SILENT TREATMENT

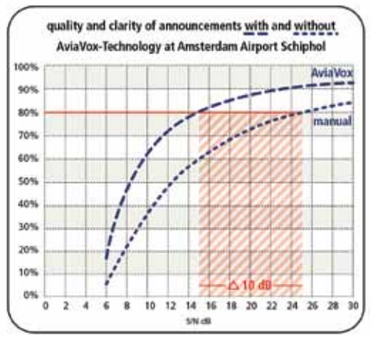
AIRPORTS CAN BECOME SILENT ENVIRONMENTS WITH THE USE OF INTELLIGENT AUTOMATED ANNOUNCEMENT SYSTEMS

Lately the term ‘silent airport’ has become popular in aviation circles. But how silent can an airport actually be? Although definitions seem to differ around the world, the general view is that within a silent airport there are no longer any announcements being made. This view, however, seems to be in conflict with the operational needs at an airport and passengers’ expectations. There is also legislation related to security, safety and evacuations that drive the compulsion to make announcements. On top of that, airline staff and handlers must also make announcements in the restricted area of the boarding gate. But there is more to it.

The term silent airport was introduced a couple of years ago as research indicated that passengers were increasingly annoyed by the fact that they were listening to announcements that could not be understood. Some airports could not properly control the intelligibility of announcements, meaning the number of announcements either needed to be reduced or removed altogether. This would at least improve the customer experience. However, does this really meet customer expectations and is this what a silent airport is really supposed to be?

> Announcement balancing ensures that only relevant announcements are being sent to certain parts of the airports

Studies have shown that most people experience some degree of psychological difficulty when flying. The most commonly known problems are pre-flight and post-flight stress and fear of flying. Air travel can be stressful because it often involves a long journey to the airport, curtailed sleep and the need to walk long distances in the terminal building.



AviaVox technology allows more passengers to understand announcements made at a lower volumes

Airports are also environments where you have to follow instructions that are likely to change at the last minute. These unpredictable procedures lead many to react with a stress response.

One of the greatest fears of passengers in an airport is that they would miss their flight, and 25% of the passengers view travel hub experiences as equally distressing as moving house. Fear and stress can grow when passengers cannot understand the relevant public announcements.

Consequently, it is important to provide passengers with clear and understandable announcements, making them feel comfortable and in control. Equally important is to provide such announcements not only in the English language, but also in the native language – in a world population of 7.2 billion people, only 1 billion speak English, of which only 400 million are native speakers, according to the University of Utrecht.

Automated operation

The question is how can a silent airport accommodate both the needs of passengers to feel comfortable and in control, and be compliant with legislations and operational requirements at the same time. The answer is to use intelligent automatic announcement systems, such as those developed by AviaVox, that can generate short effective announcements in multiple languages at the right time and at the right location. These systems take their data-feed from the Airport Operational Database (AODB) and interface directly with the PA systems so that they can control the PA zones at the airport.

But these intelligent automated announcement systems can do far more. They can take away the need to train people and to manually handle multiple languages without accents. They can control the number of announcements made, and by routing them properly, the passenger will only hear the announcements relevant to them. By no longer being overwhelmed by announcements, the passenger will not develop ‘announcement deafness’ and will follow the clear instructions, especially when they are provided in the travelers native language.

One can try to resolve all the aforementioned issues in other ways, however this is very challenging as the improvements are not static and must be adaptive to an ever-changing environment in order to support operational processes of airports and airlines, customers’ expectations, and to remain compliant with insurance policies and local and international laws. This puts pressure on both management and staff. A solution to this could be to consider implementing the latest philosophy of a ‘silent airport policy’ – making announcements in a clever way by using technology.

Announcement balancing

Amsterdam-based AviaVox has developed phoneme technology to support this silent airport policy. Once this technology is implemented, the traveler will hardly experience any announcements in the airport and yet all the required announcements are made, whether they are compulsory or needed as part of the operational process in the terminal building, or in the restricted area of the boarding gates. And that is exactly what a silent airport should be: to route only required announcements to those areas at the airport where they are needed, at the right time, in the appropriate languages. Another term for this is ‘announcement balancing’.

Announcement balancing ensures that only relevant announcements are being sent to certain parts of the airports where the likelihood of reaching a certain group of passengers is very high. In other words, travelers will only hear an announcement if it is intended for them. Other parts of the airport will not hear them. These announcements are short and only provide the essential information to the passenger in their own native language. They are also only made once in a while to draw the immediate attention of the traveler. This combination makes the announcement very effective.

Furthermore, the phoneme technology creates an intelligible announcement that, on average, is 10dB lower than a manual call. It further reduces the noise in those areas where an announcement is made. AviaVox also carries out a complete analysis of what kind of announcements need to be made in public areas and boarding gate areas. In most cases, the generic announcements in the public areas airside can be made more efficient. These can be reduced dramatically in favor of the airline-gate announcements that support the boarding process in the restricted boarding gate area.

Announcements cannot be completely removed from an airport; that is not what a silent airport is meant to be. The modern idea of a silent airport is simply make announcements in a more intelligent way by using new technologies that can limit the number of announcements, but will make them very clear and will present them to the public in carefully selected areas, thus avoiding noise pollution in other areas. If done correctly, the passenger will hardly hear any announcements. The customer experience will thus improve and operational processes can become more effective, ultimately leading to fewer delays and reduced costs for both airports and airlines. ■