

BEST PRACTICES

FOR IMPROVING THE AIR TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

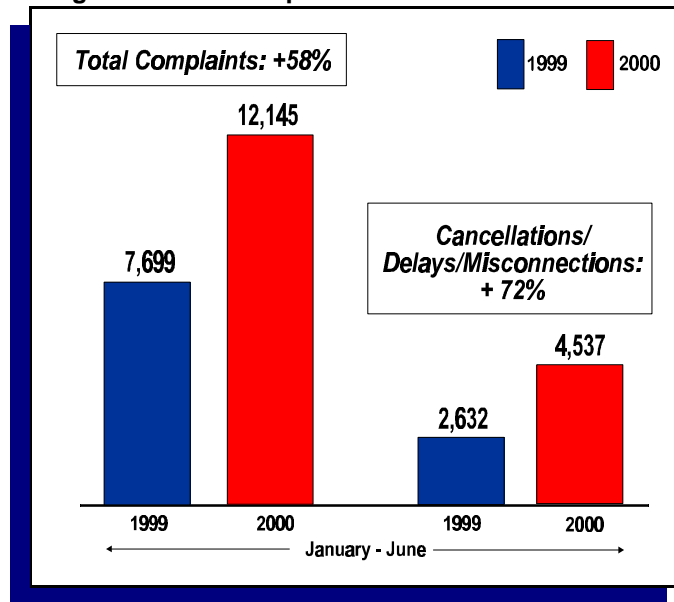


October 2000

BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING THE AIR TRAVEL EXPERIENCE

On August 21, 2000, Secretary Rodney Slater convened a meeting of aviation industry leaders from around the country to focus the industry's efforts on "putting people first" in dealing with air travel delays. Following the meeting, Secretary Slater formed a task force, chaired by the Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs, Francisco Sanchez, to address the issue of flight delays and cancellations. The task force was to identify "best practices" used by airlines and airports to (1) facilitate consumer access to flight information and (2) provide services that minimize the adverse consequences of air travel delays and cancellations.

Rising Consumer Complaints



The Secretary's action establishing the task force reflects growing public concern over flight delays and cancellations. During the first six months of 2000, the total number of air travel complaints received by the Department of Transportation (DOT) increased by 58 percent compared with the same period in 1999. Meanwhile, the number of complaints about flight delays, cancellations, and misconnections rose by 72 percent. Delays and cancellations have significant adverse economic consequences for airlines and air travelers. They also result in frustration and emotional distress for travelers and airline employees. While the diverse causes of delays and cancellations make them hard to eliminate, advances in communication technolo-

gies and increased attention to customer needs should help to minimize their effects.

The identification of best practices is but one of several near- and longer-term initiatives underway at the Department to deal with the issues of flight delays and congestion in the nation's air space. These issues in large measure are products of the remarkable growth and success of the U.S. economy since 1993. The task now is to ensure better service along with safety, while continuing the long-term viability and growth of the aviation community. To that end, in addition to best practices, other near-term DOT efforts include a task force on airline service quality performance led by Associate Deputy Secretary Van Beek; an investigation by the DOT Inspector General into the success of the airlines in implementing their voluntary plans for improved customer service; and several FAA initiatives to increase operational use of the national airspace system. Longer term, the



Department is looking to continued modernization of the air traffic control system, infrastructure growth, and the encouragement of demand-management techniques as means to reduce flight delays and congestion.

To identify best practices, Assistant Secretary Sanchez asked airlines and airports for information about practices and policies they have adopted to improve consumer satisfaction and reduce the emotional and financial consequences of flight delays on their customers. Secretary Slater and Assistant Secretary Sanchez also met with airlines, airport representatives, and other parties to experience first hand some existing or planned practices. (A list of best-practice respondents and locations visited appears on page 19.) While we cannot claim to have identified all best practices, we have identified many current practices which, if adopted more widely, could improve the air travel experience for millions of consumers.

ENHANCING INFORMATION FLOW

Information plays at least two key roles in reducing both the real and perceived impacts of delays and cancellations. First, improving collaboration and coordination among and within the airlines, airports, and FAA helps to reduce delays from causes such as severe weather and equipment problems. Second, improving the flow of information about delays and cancellations to travelers helps to reduce the impact of these problems on the flying public.

Decisions to delay or cancel flights can result from one or more of four factors: (1) severe weather; (2) changes in airline flight operations because of scheduling, equipment, and crew availability; (3) airport capacity constraints; and (4) air traffic control maintenance or equipment problems. Recognizing that severe weather is by far the most frequent cause of delay, President Clinton and Secretary Slater, in March 2000, launched a new industry-FAA effort, known as the Spring/Summer Initiative, to improve the flow of traffic during severe weather conditions.

