

Airline passengers' complaints

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Teams snagging pitchers

■ Derek Lowe among sought-after free agents as overall spending on pitching hits \$530M, 1, 8C

By Elsa/Getty Images

Lowe: Said to agree to Braves contract.



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Cover story

Fliers' complaints on upswing

2008 complaints remain high despite declines in travel

Consumer complaints about U.S. and foreign airlines sent to the Department of Transportation:



Sources: USA TODAY research, U.S. Department of Transportation, Air Transport Association of America, International Air Transport Association

By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

Getting a satisfactory response isn't guaranteed

By Gary Stoller
USA TODAY

Mike Tancredi hasn't recovered the Garmin GPS device that he says disappeared from a checked bag on a Spirit Airlines flight in November.

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Please see COVER STORY next page ►

By **Gary Stoller**, USA TODAY

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Airlines don't report how many complaints they receive, but the DOT estimates a U.S. airline directly receives 50 complaints

for every one the government gets.

Even at that ratio, it's still a small percentage of the tens of millions of passengers that a large airline flies in a year. But DOT complaint data are a barometer of which airlines are raising customers' ire, and whose service is improving or declining over time.

A close look at that data, and interviews with DOT and industry officials, finds:

- More than 60,000 passengers have sent complaints to the DOT about U.S. and foreign airlines since 2001. The totals range from 100 to 1,800 a year for every major U.S. airline.
- US Airways, which led the industry in 2007 with 1,828 complaints, appears to have improved its performance in 2008. Its total through October was 957.
- Complaints about some smaller airlines are increasing rapidly. The DOT received 719 complaints about Spirit through October, compared with 552 in all of 2007 and an average of 48 a year from 2002 through 2006. Complaints against AirTran (AAL) and JetBlue (JBLU) also hit their seven-year-high marks in October.
- Among the seven largest U.S. airlines, Delta (DAL) drew the most complaints — 1,120 — and Southwest (LUV) had the fewest, 224, during the first 10 months of 2008.

Does complaining make a difference? Sometimes, but

many customers, such as Tancredi, say they get nowhere. **"I've never seen anything like this,"** says Tancredi, of Adrian, Mich., who had flown on Spirit several times a year without a problem until his GPS vanished. **"I'm very upset about the way they handled this whole thing."**

Spirit says it isn't responsible because valuables shouldn't be in checked bags. That's stated in its contract of carriage — a document that spells out an airline's responsibilities and is on its website.

American Airlines (AMR) passenger Magdalen Hsu-Li was upset last year when American's delay in bringing out a jet bridge to her arriving flight in Miami caused her to miss a connecting flight to Fort Myers, Fla., where she had a business appointment. She paid nearly \$400 for a ground-shuttle ride to Fort Myers, she says, after an American customer-service agent said the airline would reimburse her for ground-transportation expenses.

When she sought reimbursement, American first sent her a letter apologizing and offered a \$39.49 refund for her unused Miami-Fort Myers ticket. When she expressed her dissatisfaction, American then sent her a \$100 voucher for a future flight, but that didn't appease the musician.

American has no computer record of a conversation between Hsu-Li and an employee, or any expense authorization, says spokesman Tim Smith.

Winning loyalty

Customer-service guru **John Tschohl** says Spirit and American each missed an opportunity. If they had provided full compensation, both customers would be loyal customers for life, he says.

Tschohl is president of the **Service Quality Institute**, which provides customer-service training for companies. He advocates empowering employees to give substantial compensation.

"Airline customer-service departments are much worse than those in other industries," Tschohl says. **"They are ineffective and rarely take care of the customer's problem."**

Frequently, the goal of airline customer-service departments is to "close the file, which means getting an answer to the customer — period," says Michael Boyd, an airline industry consultant and head of the Boyd Group International.

"Too often, stock response letters are used, and they may often not address the nature of the complaint," says Boyd, a former supervisor of refund complaints for American.

Airlines say they read every complaint and do their best to resolve them. Many complaints are valid, and many are not, they say.

"We take every complaint seriously and fully investigate it in the order in which it was received," says American's Smith.

US Airways (LCC) says it tells customers who complain that they will get a response within 36 hours. Most get a reply in less than 24 hours, and the first response resolves "the vast majority of customer interactions," says spokeswoman Valerie Wunder.

The 2008 DOT figures show consumers filed three times more complaints against Spirit than Southwest, which flies more passengers than any other airline — 102 million last year.

Barry Biffle, Spirit's chief marketing officer, says more than 99% of its passengers are satisfied.

"There is, however, a handful of passengers with false expectations who thought they were shopping at Nordstrom's and didn't realize they were traveling with an ultra-low-cost carrier that's like Wal-Mart," Biffle says. "Spirit is not for everyone — such as those who are expecting the Nordstrom experience."

