

Metro Airport moves from bottom to top in customer satisfaction

BY JOHN KALL
CORRESPONDENT

It wasn't very long ago that the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport was the butt of a lot of bad adjectives - "crowded," "unfriendly," "dirty" etc. In a 2001 survey of 20 major metropolitan airports by J.D. Power and Associates, Metro Airport ranked fourth from the bottom in its customer satisfaction survey. In the 2002 survey, the airport ranked fourth from the top.

"The airport improved in almost every category except baggage claims," said Mike Taylor, senior director of travel services at J.D. Power & Associates. "Detroit Metropolitan Airport is near the top in all of the major categories including arrivals, check-ins, security, etc."

"The old terminal squeezed everybody in - it was confusing, noisy, got dirtier faster. The new terminal is spacious, bright, open and you are not bumping into people with the little rolling carts."

Mike Conway, Detroit Metropolitan Airport director of external relations is also aware that the airport has come a long way since before its construction of the \$1.4 billion McNamara (Midfield) termi-

nal, which opened in February 2002. "I remember when we were getting bombarded with negative headlines based on survey results showing Detroit Metropolitan Airport as very unfavorable," said Conway. "We knew that a new road and new runway and a fabulous new terminal were all under construction, so all we could say was: 'Wait 'till next year.'"

"Next year is now here and the survey results are now extremely favorable. The new runway improves on-time performance. The new road improves vehicle access. We've doubled the parking and curb front capacity, and the beautiful new 97-gate McNamara Terminal with 65 shops and restaurants has pushed us near the top in customer satisfaction surveys."

The J.D. Power survey examines 46 major global airports and is based on responses from more than 10,250 airport evaluations from consumers in more than a dozen countries. Respondents were contacted via e-mail or by invitation from travel-related Web sites. Respondents logged onto a survey that was available in seven languages.

Detroit Metro Airport is considered a "large category" airport, which accommodates 30

million passengers or more each year. The highest ranking airport in this category for 2002 was Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok International Airport. Only Las Vegas' McCarran Airport ranked higher than Detroit among U.S. cities.

"Many of these survey respondents are international travelers," added Conway. "We have a great advantage over other airports now that most of the international to domestic connections occur in the same building. There is no longer any need to find a shuttle ride to another terminal to catch your domestic connection."

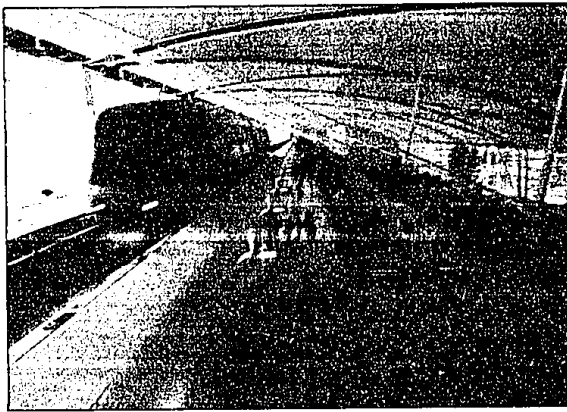
Another survey by a different research group found some very similar results. The Netherlands-based Web site, TravelQuality.com, ranked Detroit Metropolitan Airport fourth among international airports and the only U.S. airport among the top five overall. The six-month survey received responses from over 21,000 travelers. The voting took place over a six-month period ending Nov. 30, 2002.

HAPPY RETAILERS, TOO

Retail establishments in the new McNamara Terminal can easily understand why Detroit has rapidly moved up in the satisfaction rankings.

Hassan Yazbek is the general manager and part owner of the Online Cafe Bar & Grill. Yazbek has high praise for the new terminal. "We are very proud to be a part of a world-class facility like this. It has brought in a new image for the Detroit area. I give credit to the airport management for the way they planned the terminal and the way they operate it. The culture has changed - they are very responsive to us."

Customers at the Online Cafe give the new terminal high marks, too. "Everybody walks into the Cafe happy. We have not heard one negative complaint about the new terminal - I am not kidding. In the old terminal, where we used to operate, we got many com-



The Express Tram approaches the north station.

PHOTO BY JIM JACQUELLE (STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

plaints everyday about how hard it was to navigate and how dark it was.

"People are shocked when they walk into the new terminal and see how easy it is to navigate - and how friendly it is. It is very user-friendly."

"Most of our concessionaire friends feel the same way here. The food and beverage industry is very demanding and we strive to keep our customers happy. When they walk in happy, our job is much easier." Suzanne Letourneau opened up her concession, OratOxygen, in the new terminal amid objections from some of her business associates.

"I told them we were putting a store at Detroit Metropolitan Airport and they thought I was crazy," she said. "They remember the old terminal."

"But the ones who have visited the new terminal have called it a pleasurable experience. When people arrive at the new terminal they get a positive impression of Detroit."

The store, which offers massages, fresh oxygen sessions, manicures, pedicures - even showers - is a welcome stop for weary travelers, especially amongst the many other terminal amenities.

Maria Westman owns the Monarch Shop, a retailer who sells high-end merchandise to travelers - averaging \$200-\$300 per transaction.

"I have worked at over 25 different airports and I am very impressed by the design of this terminal - and this is a well-managed facility," she said. "When we opened last Feb. 24 (2002), all day long we got positive comments on how user-friendly the airport terminal is. We get that all-day long now. People say that their experience here is greater than they expected."

GOOD FEEDBACK

"The first comments we hear are 'Wow, we can't believe we are in Detroit.' They also can't

believe that the prices of goods we carry are competitive to non-airport retailers."

Monarch keeps the same hours as most retailers, from approximately 6:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m., when the last flights depart the McNamara Terminal. But Westman has stayed as late as midnight for customers who want service - and who may be experiencing a delayed flight. "The traffic dictates when we open or close."

Westman said that about 75 percent of her business is from repeat customers, something she said is "unheard of in the airport industry."

Happy retailers and happy travelers - two good reasons why Detroit Metropolitan Airport is becoming a jewel.

Conway has his sights set a little higher, based on what the future of the airport holds. "Once the older terminals are modernized, there's no reason why we cannot become the greatest airport in the world."



Rebecca Medrano gives a neck and shoulder massage to a client at the Oxygen Bar.

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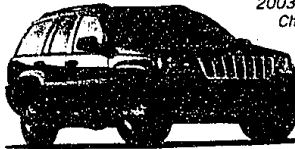
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