Getting inaccurate, conflicting, or late information about flight delays and cancellations is one of the most frustrating experiences for air travelers. Given the remarkable information and communication technologies available today, travelers are understandably frustrated and angry when information is poor or non-existent. Some airlines recognize this, and have invested substantial amounts of money to improve the accuracy and timeliness of information given to employees and customers. Moreover, the FAA, air carriers, and airports are giving increased emphasis to customer needs in their operational decisionmaking.



Collaboration and Coordination

Collaboration and coordination among and within the airlines, airports, and FAA is essential for improved information flow within the aviation community. During the past two years, the FAA, air carriers, and airports have recognized the increased importance of adding a customer focus when they make decisions regarding operations and schedules. In this regard, a number of practices are being adopted that focus on enhancing the flow of information and how such information affects decisionmaking at all levels.

Spring/Summer 2000 Initiative

< In March 2000, FAA initiated a collaborative effort with the airlines and others to reduce delays due to severe weather. The Spring/Summer Initiative focuses on maximizing the use of available airspace during severe weather conditions. The underpinning for the Initiative is a daily “severe weather forecast,” which is agreed upon by all parties. With this forecast as a basis, FAA’s Air Traffic Control System Command Center in Herndon, Virginia, initiates conference calls every two hours beginning at 5 a.m. Participants in these calls include FAA’s strategic planning team, FAA traffic management specialists, FAA air traffic field facilities, airline operations centers, and aviation weather experts from the airlines, FAA, and National Weather Service. Collectively, these groups develop a coordinated approach regarding changes to air traffic flight patterns, changes to the arrival and departure rates for airports, and other decisions to manage traffic flows. This information benefits customers by allowing airlines to: (1) make decisions about re-routing passengers and traffic from affected airports, (2) shift airplanes and passengers to alternative flights, and (3) make earlier preparations to handle customer-service issues including re-booking passengers because of delayed or canceled flights. The Initiative provides a common database of information and weather forecast tools for all participants, enhanced decision-support tools, new planning and operational procedures, and a web site with real-time information on air traffic conditions at major airports (*see pp. 4, 5*). Airlines attributed improved information flow to the Spring/Summer 2000 Initiative. Northwest Airlines credited the Initiative with improving its annual on-time performance at three of its hubs. Other airlines stressed the importance of a system-wide strategic focus, rather than a narrow emphasis on particular regional or airport-specific issues, as the best way of facilitating early decisions on how to serve airline customers most effectively during periods of irregular operations.

Consumer-Focused Decisionmaking

< Airlines have instituted a number of best practices that have resulted in a more customer-focused decision-making process. Examples include:



SPRING/SUMMER 2000 INITIATIVE

Baseline

Collaborative FAA / Airline / National Weather Service Severe Weather Forecast

Strategic Decision Makers

- o FAA Air Traffic Control System Command Center (Herndon, VA)
- o National Weather Service's Aviation Weather Center (Kansas City, MO)
- o FAA Air Traffic Field Facilities
- o Airline Operations Centers

Process

- o Conference call among Strategic Decision Makers every 2 hours
- o Reach agreement for orderly flow of traffic around, or in the presence of, severe weather
- o Fair and efficient use of runways, terminal gates, and high traffic flight routes

Output

- o Common database of aviation information and weather forecasting tools
- o Airlines prioritize flights to operate when weather reduces capacity at some airports
- o Airlines reroute traffic and passengers / transfer passengers to alternate flights

Results

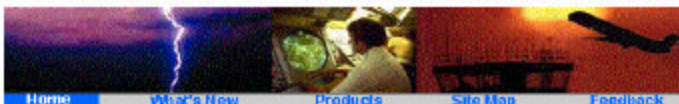
- o Reduce delays by making additional routes and airspace available for more flights
- o Allow airlines to make early customer service decisions (e.g., re-booking or re-routing)
- o Real-time delay data at major airports available on FAA Web site (fly.faa.gov)



FAA's Airport Status Page on the Internet



AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM COMMAND CENTER



Welcome to the Air Traffic Control System Command Center Real-time Airport Status page. Select an airport from the map or from the drop-down list to obtain the latest delay information.



Selecting Las Vegas (LAS) from the map brings up current information on the status of delays by specific destination (e.g., Los Angeles) and the reasons for a reported delay (low ceilings, visibility). Also shown is the status of delays at LAS for departures and arrivals generally.

AIRPORT STATUS INFORMATION
 Provided by the FAA's Air Traffic Control System Command Center

Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport / LAS
 Real-time Airport Status

Delays by Destination:

- Due to **LOW CEILINGS/ VIS**, departure traffic destined to **Los Angeles International Airport (LAX)** is currently experiencing delays averaging **31 minutes**, with some flights receiving as much as **1 hour and 12 minutes** delay.
- Due to **WX/LOW CIGS/VISBY**, departure traffic destined to **Newark International Airport (EWR)** is currently experiencing delays averaging **1 hour**, with some flights receiving as much as **1 hour and 43 minutes** delay.

