

Airport rankings: Useful as feedback

Does it matter if Changi drops one or two spots?
Not if it set things right



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THREE months ago, Changi Airport slid from second to third spot in an annual ranking of airports throughout the world by research group Skytrax.

The news prompted a flurry of comments from readers who were convinced that Changi had lost its edge.

Then, last week, Changi Airport Group announced it had bagged five awards last month, including four "Best Airport" titles.

Among the accolades: Readers of the British edition of Business Traveller magazine voted Singapore's airport No. 1 for the 22nd consecutive year.

Closer to home, the magazine's Asia-Pacific readership gave Changi Airport the title of "Best Airport Duty-Free in the World" for the 12th time running.

Apart from a restructuring that turned the airport from a statutory board to a corporate entity, nothing much has changed in the last few months to explain how Changi, which slid from second to third spot in Skytrax's listing, took home the recent awards.

Should we even be paying attention to such rankings and surveys?

While they help airports gauge their performance levels, moving a notch or two either way does not make an airport better or worse – overnight.

Airport polls and surveys, which are conducted mainly by research houses and travel magazines, are a dime a dozen. Each has its own methodology, focus and

target group.

In some cases, the surveys involve face-to-face interviews with travellers at airports. The norm, however, is for the survey organisers to collate online submission of feedback and answers to questionnaires.

The problem with the latter method is that there is little or no control over who the respondents are, which must surely affect the reliability of the findings.

Some surveys may boast a large pool of interviewees. But one could also argue that soliciting the views of a select group of well-travelled individuals would be a more fruitful exercise than talking to dif-

ferent passengers randomly.

Theoretically, there is also nothing to stop an airport from actively encouraging employees and travellers to submit feedback, either by handing out survey forms itself, or by providing the relevant links on its website.

The bottom line is that there is no perfect survey or ranking method. Thus, one should not read too much into the different findings, said Assistant Professor of Management Terence Fan, from the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University.

Ultimately, which airport is best depends on who you ask. For example, a

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good number of the passengers travelling through Changi Airport are in fact transit or connecting passengers. By contrast, South Korea's Incheon International Airport, which won top spot in the Skytrax survey, is the final destination for many of its customers.

Prof Fan said: "This means that they would have different needs and expectations. Hence, it is difficult to see which airport is indeed better in a 'one-size-fits-all' manner."

For time-pressed business executives, for example, good connectivity with minimum layover time is a big plus point when rating an airport. Flight times are important too. Early morning arrivals are preferred by business travellers because they have a full work day ahead of them.

That said – and while it is important to realise the limitations of such rankings so that one is not overly obsessed with them – they should not just be dismissed either.

When Changi Airport slipped in the Skytrax ratings, having lost out in several categories like washroom cleanliness and security processing, it went about setting things right.

It decided that all 1,000 cleaners at the airport would be sent for retraining and toilet cleanliness would be better monitored. The new system would take six to eight months to implement.

Dr Prem Shamdasani, associate professor of marketing and branding at the National University of Singapore, said that in addition to monitoring survey results, airports should also keep track of the frequency and nature of the complaints, incidents of service failure, and testimonials from passengers in various classes.

Changi Airport, which receives about 500 feedback responses a month, also surveys more than 2,000 passengers a month on matters like staff courtesy and airport efficiency.

In the end, such indicators – taken together with globally recognised awards and surveys – should give airports a good sense of where they stand when evaluating customer satisfaction and service standards, said the professor.

Trophies and plaques undoubtedly look good in the display cabinet. It is only natural to desire them. But let's not make winning or losing any particular award too big a deal – so long as Changi Airport remains among the top few.

And, more to the point, so long as it responds to any criticism, no matter how slight, by redoubling its efforts and correcting whatever blemishes it has, no matter how minor.

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