

That contrasts sharply with the "apology" Jane Colocchia 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 Colocchia, 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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A passenger checks her cellphone before a flight in Boston on Oct. 31, 2013.(Photo:

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