General Departure Delays: Traffic is experiencing Gate Hold and Taxi delays of less than 15 minutes in length.

General Arrival Delays: Arrival traffic is experiencing less than 15 minutes airborne delay.

This data was last updated: Tue Sep 19 15:37:58 2000 EDT



- o Northwest Airlines has made organizational changes so that its maintenance, weather, and system operations staffs, together with flight crews and station managers, are all housed in one area. This change enhanced and expedited the flow of information about delays or cancellations from the source or cause of the delay to all levels of the organization, including front-line personnel who deal directly with customers.

 - o At Continental Airlines, decisionmaking focused on the customer has made it easier for the airline to provide information and assistance. During a daily operation meeting, a team of Continental operational and customer-service representatives evaluate factors that affect delays and cancellations, such as aircraft out of service, location and number of spare parts, weather forecasts and weather alerts, facility constraints, and any anticipated problems with air traffic control. This team uses knowledge and experience gained from prior service irregularities to begin planning for known events. The airline advises local airport management of the circumstances that exist or weather forecasts so the airport can also begin to prepare as necessary.

 - o Some airlines and airports have developed and implemented plans detailing airline and airport communication processes for minimizing inconveniences caused by delays or cancellations. American Airlines, for example, reported that all of its field locations have created a local airport contingency plan that details airline and airport communication processes for minimizing inconveniences. The plans provide detailed information regarding overnight accommodations, alternative transportation, and airline communication processes for handling customer needs during delays. Similarly, each airport facility of US Airways has a preparedness plan that outlines the steps to be taken during irregular operations to alleviate customer problems, such as when to launch passenger re-booking procedures.

 - o Delta Air Lines highlighted the importance of system-wide conference calls that occur in its operations-control center three times daily as an important pro-active management tool. These calls focus on the state of the airline with an emphasis on what the airline can do when irregular operations occur to enhance customer satisfaction, particularly getting passengers where they want to go when they want to get there.
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Consistent and Timely Information

Airlines are developing and testing new communication technologies to improve the quality and timeliness of information provided to travelers. These new technologies already have been deployed at a few airports.

Centralized Flight Information

< Until recently, some airlines had no centralized system for updating flight information. When a delay or cancellation occurred, airline personnel at the affected airport had to enter data into the flight information system manually. They also had to estimate the impact of the delay or cancellation on subsequent flight arrival and departure times. This procedure was not the most efficient because information often was not entered in a timely fashion and the consequences of a delay on subsequent flights were seriously misgauged. Today, several airlines have adopted centralized information systems and sophisticated computer programs that more accurately estimate flight arrival and departure times at downstream airports, providing customers with more consistent, real-time information. Continental Airlines, for example, has developed a Cascading Flight Information Center, a technology that has resulted in more accurate estimates of flight delays. Better information also makes it easier for flight and station personnel to explain the nature of the delay and its expected impact on arrival and departure times. Other technologies, such as US Airways' automated flight information system, are improving the flow of information throughout the airline's network, with resulting benefits for consumers. Airlines also are providing toll-free telephone access to a voice-prompted menu that transmits information about flight arrivals and departures and terminal and gate information. Trans World Airlines, Continental Express and Horizon Air are among the airlines providing such services.

Using the Internet

< Increasingly, travelers are using the Internet to gather information about airline services. Airlines and airports should post accurate and timely information on their web pages, and their web pages should be "consumer friendly." Many airlines recognize this, and are moving rapidly to use the Internet as a tool for reaching consumers (and, of course, marketing their services). Airlines (and airports), however, differ as to how current the flight data on their web pages are, and how much information they provide to consumers. Southwest Airlines is generally considered to have a "consumer friendly" web page because of the straightforward manner in which information and data are presented (in English and Spanish) and the ease with which a consumer can navigate the site and locate information on flights, fares, and services. Other major airlines recognize the importance of the Internet, and they are taking actions to



improve the accuracy, timeliness, and usefulness of the information that appears on their web pages. Northwest Airlines, for example, provides information on its web site regarding what customers can expect during periods of flight delays and cancellations. Examples of airports that provide consumer-friendly web sites with flight information are Dallas/Fort Worth International and Sacramento County airports.

**Wireless
Communication**

Several airlines now offer customers a free subscription to a service that allows an airline to communicate directly and automatically with subscribers via cellular phone, E-mail, pager, or other personal communication device. Improving the use of wireless communication technologies will inform passengers more easily about flight delays, cancellations, and other pertinent travel information. United Airlines, for instance, has instituted "Proactive Flight Paging," a service that allows customers to receive, at no charge, up-to-date information about flight delays, cancellations, and airport gates. Given the importance of wireless communication devices, other airlines have instituted or are instituting new services to improve their ability to communicate on a real-time basis with their customers. Frontier Airlines will begin offering electronic delay notification in October 2000, and in the first quarter of 2001, US Airways expects to be able to offer a similar service to its customers.

