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Can you see it? Roll over to envision it.

BMO  Harris Bank



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I write about how companies make money (or should be making money).

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The Fine Print You Should Read Before You Book Your Next Flight

Customer service from the airline industry is improving, or at least it is no longer in clear free fall, as two recent surveys suggest.

The American Customer Satisfaction Index reports in its June survey that the airline industry achieved a score of 67 out of 100—its best score in a decade. Airlines that ranked well in this survey include JetBlue, which debuted in the top spot for the first time, followed by Southwest. Southwest spent 18 years dominating the top perch, but its merger with AirTran seems to have done a number on passenger satisfaction. That is what happened to Delta after its merger with Northwest last year—a merger from which it is still recovering, customer service wise, the survey shows.



English: New interior on Delta Air Lines' Boeing 737-800 fleet. (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

In short, this is the story throughout the industry, ACSI says—smaller airlines such as Alaska Air or Spirit score well, while legacy providers such as American Airlines and United, not so much. A similar tale is told by J.D. Power and Associates' 2012 North America Airline Satisfaction study. Alaska Airlines ranked highest in the survey's traditional network carrier segment, followed by [Air Canada](#) and then [Delta Air Lines](#). JetBlue Airways ranked highest among low-cost carriers, followed by [Southwest Airlines](#).

Curious to find out if travelers' perceptions jive with these surveys, I asked

around. The results of my decidedly informal and unscientific survey were best expressed by April Masini, author of the dating advice column ‘[Ask April](#)’, who happened to be getting ready to board a flight when she emailed me.

Take it away April.

“Every seat on the plate is taken, and there are no direct flights for my route... there’re the fees for everything. Baggage. Food. Internet service on planes costs a fee, and unless you’ve paid for first class (another fee), your (by this point, much needed) cocktails cost extra, too.” She didn’t mince words with flight crews’ attitudes either.

“I’m doing YOU a favor” is the attitude most airlines adopt these days. So long, “the customer is always right”, and hullo, “you’re lucky to have this overpriced seat in steerage”.

The Real Reason to Complain

All of this is beside the point, according to Kate Hanni, founder of [FlyersRights.org](#).

Yes, airlines are still treating customers shabbily, she says—but their worst offenses are happening behind the scenes.

Several years ago Hanni found herself on a plane that was stranded on a tarmac for nine hours. Her reaction was to quit her day job, found FlyersRights and generally torment the airline industry ever since. She is, in large part, to thank for the Department of Transportation rules issued in 2009 governing how long and in what conditions airlines can keep passengers stuck on a plane, having advocated for them for years. (Basically, passengers can’t be held no more than three hours on a stranded plane and they must be provided food and water).

Hanni still at it, offering passengers assistance with everything from getting compensation for lost luggage to being bumped from a flight.

The truth is, she says, air passengers have fewer rights today than they did a year ago whether they realize or not—and most don’t. That is because carriers, according to Hanni, have been quietly revising their Contract of Carriage every few months, editing out more and more rights for passengers.

“When people buy a ticket they don’t know they have signed an underlying contract. Most people, when they buy a ticket, assume the airline is promising to get you to point A from point B.” Which for the most part they do—but they leave themselves plenty of wiggle room.

Redefining An Act of God

Increasingly, she says, airlines have been packing the “Force majeure” or “Act of God” portion of the contract with events that are hardly unstoppable, unavoidable, unforeseen events. Some, for instance, have included outsourced maintenance. “It used to be standard that is there was a mechanical delay and

the passenger missed a flight and would be at the airport overnight he or she would get a voucher for a hotel, meals and taxi.” No more, if the mechanical delay is due to a third party and has been written into the contract.

Hanni says she now sees such events as strikes and labor shortages—which could be interpreted to mean no available crew—included in the force majeure.

For those unfortunate passengers stranded for one of these reasons their options are, well, whatever the airline deems to provide, Hanni says.

Stay tuned for Part 2—Passenger Survival Tips

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