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Think twice before accepting that airline apology

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Christopher Elliott, Special for USA TODAY 8:17 a.m. EST February 10, 2014



Travelers check in at the United Airlines ticket counter at Terminal 1 in O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. (Photo: Nam Y. Huh, AP)

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If you've experienced a recent flight delay or service disruption, then you probably know that for better or worse, no one says "I'm sorry" like an airline.

A well-crafted apology is often just the beginning. Gift cards, credits and loyalty points — lots of loyalty points — frequently follow. And the *mea culpas* appear to work. Most passengers accept them and move on.

Well, maybe they shouldn't.

A closer look at the airline industry's "sorries" suggests they sometimes lack sincerity and show a remarkable unwillingness to fix the problem that caused the complaint in the first place. In other words, it's more like hush money than an apology.

Airline apology innovations may not sound like big news, but they are. Take the form letter, for example. A few years ago, these e-mails were riddled with typos and grammatical errors. But almost overnight, they began to look almost literary. Sure enough, one airline vice president admitted to me that his company had hired English majors to write the letters. Brilliant.

Gift cards are also parceled out when things go wrong. If you experience "less than exceptional" service on Delta Air Lines, it sometimes offers certificates that can be used at Avis, Carnival and Lowe's. El Al gives aggrieved customers the choice of a gift card for dinner at a kosher restaurant, gift baskets, frequent-flier points or duty-free vouchers.

The most customer-focused companies don't wait for the complaint; they e-mail the apology and deposit the miles into your account before you can make a phone call.

But do customers really want that stuff? Sure, but that's not all. When Mitch Robertson, a professor from O'Fallon, Ill., complained about an unpleasant Southwest Airlines flight, it responded swiftly by crediting him with 12,180 points, the value of his one-way fare. It also sent a personal response saying it was "truly sorry" for the incident.

Robertson liked Southwest's answer because it was quick, personal and addressed each issue he'd brought up in his complaint.

"Southwest admitted that there were mistakes, didn't make excuses and offered sincere and profound apologies," he says.

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A passenger checks her cellphone before a flight in Boston on Oct. 31, 2013. (Photo: Matt Slocum, AP) Story Highlights Lawmakers in both House and Senate are

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That contrasts sharply with the "apology" Jane Coloccia says she received after flying in first class from St. Maarten to Newark on United Airlines. "The second we took off, the flight attendant made an announcement that the left hand of the first-class section had no audio or video entertainment, and he just handed out these pre-printed apology cards with a tracking number on them," remembers Coloccia, a communications consultant from New York. "We had to go online and fill in that tracking number, and I just got this e-mail back giving me 2,000 miles in my account."

To her, the apology seemed half-hearted. United must have known its entertainment system wasn't working, but instead of fixing it, it parceled out coupons, she says. What's more, her 2,000-mile credit wouldn't even buy a decent bouquet of flowers.

Because I'm a consumer advocate, airlines often say they're sorry to me. Whenever two legacy airlines merge, it's usually followed by something I like to call the Apology Tour, when I'm summoned to executive offices, and they apologize for the ridiculous number of customer service complaints generated in the last year.

Experts say we shouldn't be overly impressed with the volume or the creativity of the airline industry's apologies. Advice columnist April Masini calls the increase in *mea culpas* "apology inflation" and says it's turned "I'm sorry" into two "cheap and tawdry" words.

Apology critic Jennifer Thomas, co-author of *When Sorry Isn't Enough: Making Things Right with Those You Love*, says airlines fail to take responsibility, repent or ask for forgiveness. "Customers know talk is cheap," she says.

Flexibility on both sides may be in order. On the one hand, "too much indignation or entitlement on the part of the travelers will drive a one-size-fits-all corporate response that ends up doing the truly mistreated a disservice," says psychologist and relationships expert Guy Grenier.

On the other, airlines should read responses they get to apologies, especially canned regrets. When Sean Ryan complained to JetBlue that its reply was insincere, the commercial real estate agent from Yorba Linda, Calif., was surprised to find a quick offer of a \$150 credit, and a sincere apology for being so insincere.

"That's an improvement," says Ryan. Without a doubt.

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