

Barnett on Business Travel: Woo? Me?

by *Chris_Barnett*

Mario Moussa roams the nation 30 percent to 50 percent of his time advising corporate behemoths like Microsoft, Sun Microsystems and Oracle how to get their way without stomping on their competition. His approach is spelled out in a \$24 hardcover book he co-authored called "The Art of Woo" (Portfolio): Win over your adversaries by crawling into their brain, empathizing with their problems and leaving your own agenda on the table.

Yes, but can subtle wooing help a frustrated traveler win a few battles today? Moussa, a principal in Philadelphia-based Cfar Inc., an organizational change and teamwork consultancy, says yes. He practices what he preaches and publishes - when he's wooing an airline for comfort, convenience, cost-savings or simply a seat or hotel for a bed and sharp room service.

For example, flying nationwide out of his headquarters city of Philly, Moussa is pretty much stuck with US Airways, however, he often flies on a first class ticket paid for his clients who are wooing him to share his wisdom - for a fee. Anyhow, with US Airways, Moussa says the wooing starts by showing empathy to the ground and cabin employees who are at the mercy of the dolts running the airline.

"US Air people tend to be very stressed, not terribly friendly or responsive," he explains. "They've gone through lots of changes, are doing more work for less money so you may have to go out of your way with them to get good service." Translated: the art of the woo is showing genuine concern for employees or service providers and that you understand the kind of pressure they're under today.

Moussa, along with his co-author, G. Richard Shell, is a director for the Wharton School's Strategic Persuasion Workshop, tells an interesting story not in his book. He was booked on a US Air 6:30 p.m. flight, arrived at the airport in time to make a 5:30 p.m. flight. With scant minutes to spare, he struck up a conversation, wooing a Transportation Security agent by asking her how her day was going, was she starting or ending a shift, did she have children?

He explained he could make the earlier flight and "I gave her a reason. I told her I wanted to get home and see my family before the kids went to bed. That made all the difference." The TSA agent took him to the head of a long security line. "The wooing arts include the 'power of because' and human beings are programmed to respond to reason."

Still, the gate for the 5:30 p.m. departure was mobbed and the flight was oversold. Moussa asked the gate agent "can I just wait here" and was told "sure but there's no way you will get on this flight." He says he "hovered" by the counter and "made small talk" with the gate agents.

"I simply said, 'boy you are really busy today. Must be stressful for you with all these people wanting to go get on an overbooked flight.' I was careful not to disparage the airline, just tried to develop a sense of rapport with them and some of the passengers at the top of the wait list during all this chaos and kept checking on the status without being pushy."

His wooing worked. There were two 'no shows' and three passengers including Moussa. "The first woman boarded and I turned to the second woman and said with a smile 'I think I was here first' and we briefly exchanged how tough air travel is today. That mini-negotiation worked out because I appealed to her sense of fairness. People are fair."

The art of woo doesn't always work and Moussa knows when to zip his lip. He tells of being on a sold out, cramped US Air regional jet and another consultant was trying to stuff his bag in the tiny overhead bin. The flight attendant told the consultant that's where the oxygen goes and the space next to it was where she stows her shoes and bag.

"I told him 'this is a battle you're never going to win,'" says Moussa, who was 100 percent right. "The flight attendant was in a position of authority and very stressed told the consultant "either get your bag down or get off the plane." He stewed, snapped at her but complied."

In those cases, Moussa added, "I don't want an unpleasant experience so I just suck it up and realize there are things I can and cannot do or woo."

Today, in dealing with travel purveyors, the Cfar principal advises anyone on the road to "show that you are a calm, reasonable, rational, experienced traveler." In wooing telephone central reservationists, he builds a rapport quickly, not by tossing around that he's platinum level frequent traveler, but by saying "I imagine you are inundated with calls like this and I really appreciate what you are doing for me."

The wooing arts can be total silence, too. At the San Francisco Omni Hotel, Moussa's room service breakfast was a half-hour late. He called down and said, "I was on important calls, delivering my breakfast was important to me and then said nothing." The room service clerk apologized, brought up the meal and didn't charge him for it. There are different styles of wooing. Says Moussa: "There are times to be ingratiating, quiet or firm."

The consultant recently flew Continental's new Newark, N.J., to Mumbai, India, nonstop in BusinessFirst class and the "service was over the top." Moussa got a note from the airline purser on the flight, sent one in return and a dialogue ensued. "Nice example of an airline trying to develop a relationship with its customers," he muses.

Moussa's final wooing tips for road warriors:

- Chill out no matter what. Don't argue. Don't throw your weight around. Employees have the last say and can help you or ignore you. (This isn't new advice but good to remember today.

- Form coalitions with fellow passengers on a flight to get information, but make sure the intelligence is correct and not just hand-me-down rumors.

- Pick your battles. Not every situation is winnable by wooing.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassle.

Â© Copley News Service

Barnett on Business Travel: Woo? Me? by Chris_Barnett