**Better Information
For Responding to
Passenger Inquiries**

Of course, passengers already at an airport require up-to-date information about arriving and departing flights. Some carriers are testing "smart" monitors that would allow passengers to review flight information and to get responses to frequently asked questions about the status of flights and other relevant issues. Travelers will no longer have to stand in long lines to reach agents. The monitors are also being designed to assist the hearing impaired. Delta Air Lines is now testing smart screens at two airports, and will begin installing them at other major airports later this year. Also at Delta, media advisories are released to local press outlets on days when the airline is experiencing severe weather. These advisories relate to customers the likelihood that flight delays exist and suggest they call the airline before leaving for the airport.



**REDUCING
TRAVELER
STRESS AND
INCONVENIENCE**

The collective efforts of the airlines, airports, and FAA to avoid or minimize flight delays and cancellations, together with stepped-up efforts to keep travelers well informed of the status and reasons for any significant schedule disruptions, are the first lines of defense in preserving a stress-free air travel experience. However, when significant flight delays occur, or when cancellations are unavoidable, additional measures are called for to expedite delivery of passenger services and to address the needs of travelers whose plans have been disrupted.

***Expediting
Passenger
Services***

Delayed or canceled flights often translate to missed connections, the need to find and book alternative flights, to reroute baggage, and to contact family or friends to alert them to changes in travel plans.

***Specialist
Training***

< Several airlines reported increased training to deal specifically with customer issues arising from delays and cancellations. At America West, for example, staff are trained and positioned solely to track flights throughout the airline's system, watching for missed connections and inconvenienced customers due to delays and cancellations. Affected customers are re-booked prior to their arrival at their connection point, met at the gate with a new ticket and/or boarding pass, and provided a meal voucher and phone card to use during their wait for their new flight. US Airways, meanwhile, has undertaken several behavioral training programs to enhance the service provided to customers during periods of delay or cancellation. This training emphasizes leadership skills, techniques for promoting positive attitudes in stressful conditions, and tactical planning for maintaining quality of service in difficult situations.

***Customer
Perspective***

< Some airlines emphasized their efforts to better integrate the customer's viewpoint with operational decisionmaking once delays or cancellations occur. At Southwest Airlines, for instance, Customer Service Coordinators collaborate with aircraft dispatchers to find ways to best accommodate customers affected by delays. Similarly, at America West, an employee at each airport is appointed to serve as a "customer advocate," whose job is to provide a customer perspective on all operations at the station and to enforce carrier compliance with customer commitments. In August, United Airlines launched a prototype Customer Advocate Center at Chicago O'Hare to help customers affected by delays and cancellations.



**Mobile
Stations**

< Northwest Airlines, United Airlines, and several other carriers are implementing portable technologies for passenger check-in (see p. 11). At United, for example, mobile, battery-powered systems based on wireless technology allow airport personnel to set up and complete customer re-accommodation (re-booking, check-in, ticketing, baggage, etc.) at virtually any location in the airport.

**Computer
Programs**

< Airlines are implementing sophisticated computer programs that allow for faster re-accommodation of customer itineraries by performing tasks formerly executed manually. Programs operated by US Airways, for example, automatically review flight availability to reserve alternate transportation, assign seats, issue boarding passes, and reissue electronic tickets. Similarly, at Delta Air Lines, whenever a flight is canceled, an automated program is launched that re-books affected passengers on the next available Delta flight.

**Automated
Calling**

< Automated calling systems have been implemented to play recorded messages advising of a flight delay or cancellation. US Airways' system, for example, with a capacity of up to 2,250 calls per hour, frees airline representatives to attend to other customer needs in the event of serious delays or cancellations.

**Phone
Banks**

< Some carriers, such as Northwest Airlines and US Airways, deploy portable phone banks containing as many as eight portable cell phones, including ones accessible to customers with disabilities, to facilitate re-booking in the event of a delay (see p. 12). These devices provide direct, priority access to reservation desks, allowing customers to bypass lines at airport locations.

**Addressing
Other Basic
Needs**

In addition to re-accommodating passengers' plans, airlines and airports frequently must deal with an assortment of customer needs (e.g., food, infant care) in the event of serious flight delays or cancellations.

