The Hold Room, Season 2 Episode 20 – Tommy Bibb, Marco Toscano, and Joseph Kenney

Transcript

[Introduction]

TJ: Welcome to The Hold Room with ACC: a quick update on all things relating to airport development as well as the Airport Consultants Council.

Laura Canham: Hello from the American Association of Airport Executives conference in Denver, Colorado. Janelle Aslam conducted live interviews at the conference in June 2023 and we are excited to hear from Tommy Bibb, Aviation Consultant and prior AVP Operations and Maintenance at Nashville Airport Authority; Marco Toscano, Director of Customer Experience at Denver International Airport; and Joseph Kennedy, Business Development Manager at Smiths Detection.

[ Interview]

Janelle Aslam: Hi Tom. So nice to have you here on The Hold Room podcast. You are an industry veteran. I'd love to know about your background 1st and then also your perspective on customer experience and what we can do to improve it.

Tommy (Tom) Bibb: Thanks, Janelle. It's a pleasure to be with you. Background, I spent just over 32 years with the airport in Nashville. And had a variety of departments and functions under my purview over that time. Operations and maintenance certainly were a big part of that 22 of those 32 years. But passenger experience is critical. You know, we were an airport in active growth mode and you're an airport first, a construction site 2nd and maintaining that positive experience is critical. We had a lot of opportunities to work on that both in the building, in front of the building, and the behind the building and by that I mean terminal, landside, and airside. So we tried to work on that every day actually.

Janelle: That's great. Can you tell me about one of the examples you think is really like best in class in terms of something you implemented to improve passenger experience?

Tom: Yeah, I'll take a what's probably an easy one. And that's restroom modernization of restrooms, making them more comfortable and more bright. Easy in and out, not congested. Trying to get in and out of the facilities, just bringing up refresh with new fixtures, more modern three in one sinks with soap, water drying capabilities. But restrooms are a big factor in the passenger experience. Restrooms and parking will get you in trouble quickly. We put a lot of emphasis on restrooms, parking accessibility, walking distance and things like that, but those are a couple of easy examples on the things that we focused on to try to not only maintain but greatly improve the passenger experience.

Janelle: Great. So how did you actually listen to your customers? How did you gather feedback from them to make sure that you were moving the needle and improving that experience for them?

Tom: Like most airports, you know, do surveys and things like that. But we paid really close attention to our website and comments that came in and we kind of had a policy: three business days to get a response unless it was something really significant. And then you still get a response and. Follow up with
a more detailed answer if that's what was called for. But got a lot of feedback that way. Being in the capital and a lot of state legislature there, we got a lot of feedback from the community and just through informal channels we always took that stuff very seriously and took it to heart and tried to take it and use it and, and make things better.

**Janelle:** Excellent. Can you talk to me a little bit about diversity, equity, and inclusion and how that implemented into your past experience?

**Tom:** The airport should reflect the community that it resides in. Everybody has a little bit different opinion of what the positive passenger experience should be. So, we did a lot of work outreach with various organizations and things of that nature to understand what various groups to make sure that those needs were being met and one that I'm particularly proud of, maybe more than anything in my entire career there, was/fell into the world of ADA with adult changing tables in some of our family restrooms because it opens up the door for so many more people to travel. That prior to that air travel would have been off the table simply not an option. And it was so well received when we did that on the personal level that was something I felt really, really good about.

**Janelle:** Nice. That's awesome. How did you communicate these change efforts to?

**Tom:** You know, a lot of outreach on social media. We had a staff that took care of that for us and pushed those messages out. We actually had a lighting system on one of our new garages and we could do the lights to reflect certain things. Maybe if it was the Heart Association week or breast Cancer week or whatever it happened to be. But we use social media a lot and we use some of the amenities we had built into our new facilities to help push those messages. We did some sign language. At times we have live music in building and we would have somebody come and sign the words along with the music. And that was kind of neat because that really improve that experience for people that had that impairment.

**Janelle:** That's great.

**Tom:** So, we tried social media. A lot of things, just some of the in-house amenities that we have we could take advantage of it.

**Janelle:** Guys, what about employment? Did you do anything from a DEI element to make sure that your employment also modeled the residential structure?

**Tom:** Yeah, we did a good job. Basically, it's kind of started with the leadership team to make sure the leadership team again reflected the community and being sensitive to how we approached different groups and create opportunities for success not only for the person but for the organization as well. And I can see that although I've retired from the airport. You can see that throughout the organization it's a very diverse leadership team and then all the way through the organization as a whole.

**Janelle:** So, as we end this interview and I'm really appreciative of all of your insights here, but I would love to know as you look to the future, what are you most excited about in terms of the new developments to really improve customer experience?

