

Passenger Ground Handling

Broadly speaking, ground handling within an aviation context explores the many service requirements of an aircraft, between the time it arrives at the terminal gate and the time it departs on the next flight. Speed, efficiency and accuracy are paramount in order to minimise turnaround time. From a business perspective, lower turnaround times translate into better profits.

It is important to consider that most ground services are not directly related to the actual flying of the aircraft, and instead involve an array of other tasks and activities. One of the major constituents of ground handling includes the branch of passenger ground handling which will be discussed in greater detail in the following article.

Customer service functions with regards to passenger ground handling include:

Ticketing: The modern passenger is likely to arrive at the airport having already checked themselves in via an online system, however there are provisions for on-the spot-purchases.

Check in: In most major airports, electronic check-in kiosks prevail. However, a need remains for customer service agents to assist passengers with the check-in process, verification of documentation, tagging and processing of check-in baggage etc.

Lobby management: Passenger service agents will ensure that the appropriate number of check-in desks are available, that they are adequately staffed and have the appropriate signage. They will also direct and control the flow of passengers in an orderly and efficient manner.

Special Needs Handling: Customer service agents will be required to make the necessary arrangements for wheelchairs or other appropriate means of transport to the departure/arrival gates for mobility impaired passengers. They will also assist with the processing, safeguarding and supervising of any unaccompanied minors from check-in to aircraft boarding, and from aircraft disembarkation to the release of the UM to a parent, guardian or other authorised person.

Gate assignment: Passenger ground handling agents, in co-ordination with the airport authority, will assign aircraft gates and will relay the gate information to passengers.

Aircraft Boarding: Customer service agents will make appropriate boarding announcements, conduct final passenger screening and document verification and provide the final passenger manifest and customs documentation to the aircraft crew. Passengers may need to be bussed to the aircraft or may be required to walk on the ramp. In this instance, ground agents will enforce the necessary safety protocols and procedures.

Aircraft disembarkation: Ground staff will be required to receive any in-bound customs paperwork and accept the arriving passengers at the aircraft. They will also facilitate their transport and transfer to the terminal building, dealing as necessary with any occurrences arising from an in-bound delay or cancellation of connecting flights.

Irregular Operations: Passenger ground handling staff must be available and prepared to accommodate irregular operation protocols. This includes the re-booking of passengers who have missed connections, providing meal and accommodation vouchers, employing crowd-control strategies and making arrangements for overnight stays at hotels in the event of delays/flight cancellations.

Customer service staff can be described as the key interface between airline partners and their passengers and play a crucial role in offering the care that is integral to successful ground handling operations. A team of professionally trained employees ensures the smooth handling of passengers from the initial check-in point to boarding, and from disembarkation to baggage collection. For those passengers that require extra support, customer service agents are skillfully trained to offer assistance to those with special needs, including unaccompanied minors and those with reduced mobility.

Frontline employees are some of the most important people in an organization. These “front facing” staff perform sometimes challenging tasks needed to keep the operation running as smoothly and efficiently as possible. It is often the case however, that this very workforce gets overlooked in the broader framework of ground operations. Failure to integrate frontline employees effectively within a broader business framework may cost the company in the long run. Frontline employees can be a valuable asset in terms of anticipating customer needs as they interact with customers on a daily basis.