

Piccolo: Improving the passenger experience

By Rick Piccolo

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It's probably safe to say that anyone that uses the Sarasota Bradenton International Airport can see that the airport is making continuous efforts to enhance its passenger experience wherever it can. Residents and passengers often send us their positive feedback about how easy, convenient, clean, and pleasant their experience is when using the airport.

Given the significant increase of new airline service this year, resulting in 18 new nonstop destinations, increased frequency by existing carriers, and the addition of two new airlines, complaints about lack of service have dwindled. Given the significant increased service, passengers should plan on arriving to the airport earlier to ensure they budget adequate time for processing.

The airport is always looking for ways to address the individual needs of its passengers, especially given its clientele is an older demographic than at many other airports. For instance, when the airport replaced its 25-year-old escalators, specifications were implemented for a variable speed so the escalators can be slowed down to meet the mobility challenges of senior users when transitioning off the escalators — especially when pulling luggage along. Since that change, it now takes three seconds longer to go up from one level to the next, but the number of trip and falls has dropped.

Another improvement that will come online in April to assist our airport passengers is the installation of Hearing Loop technology at all departure gates. This looping technology enables hearing aids to receive only the sounds coming directly from a microphone without the ambient or background noise.

In a story published on the Hearing Health & Technology Matters website, they wrote about the vision of David Myers, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, who is widely considered the father of the hearing

looping movement. He wrote about it in an article, "Harnessing the Human Factor in Hearing Assistance," published in the Association for Psychological Science (APS) Observer.

The story stated, "Myers, who has long had a severe hearing loss, told of a visit he made 12 years ago to an ancient abbey in Scotland. As the spoken word [of the tour guide] reverberated off the 800-year-old stone walls, it was, for me, an unintelligible verbal fog," he recalled. But then his wife noticed a sign indicating an induction loop. Myers activated the telecoil in his hearing aid and found: "The result was stunning: Suddenly I was hearing a clear voice speaking from the center of my head. The delicious sound (is this what others hear?) put me on the verge of tears."

Locally, Richard Williams has been an advocate for these systems and brought this technology to the airport's attention. He has been a great help in understanding the challenges faced by those with hearing loss, especially in area of significant background noise such as airport gate areas. These systems can be found at 13 live stages including the Van Wezel, 75 churches and Selby Auditorium at USF, to name just a few. The airport is pleased to be the first airport in Florida to install this technology, and the Airport Authority is hopeful that other airports in the state will follow its lead.

The airport also tries to address the needs of other specific users as well. For example, the airport installed two Mamava lactation pods for nursing mothers needing private space.

Additionally, the airport installed a pet relief area in the gate area for passengers traveling with their service or emotional support animals. We doubled the amount of electric charging stations in the parking lot for electric vehicle users, added more charging stations and free iPad for passenger electronic devices, and installed filtered water filling fountains on both levels of the terminal.

As our passenger traffic continues to increase at a rapid pace we are constantly examining what adjustments and improvements can be made to maintain the level of convenience, cleanliness and ease that our users have come to expect. Projects in design or construction include expansion of our aircraft fueling facilities, added parking facilities, improved police facilities, a new Board and

meeting facility, and improved entrance signage. Additionally, the airport board awarded a new janitorial service contract that dedicates nearly double the resources previously expended annually.

The Sarasota Bradenton International Airport will continue its efforts to seek the best ways to serve our users and appreciate all the added patronage realized with the new airline service.

Rick Piccolo has been president and chief executive officer of Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport since 1995 and serves on various international aviation, business and charitable boards. He can be contacted at Frederick.piccolo@srq-airport.com.