**Tom:** Some of the things I think are really moving the needle on passenger experience are better concessions and things of that nature. Gate delivery on concessions at some of the larger airports because we tend to get through security and we go from point A to point B, we get to our gate and a lot of times we walk by things because we just want to get where we know we need to be. But good...
concessions and having the concessions reflect national options as well as local music and entertainment in the buildings. You see that a lot now. That was all over our facility and you see it in many places. I think there's just a lot more awareness. People are in the terminal longer now than they used to be good. Good parking facilities where there's walking distances or short transportation. There's a number of things, I think airports, are doing a lot better. You know it's kind of a drop off to take off mentality. Parking all the way to your gate and making that experience everything it can be all the way through.

**Janelle:** Excellent. Well, Tom, I look forward to hearing more insights from you in the future. Thank you so much for your time.

**Tom:** Well, you're welcome. Thank you.

**Janelle:** Marco, I am so happy that you're here to talk with us at the Hold Room. So, tell me a little bit about what you do at Denver.

**Marco Toscano:** Thank you for having me. Yeah. I’m the director of customer experience. So, within my realm of responsibilities are voice of the customer, customer research data, customer metrics, documentation, as well as looking over the customer journey map and how our customers interact with our report and their entire journey from Pena Blvd. all the way over to their flight. And what does that mean of them? Trying to create a good experience for them as they go through the process.

**Janelle:** Wow, that's amazing. So how often do you actually connect with your passengers to really get the voice of what they're looking for from an experience standpoint?

**Marco:** We capture customer voice through several different ways. We actually provide all social media comments about the airport. All of that is filtered and aggregated through our customer relations center. So, every comment, every post is categorized by subject matter, whether it’s an inquiry complement, complaint, and then we actually categorize that further by the subject of what the customer was talking about. And then we capture verbatim as well, but then that gets put into a system where we can analyze the data at the end of the day and look at what are the top complaints for the day, for the week, for the month. How can we make those better? How can we do for identifying trends that we’re seeing based off of customer voice you can try to get ahead of those in the future.

Not only social media, we also have a call center. The same thing happens if you were to call in. Or chat with us through our website. As well as we have surveys, we partner with ACI and AAAE to the RSQ survey. So, we have several different ways to try to capture what customers are experiencing.

**Janelle:** That's great. And what do you see in terms of the latest trends of what your passengers are asking you for?

**Marco:** We’re seeing a trend that has certainly started in COVID, but it’s one of the trends was customers arriving to the airport two or three hours before their flight and it’s not really something we really saw before proving. And now that trend is continue. So, it shifts priorities of our customers knowing that we’re going to be spending that much time. So now they are looking for food and beverage options and looking for more comfortable seating options, looking for charging stations, fast Wi-Fi, things that were all still important prior to COVID, but have become so much more important now that customers are literally spending two hours in your airport. Waiting for their flight no longer is it just
30 minutes to get through. Now it's actually spending a lot of time in the airport and you're looking for options to do other than just sitting in a restaurant for two.

**Janelle:** That makes sense. So, in terms of like the amount of time that you spent there at Denver and really instituting some of these amazing passenger experiences, what do you think is really one of your best case studies or best practices, if you will, in terms of how you've coordinated with a lot of different players to institute the passenger experience?

**Marco:** We just launched a new program in January. And it's a team of individuals called our airport customer experience specialist we call our aces. Four individuals who spend their entire shift walking the path of customers. They're not in an office. They don't even have a computer. We give them an iPad and a cell phone and literally their entire shift on our premises and the benefit of that is we no longer have to wait for customers to report things like down conveyances or a charging bank that's no longer working. Our Aces are out there the entire day, where they're from 6:00 AM to 11:00 at night every single day. And they're looking at the airport for things. So, hopefully they're the 1st to spot a downed conveyance. Or if they walk by a gate area and they notice that the blue lights under the seats indicate there's power to those seats is not on, they'll either do first resolution or they'll put in a work order to try to get this fixed right away. They're inspecting our restrooms if we're out of hand towels, they'll put in a ticket to get that resolved. If there's a spill, oftentimes they just clean it up themselves because we're really stressing that first resolution instead of putting in a ticket for a spill, let's say. Instead putting in a ticket, waiting for a janitor to come out, and clean it up. It could be 30 minutes. If you just think about how that can be done, no impact to the customer can move on with our day. So that is a tremendous amount of coordination with back end to actually make that work and make it valuable. So, it's a new ticketing technology ticketing system we just implemented, working with our stakeholders and maintenance and janitorial to make sure that we've got those right votes of people, so we can have quick resolutions and so far we've already seen great metrics for customers showing that the program is working and it's, you know, six months in.

**Janelle:** Wow, that's awesome. I really love that example of the aces and I hope I can see that at more airports as well.

**Marco:** Yeah, yeah, it's, I know a couple of airports have started similar programs and it's been paying off for our customers already. So, it's great, great impact.