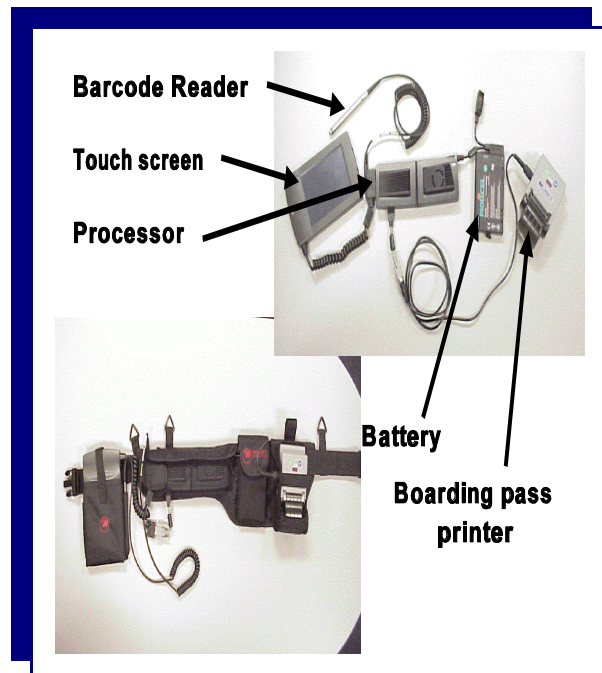
**Airport
Assistance
Plans**

< At O'Hare International Airport, the Chicago Department of Aviation has established a Passenger Assistance Program to accommodate travelers who are stranded mid-journey and are unable to procure lodging outside of the airport. In such events, the Department sets up a "camp" for travelers in areas designated by the affected airlines, including cots, blankets, pillows,



TECHNOLOGY ENABLES TIMELIER, MORE CONVENIENT PASSENGER CHECK-IN...

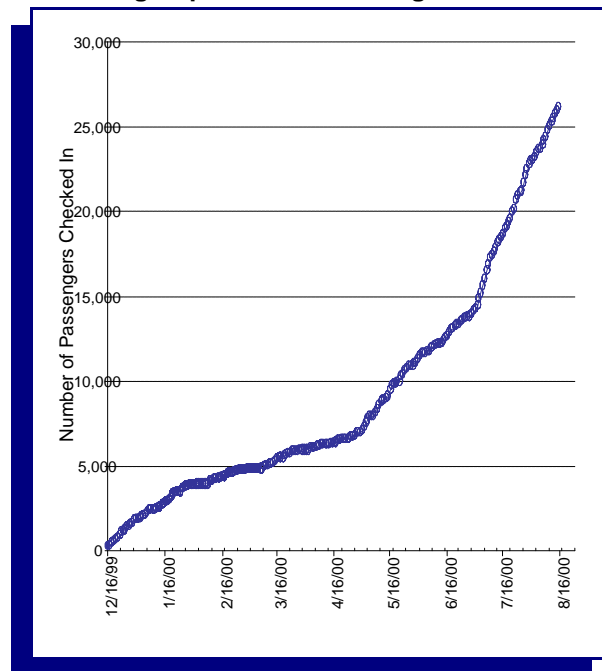
Northwest's Portable Work Station...



...At Work in the Field...