Boyd and Tschohl praise Southwest for its customer service. ***"The top executives of Southwest walk the talk,"*** says Tschohl. "They love their employees and their customers, and the result is the employees love the customers."

Southwest employs 112 workers to handle complaints received on the telephone, over the Internet and in the mail. Most complaints are made on the phone, says spokesman Chris Mainz.

"Our goal is to find a win-win solution," says Mainz, who

formerly worked in the customer-service department. "Our goal is to do right by the customer and make them happy."

Southwest aims to respond to a complaint within 30 days, and it meets that goal for 95% of the letters it receives, Mainz says.

If at first you don't succeed

When passengers don't get satisfaction from airlines, they turn to the DOT. The number of complaints the DOT gets is likely reduced by consumers' lack of awareness that the DOT accepts complaints and has a complaint form on its website: airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/escomplaint/es.cfm.

The DOT generally doesn't investigate individual passenger complaints it receives. Each one the DOT gets is sent to the airline mentioned in the complaint, says Samuel Podberesky, the agency's assistant general counsel.

The DOT, however, lacks enforcement power in most complaint areas such as flight problems resulting from delays and cancellations, and baggage problems. It has enforcement authority over denied-boarding compensation, credit card refunds and airfare advertisements, says DOT spokeswoman Sarah Echols. It can also prohibit unfair and deceptive practices and unfair methods of competition.

Airlines are usually not required to reply to the DOT after it

sends them a consumer complaint about a flight delay, a service problem or other problems not subject to DOT regulations, the DOT says.

In November, the DOT proposed new consumer-protection rules, including one that would require airlines to respond to consumer complaints. The proposal requires airlines to post on their websites and their electronic tickets how consumers can file a complaint. The information would have to be available at every ticket counter and gate area.

Consumer advocates charge that the rules don't go far enough to assist fliers, and that the DOT complaint system is toothless.

"The mantra of the DOT has been, 'The market will take care of it,'" says Paul Hudson, executive director of the Aviation Consumer Action Project. ***"The problem is, the market has crashed, and consumers are left with no practical recourse when their complaints are denied or ignored, and the airlines and DOT know this."***

Most passengers don't understand how ineffective a DOT complaint is, says Boyd.

"All DOT does is categorize the complaint and pass it on," says Boyd. ***"You can complain that Grandma was attacked by a Klingon in the lavatory on the way to New York, and DOT will categorize it and pass it on."***

The DOT receives complaints on many subjects and would need

a huge staff to research and make determinations about each complaint, he says.

"Within the realities of staffing and the scope of the issue, they are doing what they can," Boyd says.

Despite its limited authority in customer-service matters, the DOT says, in a written statement to USA TODAY, that it ***"has worked tirelessly to address the causes of aviation congestion and flight delays, which contribute to customer complaints."***

For Craig Matsuda, complaining to the DOT "made a tremendous difference."

Matsuda and his family missed a United Express connecting flight late last year when the airline changed the departure time and didn't notify him.

United (UAUA), which had initially refused to give him a refund, acknowledged in November that it had received the complaint from the DOT and was providing a refund for every ticket Matsuda bought, plus discount travel certificates for a future flight. ***"I cannot thank the DOT enough for creating such a channel for the public,"*** says Matsuda, of Windsor, Ontario. ***"This was a very big deal to my family, because there was almost a thousand dollars involved."***

A positive resolution for a consumer is a rarity, Boyd says. ***"Sending the DOT a complaint is more effective than howling at the moon about a service problem,"*** he says. ***"But not much more effective."***

AIR TRAVELER COMPLAINTS

Consumer complaints about airlines sent to the Department of Transportation:

Largest airlines ¹	Total complaints 2002-Oct. 2008	Jan.-Oct. 2008	2007
American	7,526	1,105	1,617
Continental	3,035	456	534
Delta	6,630	1,120	1,325
Northwest	3,876	362	768
Southwest	1,300	224	266
United	6,494	1,045	1,540
US Airways	5,691	957	1,828

Other airlines²

Largest airlines ¹	Total complaints 2002-Oct. 2008	Jan.-Oct. 2008	2007
AirTran	1,148	238	197
Alaska	719	68	133
Allegiant	180	53	66
American Eagle	890	150	216
Atlantic Southeast	539	95	149
Comair	729	94	138
ExpressJet	270	57	56
Frontier	358	77	71
Hawaiian	325	57	51
JetBlue	551	196	165
Midwest	166	68	33
Pinnacle	369	83	96
SkyWest	595	90	156
Spirit	1,481	719	552

**1 = 49 million or more passengers in 2007;
2 = 3 million to 24 million passengers in 2007**
Sources: USA TODAY research,
Department of Transportation



Travelers line up to get their luggage at the Southwest baggage claim at San Jose International Airport in California.