Service is in Changi Airport’s DNA

For its dedication to service excellence, it is awarded the inaugural Singapore Service Excellence Medallion. By TEH SHI NING

For an international airport where, roughly every 100 seconds a flight takes off or from some place round the world takes off or lands, it is fitting that what’s most eye-catching about Changi Airport Group’s logo are the vibrant coloured ribbons encircling a globe-like sphere.

Less obvious though, is the globe’s positioning and the symbolic intent behind it, one which has at root a focus on individuals – both passengers and staff – so as to drive service excellence.

Receiving the inaugural Singapore Service Excellence Medallion on behalf of the Changi Airport Group (CAG) at the recent awards ceremony, chief executive officer Lee Seow Hiang explained how the globe was deliberately positioned above the last letter of Changi to form a huge “I”.

“I stands for the Individual – a reminder to us that despite the more than 40 million passengers we serve each year at Changi, every individual counts. Every compliment and every complaint matters to us,” he said.

When Changi Airport Group was corporatised, we decided to enshrine this focus on the ‘individual’ into the new logo,” he said.

The move to corporatis CAG as the operator of the airport and separate it from regulator, Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore, was hailed as one that would “sharpen Changi Airport’s business focus” and stay ahead of the competition.

But the logo is not merely corporate branding and the company does not pay mere lip-service, to service excellence.

“For Changi Airport, service is not an add-on activity. It is at the core of who we are and everything we do. CAG is first and foremost a service company,” Mr Lee said.

This clarity of purpose has helped the group to “build a strong service culture, because everyone knows it is our DNA and our raison d’etre,” he added.

So much so that the world’s most decorated airport, with more than 360 accolades to its name, recently picked up yet another – the inaugural Singapore Service Excellence Medallion.

Customer satisfaction

And with good reason too, says Marcus Lee, Singapore Management University assistant professor of marketing practice and a member of the Medallion Management Committee.

Changi Airport has performed well on the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore for the past three years, with consistent improvements in its score too, Dr Lee notes.

Its current score of 78.6 points is bested only by five other organisations ranked on the CSI – all of which are prominent hotels.

Satisfying the customer involves more than just pleasantries exchanged over information desk counters too.

Dr Lee points out that CAG “also continually aligns its value proposition with partners and systems, meeting operational demands in a very prescient fashion”.

“This nimbleness, despite its scale and complexity of operations and numerous alliances, makes CAG deserving of its international fame and accolades, and indeed, the 2011 Organisation Medallion,” he says.

CAG’s chief executive Mr Lee said that the “I” for individual drive to create
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At a "Changi Experience" extends to the companies and agencies CAG collaborates with too.

"CAG has about 1,300 employees, but to run the airport well, Changi needs a community of over 28,000 people," Mr Lee said, acknowledging the crucial support of airport staff from the more than 200 organisations operating at Singapore's airport.

Delivering service excellence, he said, is "also about a firm belief in the Power of One - one individual rising to the occasion and making a difference for another". Hence, the "I" in CAG's logo "also symbolises the many individuals who serve at Changi".

More than magic

"Whenever one of them takes the initiative and reaches out to a passenger or visitor, a moment of magic is created," said Mr Lee.

Magical as it may seem, there is no instant spell or potion to transform an organisation into one that can claim to be at the pinnacle of service excellence.

Service rendered by staff who customarily consider what they can do for each customer, and how to make each passenger's experience at the airport a memorable one is just one aspect of overall service excellence, and falls apart without seamless and efficient operations and systems, including "cutting-edge and innovative terminal facilities" to back the people up.

One of the aims of the Medallion is to sieve out exemplars of service excellence locally, organisations that can be held up as role models for others in Singapore to aspire towards.

On that front at least, Changi Airport has already been identified as one of four service excellence icons under the government-led Customer-Centric initiative, and tasked with the challenge of pushing the frontier of service excellence for other service players here.

In September 2010, the group initiated a series of service initiatives, including the SWIFT (Service Workforce Instant Feedback Transformation) system.

Small monitors at counters and in the toilets allow customers to offer feedback immediately, and help ensure a timely response to any faults.

This has also served to improve the productivity of service providers such as toilet cleaners, trolley retrievers, estate management office and other service workforce staff too.

The SWIFT system, CAG says, also allows for monitoring of the conditions of facilities, detailed incident reporting and alerting of contractors.

Roving officers

But it is not just about efficiency, says Mr Lee. "At Changi, we are privileged to be in the business of Connecting Lives. Each day, Changi is blessed with many heart-warming stories of individuals, whether they are our service cleaners, our taxi coordinators, frontline helpers or backroom planners, each stepping up and touching the lives of individuals," Mr Lee said.

He accepted the Medallion "on behalf of these many individuals, who work selflessly and often behind the scenes to make the 'Changi Experience' a daily reality".