...Is Seeing Rapid Growth in Usage



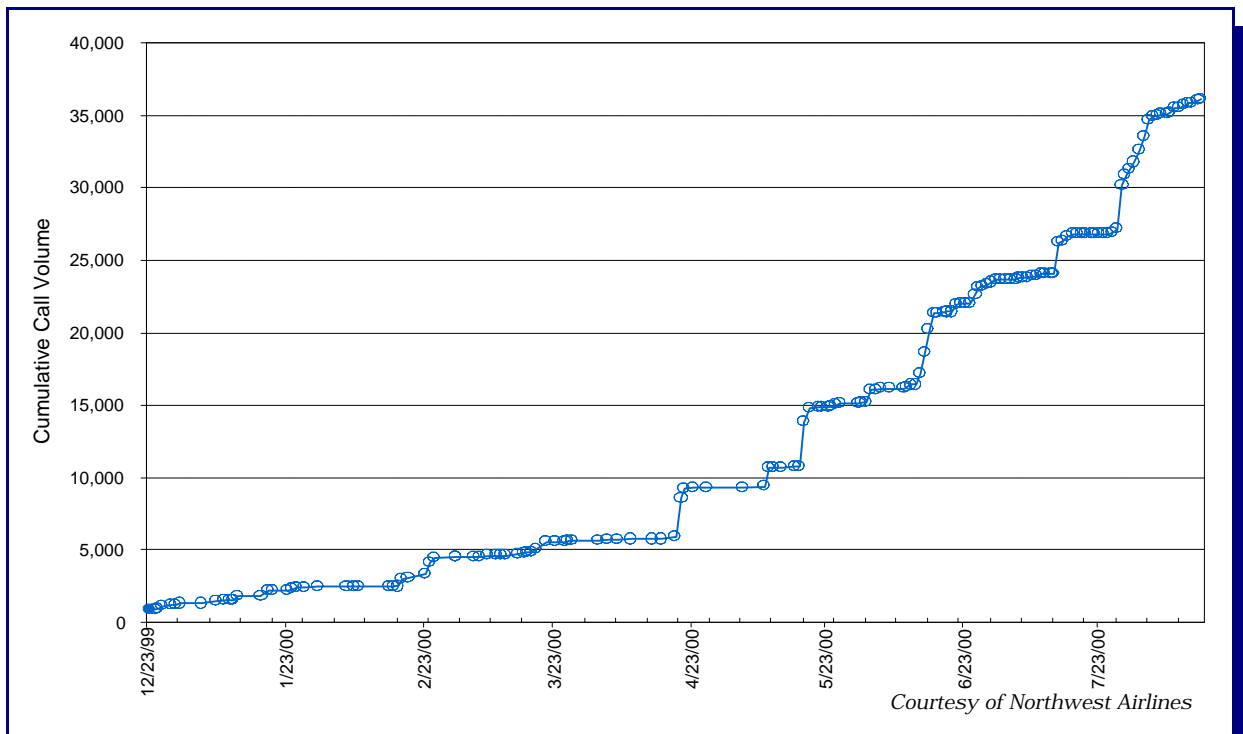
Courtesy of Northwest Airlines



Portable Phone Banks at US Airways



Growth in Use of Customer Rebook Hotline at Northwest Airlines



and hygiene kits (e.g., soap, deodorant, comb, tooth brush, and tooth paste). Lighting is dimmed and public address systems are turned down in order to allow passengers to sleep, while security officers are deployed to ensure public safety. In the morning free coffee is distributed by customer service representatives, often assisted by the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross. Similar amenities also are provided by the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport when extensive cancellations occur. Chicago's Passenger Assistance Program began in March 1993, after a major snowstorm on the east coast closed several airports. During 1999, over 14,000 travelers were involved in 56 separate incidents or passenger-assistance events. Through August of this year, more than 14,000 travelers had participated in 50 such events or incidents.

**Senior Management
Incentives**

< At Delta Air Lines, reward and recognition programs for senior airline management have been implemented to link performance to the number of customer complaints reported to DOT about the airline.

**Employee
Incentives**

< Also at Delta, reward and recognition programs, including letters of recognition from senior management, have been structured for other airline employees. These programs are designed to reinforce Delta's priority for keeping customers informed during flight disruptions and to provide a reminder of the importance of the airline's customer commitment.

**Off-Loading and
Diversion**

< At Northwest Airlines, passengers in aircraft that have experienced extended delay in taking off or taxiing to a gate are off-loaded and transported to the terminal. Similarly, if a flight to the airline's hubs in Minneapolis or Detroit is delayed by the non-availability of an airport gate due to bad weather, the flight is diverted to one of several surrounding airports with available gates.

**Service
Guarantees**

< Aloha Airlines exhibits a willingness to back up its service to an extent unmatched by any other airline. Aloha will provide a free one-way ticket good for inter-island travel in Hawaii if it fails to get a customer to his or her destination in a timely manner, deliver baggage promptly, or provide the customer with courteous, professional service.



**Additional
Amenities**

< Virtually all airlines reported that they furnish free meals, phone cards, infant formula and diapers, and other amenities in the event of unusual service disruptions, or designate specific areas at the airport for providing amenities in such cases ("Customer Care Center, "Kids Corner," "Special Recovery Rooms," etc.). At Sun Country Airlines, for instance, Customer Service Managers have broad authority to give flight discount coupons and meal vouchers during flight delays and other irregularities.

**Maintaining
Support
Services**

< At the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, management has struck agreements with concessionaires, parking lots, ground transportation services, etc., to ensure services are maintained to accommodate late-arriving passengers. Similarly, the air carrier customer service standards maintained by the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport stipulate that airlines advise concessionaires in the event of extended delays or cancellations during the evening hours.

**DOT
OBSERVATIONS**

Despite the problems experienced by many air travelers over the summer, it is clear that the Department, airlines, and many airports are attempting to provide their customers with enhanced, accurate and timely information about flight delays and cancellations. New information and communication technologies are making it possible to keep passengers apprised of changes in flight schedules and operations on a minute-by-minute basis. Moreover, once a delay or cancellation occurs, air carriers are also assisting passengers with tools and support services to help them alter their travel plans.

More is needed, however. A renewed commitment to putting people first is the place to begin. Airline and airport executives we have met with recognize that the recent service problems that have plagued the industry have tarnished all air carriers. These executives stress their commitment to improving service, and are working to change established operating practices. Large investments are being made to provide passengers with better information. The adoption of new information technologies now being tested or deployed at a few airports could improve service for millions of consumers. For those Americans who rely on air travel, it cannot happen too soon.