**Janelle:** Nice, that's awesome. So let me ask you about DEI. How do you view that passenger experience perspective and what type of programs are you implementing to help?

**Marco:** One of the things that we're doing is a lot of airports talk about their journey mapping. And so we're looking at a journey mapping from different customer personas, including individuals who may have different needs than others. And so how does the journey map affect these individuals differently than with the status quo and really eliminating what what the concept of status quo is. So individuals will have different needs as they go through the airport and then we know that we can look at our passenger experience through their eyes, the better we can start to get some change at the airport. And that's really one of our first steps is we have our passenger training map that we've had for years. We keep refreshing it, but we've never shifted it and looked at it from a different perspective and that's what we're doing.
**Janelle:** That's great, Marco, this has been super insightful and I really appreciate your time.

**Marco:** Thanks for having me.

**Janelle:** Thank you so much.

**Janelle:** Joe, hi. So, tell me a little bit about what you do with your job.

**Joseph (Joe) Kennedy:** Sure. Yes, and thanks for having me. I work with Smiths Detection. Our main focus in aviation is with the checkpoint security and with full baggage systems, so scanners to screen bags for passengers going to the airport. I'm in business development, so I'm building strategies around how we approach airports, getting feedback, and how we can advance our technology to enhance the passenger experience and then trying to tie that all together with our sales and technical teams.

**Janelle:** So, when you look at the overall posture experience across airports within the US, what do you see really in terms of the key trends from really improving passenger experience?

**Joe:** So, for what we focus on talk a lot about security, because focus on the checkpoint security, which is obviously it's a big part of the passenger experience, right. It's usually the most stressful part with the passengers going into the airport. You have to go through the checkpoint and set time aside for it. You have to make sure you don't have any prohibited things in your bag, you know, to bring in. So, what the new technology allows both ours and other X-ray scanners is CT technology. So, when you go into a lane and you have to take your laptop out of the bag anymore. You're going through the CT scanner so the obvious improvement to passenger experience for that is it's not as much of a hassle. When you get to the checkpoint, you don't have to take your laptop out, you know, take your liquids out, put everything in one tray. It's just easier for the passenger, it makes it less stressful. You don't take as long in the front end or in the back. The kind of more technical improvement to pass your experience that that allows that, I think, the passenger maybe not be paying as much attention to is, you're using Less bins for each person, right? So every person is using one bin for all their stuff. That's less images for TSA to look at. That is less actual items moving through the X-ray, so the entire checkpoint speeds up. So, the goal is getting through faster, not sacrificing safety so the technology's improved so that the TSA agents have all the information they need to. While passengers don't feel as hassled whether going through the checkpoints, so everything is faster, it's more efficient. The noise at the checkpoint is quieter and ideally it makes everything less stressful for the passenger while TSA is still, you know, maintaining the level of security relief.

**Janelle:** So, can you talk to me about diversity, equity and inclusion and how do you actually implement that into how you think about the passenger experience?

**Joe:** We have a strong focus on diversity, equity, inclusion training and in the actual employees that we hire and bring in to work in airports and get broad viewpoints and diverse viewpoints on what people pay attention to, what people care about when they're traveling. And then what we need to be considering is a very diverse group of people that travel. Right, you have to be thinking about every kind of passenger that is going through the checkpoint. What are certain people going to be dealing with? What are certain people going to be hearing about? What do people want to see from a very diverse perspective? Right? So, we have to consider all the passengers that could potentially go through an airport and be thinking about what's important to that group, where do they struggle with? And, what do we need to be paying attention to when we are working on advancing our technology.
As far as what we see in the future. What we're rolling out right now is probably what you'll see in the checkpoint for the next 10 years, I would say. I think there's a lot of advancements being made in identification rate, the facial identification when going through the checkpoint. Advancements in how you're actually getting your boarding pass. How security is being set up on the front end. We're working with a lot of companies here that do queueing so that you can actually see how many checkpoints need to be open at certain times of day and how many people are in line. And do we need to ship people over there? There's a lot of stuff that ties into the checkpoint based on different kinds of AI and all the different companies that are in the checkpoint that you can start tying this data together to really just continue speeding up the throughput, continue improving experience. So just a lot of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and how to improve technology efficiency.

Janelle: Excellent. Joe, thank you so much for your time here at the Hold Room.

Joe: Thanks for having me.

[Outro]

Wendy Hageman: Thanks for joining us in The Hold Room for this special podcast series exploring the new passenger experience. You can find more from this series on the ACC Training Hub—that's training.acconline.org/the-hold-room—or wherever you get your podcasts, including Apple Podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, etc. Follow us for more content from the Airport Consultants Council. You can support this podcast by leaving a rating or review and by telling your friends and colleagues about the podcast. Thanks again.