

# BA'S ABIGAIL COMBER FINDS HER PASSION IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

News / Personalities



**There is one certainty for Abigail Comber, head of customer for British Airways, and it is this: passengers who fly business and first expect a good night's sleep before they land.**

"We want people to walk off a plane feeling they've had a great experience and they're fully ready for whatever lies ahead," says Comber, who has been with BA since 2002 and overseen all things that touch the customer since January 2015. Responsible for service, innovation, brand proposition, research and insight, Comber previously worked for BA in marketing and communications.

A recent project in which Comber was deeply involved was the reinvention of BA's first class cabin on the new Boeing 787-9s coming into the fleet (the carrier's 787-8s have three classes of service – World Traveler full-service economy, World Traveler Plus premium economy and Club World business).

The new 787-9 first class reflects a quiet confidence, with a predominance of black, lighter shades of gray and brilliant soft white linens for the eight full-flat seats. The space-efficient outward-facing herringbone layout doesn't shout, but enables its sleek elegance to speak for itself. A large tray table, multiple nooks and crannies within arm's reach, and 23? Thales IFE screens are among the newer features that are a direct result of customer feedback, says Comber. "We've kept the privacy with dividers and there is a lot more personal stowage accessible from the seat."

The BA executive says the carrier tries to look at the cabin holistically, so that everything feels

connected. The process begins with a design blueprint, to ensure that all levels of service bear the BA imprint. “People buy into cabins for different reasons,” Comber told Runway Girl while perched in one of the seats in the new Dreamliner first class cabin.

Indeed, whatever appears in the cabin follows extensive research over the years to determine the things that customers value most. “An example of this is the focus we place on ergonomics, and both our Club World business and first class seat have the most reclined position in the industry for takeoff and landing so our customers are comfortable from the moment they board to the moment they leave,” she says.

Irrespective of travel class, BA endeavors to adhere to a set of “hallmarks” for good customer service. “Set the tone with a warm welcome, share what you know when it helps, be there for customers and invite them to approach you, then finally, listen and make things better now,” says Comber. Despite best efforts, things can and do go wrong, but Comber says relying on BA’s core principles of service will “always improve the outcome for a customer”.

“One of my mottos is ‘listen to hear and not to respond’ – someone said it to me once and I carry it as a reminder of a great leadership, but it really applies to basic human needs especially when things go wrong. At the end of the day, we are dealing with people and it’s a human thing. We must never forget that.”

Like so many in the industry, Comber was bitten by the aviation bug at an early age and is grateful that her job allows her the opportunities it provides. “Travel is in my blood,” she confesses. “I was brought up living across the Middle East and embraced flying and living in varied cultures at a young age. I can’t imagine a world without flying so travel was my passion.”

BA's 787-9 with first cabin will start flying to Shanghai from summer 2016. Image: BA

Comber says she was fortunate to combine this early travel experience with a natural creative flair and formal studies of marketing. She started her career in telephone sales “and a lot of colleagues started as cabin crew or apprentices. It’s a brilliant route in, and you see the customer every day in most entry level roles,” she says.

The single greatest challenge in her job? “For us, it’s about making things work for customers at 35,000 feet as they would on the ground.

In her spare time, Comber enjoys music and dramatic performing saying, “I love a good musical so it has to be the combined effect of both, which is a terrible cop out!” While she believes that these two avocations are not directly associated with her day job, they do bring a set of skills that enhance what she does.

“They don’t really overlap but I think that performing helps with some simple things like confidence to speak publicly, storytelling and expression,” she says. “They don’t have connection directly to travel or marketing but I think they help you in leadership and human interaction.”

Comber also believes she has found the perfect niche and would encourage others interested in an aviation career to find theirs.

“Airlines have a vast array of roles and you can move around within the organization and grow at your own pace or discover things you never knew you liked before. My ability to combine my passion and interest meant it was an easy decision for me,’ but even if you don’t have the passion now, it is a fascinating category that gives you challenging and hard work to do and I will lay money on you getting the travel bug.”

21 JANUARY 2016

SOURCE: RUNWAYGIRLNETWORK

ARTICLE LINK:

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