**Customer
Focus**

A characteristic of many of the best practices identified is the effort by airline management to integrate a customer perspective into their decisions on flight operations. Sometimes this integration is formalized by designating an airline employee to serve as a customer surrogate, bringing the customer viewpoint to bear on decisions affecting air travel schedules. In other cases, accountability is heightened by linking management pay and performance to efforts to minimize the incidence and effects of flight disruptions. These actions suggest there are significant opportunities and potential payoffs for airlines and airports to heighten awareness and sensitivity to customer needs throughout their decision-making processes.

**New Approaches
To Consensus
Building**

Although the nation's commercial airports are receiving increased investment, the busiest and most congested airports are facing serious capacity constraints. For example, the DOT Inspector General recently reported that between 1991 and 1999, only five new runways were added at the 29 largest airports. And while another 15 runways are under construction or are proposed at those airports, most will not be opened for three to seven years. Our aviation system -- airports, air carriers, and air traffic control -- only works well if its constituent parts function in an integrated and seamless manner. But, today, local decisions to forgo investments in needed airport capacity can have substantial, long-term negative implications, both for local passengers and for the aviation system. New collaborative approaches must be found to achieve a political consensus that balances legitimate environmental and quality-of-life concerns against the need to ensure that the national aviation system has adequate capacity to meet the demands that will be placed upon it now and in the future.

**Passenger
Transfers**

When faced with flight cancellations or serious delays, passengers expect prompt, courteous and helpful assistance from airline personnel, whether such assistance involves re-booking on the airline with the delayed or canceled flight or transferring to another airline. There appear to be real opportunities to strengthen the process used by airlines to assist passengers when transferring to other airlines. First, airlines could benefit from standard procedures that provide timely notice of potentially delayed or canceled flights and the expected impact of those flights on other carriers at the airport. Such notice would enable the other carriers to prepare for a surge in passenger transfers, gear up for an increase in baggage handling, and possibly modify their flight operations to accommodate re-ticketed passengers. Second, the use of electronic airline tickets offers the promise of substantial benefits for air travelers and the airlines. When confronted with a flight cancellation or delay, however, passengers holding an electronic



ticket have encountered problems re-booking on another airline. Because there is not an industry-wide “electronic clearinghouse” for all E-tickets, some airlines will only re-book a passenger if he or she holds a paper ticket, thus defeating the purpose of electronic ticketing and making passengers unwilling to use them. While some airlines are adopting policies that will soon allow the exchange of E-tickets among a few airlines, there may be substantial consumer benefits if such practices were adopted by all airlines.

Scheduling Data

It is well known in the aviation industry that, during certain periods of the day, scheduled airline demand for operations sometimes exceeds visual flight-rule capacity (VFR, the most favorable flying conditions). The scheduled airline demand, particularly at hub airports, does not result from the marketing practices of any one airline (although a dominant hub carrier usually accounts for 60 to 80 percent of the scheduled flights), but from the combined marketing practices of all airlines at the airport. Over-scheduling becomes a critical issue when weather changes from VFR to instrument flight rules (IFR, for conditions of poor visibility). The FAA maintains and analyzes VFR airport capacity in 15-minute periods. If the FAA were to make this information available to airlines and airports, it might have a real impact on reducing delays. Airlines and airports would have the knowledge to understand the data and relate VFR capacity to IFR delays. Seeing the collective impact of their scheduling practices, airlines may choose to alter their schedules and reduce delays, which would directly lead to an improved passenger air travel experience. Providing similar information directly to passengers may provide some benefit to them in avoiding delays associated with VFR capacity shortages. If, for example, a potential passenger knew that for the preceding three months, on Tuesday through Thursday between 4:45 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., the number of flights scheduled exceeded the operating capacity by 25 to 50 percent at Newark, then the passenger may choose to book a flight during another time.

Weather Data

“How can it be a weather-related delay when it is clear outside, and I called home and it was clear there, too?” is a common concern voiced by airline passengers. To focus on this issue, some airlines now have monitors throughout their service area with direct Internet access to the weather channel. Airline and airport officials we spoke with noted that if the daily weather forecasts that are now developed collaboratively by FAA and the airlines as part of the Spring/Summer 2000 Initiative were centrally available to all airports and airlines, and if these forecasts could be displayed on airline and airport monitors alike, passengers would have



a common foundation for understanding the weather constraints faced by air traffic decision-makers. This suggestion appears worthy of further exploration as a natural extension of the data now generated by the Spring/Summer 2000 Initiative.

