

DIARY OF A CONSULTANT



In last month's entry, David wrote about receiving advice from Clow Zahn Associates's accountant on allowable deductions for small businesses. He also shared some insight on how to be combat ready for the office superstores. This month, we hear about one of the unavoidable nightmares of being in a consulting practice.

2000

November 5 - Born a Rambling Man
A Sunday morning greets me with a cold blast of air the Northeast is known for at this time of the year. I scramble down my driveway to retrieve the *New York Times*, tossed by the delivery person out of a car window at 30 miles per hour. I'm left panting and wondering whatever happened to customer service and the 12-year-old kid on a bicycle who used to deliver newspapers and collect payment on Wednesday evenings. I have exactly 45 minutes to either devour the paper over breakfast or leave it for when I return from my business trip.

Having accepted an out-of-town assignment a few weeks back for this week, I'm now sitting at the kitchen table and feeling guilty about agreeing to be in some other time zone first thing Monday morning. My kids are wanting to interact with me during the last few moments before I leave, and my wife, Stacey, is reminding me of all that remains for me to do when I return. The paper stays folded the way it arrived.

Before embarking for the airport, I go through the mental checklist I have for travel: Clothes (check); toiletries (check); materials for the project (packed them myself); directions to the hotel and the

By David Zahn

client's headquarters (in duplicate, one in luggage to be checked at the airport and one in my attaché); cash for incidentals (never enough, but I did go to the ATM). OK, I think I have what I need.

As I drive, I reflect on the last few months of travel I've endured. It has been worse than at any other time in my career. Jeff and I have commented to each other often during the past few weeks that although we make our living dealing with people (a necessary skill in our occupation), we prefer not to speak to anyone while traveling. Wherever traveling can be mechanized, removing the human element, so much the better. It cuts back on the stress and aggravation of having to deal with surly or uninformed service people. In fact, I have some tips on how businesspeople can minimize human contact while traveling:

- Pay the toll on the airport road with a device read by an electronic eye so you won't have to slow down for the toll-booth collector and wait for change.
- Check and leave messages via voice-mail, email, or e-fax so you don't have to engage in a time-consuming conversation.
- Use e-ticketing so you need only to nod at the gate agent as you answer the questions about having packed the bag yourself and not carrying anything on board for someone you don't know. (Do you think anyone has ever answered, "You know, now that you mention it, there was a seedy-looking guy who asked me to carry this box with something ticking inside"?)
- Use a frequent-rental card to go directly to your rental car and not have to deal with agents at the counter.
- Check into your hotel based on advance registration via the Internet. Your key will be waiting, and you won't have to fill out forms at the registration desk.
- Get room service by filling out the order, and leave it on the doorknob rather than call.

Now at the airport, I look up at the departure board and see that my flight has been delayed for an hour.

Suddenly feeling tired, I crumble into the nearest chair and think of how many times I've had this happen in the past few months. One time, we pulled away from the gate just to sit on the runway for hours. It was summer, and the pilot announced that to preserve fuel, they couldn't turn on the air conditioning. Another time, the plane took off from La Guardia (in New York), only to land in Newark (in New Jersey) because of smoke in the cabin. Then we sat in the terminal as the airline tried to figure out how to get us to a destination not serviced directly by Newark airport.

Another time, while waiting on the tarmac for three hours, a well-known media personality on board (hint: network news, odd hairstyle, bushy eyebrows) threatened to expose how we were being held hostage. The pilot actually came out of the flight deck to talk to the media personality, who was allowed to disembark. So, I guess the threat of being the subject of a network news story did the trick.

And there were numerous flights that were cancelled within just an hour of take-off and not because of bad weather. Believe me, no amount of airport food is worth the time spent waiting for a gate agent to try and reroute you. It's also a given that most passengers assume that yelling will get them better, faster service. And when you don't arrive at your destination at the expected time, your rental car might no longer be held for you.

Again, I have some hints for dealing with travel hassles:

- Check and double check that you have your photo ID and ticket. Without them, you're not going anywhere.
- Have directions to where you're going at the ready; don't wait until you land. The maps or automated machines at car rental counters are often not current.
- Have the confirmation numbers of your ticket, rental car, shuttle, and hotel reservations.
- Have the phone number for every one of the above service providers. Use a phone instead of standing at the counter. Phone agents are often easier to reach and less frenzied because they don't face a queue of tired, complaining people.
- Confirm your flight time before heading for the airport.
- Bring at least two books or work that's not confidential as you'll probably be sitting next to someone while waiting for the plane. Use this time to catch up on mail, administrative work, or pleasure reading.
- Measure your on-board luggage to fit requirements, and don't forget it will be competing for space in the overhead compartments with coats, hats, and scarves in the winter months. Some airports have cutouts for the size of the luggage you may bring on board. If your bags don't fit, they won't make it onto the plane as carry-on.
- Try to use the lavatory before you sit next to the window. It's no fun having to ask the person next to you to get up from the aisle seat to let you out.

On this particular trip, I finally get on the plane and settle in. I have one carry-

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on beneath my feet and one in the overhead between someone's crushed paper bag (that undoubtedly contains fine crystal) and someone's overstuffed carry-on with wheels. Then I hear the one sound that is the bane of every traveler: a cough-

ing, sniffing seatmate. I think of when my kid brother used to dare me to hold my breath, and I try as long as I can not to breathe the recycled air coughed at me. As I turn my head, the guy across the aisle nearly scrapes the bridge of my nose with

his big college ring. Flinching, I see him opening his newspaper to its entire width.

I add to my list of travel hints: Be aware of personal space on an airplane. People can get obsessive about their armrest, your feet under their area, your hairy forearms across their face. But, as long as the aisle guy's paper is being suspended in front of my eyes, I try to read the headlines.

Upon our descent into the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport, I look out of the window and can make out the neighborhood where my partner Jeff has bought a house and where he and his family will start living in the next few months. I begin going through my mental checklist for deplaning: Find rental car shuttle; call client's voicemail to assure them that I'm in town and ready for tomorrow's session; decide where to eat dinner tonight; and wonder whether the luggage with wheels in the overhead has crushed my garment bag and I'll have to iron my sport coat.

As I unplug my headset from the Contemporary Classics channel in my armrest, I hear the start of an Allman Brothers song: *Lord, I was born a rambling man, trying to make a living and doin' the best I can...* I never thought I'd spend so much time at 27,000 feet. But then, I also never thought I'd come to view a toll-booth collector as an obstacle in the pursuit of whatever it is I'm pursuing. As I collect my belongings and stand in the aisle with the rest of the passengers who assume that their need to get off the plane supercedes everyone else's, I think how the concept of manners stopped at about the time kids on bicycles stopped delivering newspapers.

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