**Customer
Services
Lab**

As part of Vice President Gore's National Performance Review, about 250 "reinvention labs" were created where front-line workers and managers could try out their ideas for change. One lab, at the Miami International Airport, brought together workers for airlines, airports, shippers, service companies, and a number of federal agencies, including the Customs Service, to develop a new approach to drug detection. The success of this lab (along with others) was reported in the Vice President's September 1996 report, *The Best Kept Secrets in Government*. The airport lab not only succeeded in increasing drug interdiction, it substantially reduced passenger waiting time during processing by U.S. Customs. A "customer services lab," bringing together representatives of airport management, concessionaires, the FAA, airlines, local and state offices, and consumer groups, would appear to be another way to provide industry-wide information by developing and testing ways to facilitate consumer access to flight information and enhance the services that minimize the adverse consequences of flight delays and cancellations.

**Commitment
To Customers**

On June 17, 1999, the Air Transport Association and its member airlines -- transporting over 95 percent of all passengers and cargo in the United States -- outlined their voluntary commitment to customer service by documenting 12 specific provisions to which each airline would adhere and use to develop its own detailed Customer Service Plans. The success of the airlines in implementing their Plans has been and continues to be the subject of a DOT Inspector General Audit (see IG Report AV-2000-102, June 27, 2000). Some airlines and all of the consumer groups we spoke with noted that one important way an airline could emphasize its commitment to the Customer Service Plan would be to incorporate the Plan in the airline's contract of carriage, making the terms of the Plan legally binding between the air carrier and the passenger. Airlines could also enhance their commitment to customers by providing specific service guarantees.

**On-Time
Performance**

Knowledge of the on-time performance history of any given flight is a valuable tool for consumers. A consumer may elect one airline over another because of its superior on-time performance. In addition, a consumer may choose the time of day at which he or she travels based on the on-time performance of flights at varying times of the day. On-time performance information may even prove valuable to consumers in selecting the airport they use for their travel. The Department currently has a rule requiring that



the major airlines calculate their on-time performance for each flight and report the information to the Department monthly. The Department summarizes this information and makes it available to the public through its monthly *Air Travel Consumer Report* (www.dot.gov/airconsumer). Much more detailed information is also available to the public on the Internet web site of the Department's Bureau of Transportation Statistics (www.bts.gov). We are exploring new ways to bring this information to the attention of the traveling public. For example, the Department will soon begin supplementing this information with a series of Consumer Alerts focusing on flight delays at specific airports, in specific markets, at specific times of the day. This augmentation of our present on-time performance information will enhance consumers' ability to make informed decisions when considering travel plans. In addition, the Department requires by regulation that the major airlines make available to consumers, upon request, on-time performance data for any flight when the consumer is making a reservation with one of their employees. All major carriers also make this same information available, through their computer reservations systems, to consumers making reservations through travel agents. Thus, both the airlines and travel agents have available, if requested, on-time flight-by-flight performance information. There may be substantial customer as well as airline benefits in providing consumer on-time performance information as a matter of course during the reservation process. The consumer may be better equipped to make an informed decision, while the airline can further manifest its commitment to improve customer service.

Web Pages

There appear to be opportunities for airlines and airports to augment their web sites in ways that will enhance information flow to their customers. For example, nearly all airlines and airports maintaining web sites include a section on "Frequently Asked Questions." It is a fairly simple step to incorporate in this section one or more Q&As on what customers should expect in the event their flight is seriously delayed or canceled, what services will be available to re-accommodate disrupted travel plans, how those services can be located, and a phone number to call to obtain further information. Likewise, it is a simple matter to include hyperlinks from the airline or airport's web page to (1) the FAA's Air Traffic Control System Command Center (fly.faa.gov), which provides real-time reports on travel delays at major airports across the country, and (2) the Department's web sites that provide historic on-time performance data for airports, airlines and individual flights (www.dot.gov/airconsumer; or www.bts.gov). With regard to hyperlinks, the DOT web site provides links to the web sites of the U.S. airlines that have released Customer Service Plans (www.dot.gov/airconsumer/customerservice.htm).



Organizations That Submitted Comments on Best Practices

Aloha Airlines
America West Airlines
American Airlines
Comair
Continental Airlines
Continental Express
Delta Air Lines
Empire Airlines
Horizon Air
Midwest Express Airlines
North American Airlines
Northwest Airlines
Ryan International Airlines
Sierra Pacific Airlines
Southwest Airlines
Sun Country Airlines
Spirit Airlines
Trans World Airlines
United Airlines
US Airways
Vanguard Airlines
Broward County Aviation Department
Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport
Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport
Groton New London Airport
Kalamazoo/Battle Creek International Airport
Sacramento County Airport
Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association
American Society of Travel Agents
Aviation Consumer Action Project
National Air Carrier Association
National Business Travel Association

Locations Visited

Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport
Chicago O'Hare International Airport
Cleveland Hopkins International Airport
Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport
LaGuardia Airport
Miami International Airport
Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport
Newark International Airport

Attendees at these locations included Members of Congress and their staffs, airline and airport officials, state and local political leaders, and representatives of business organizations, associations, the tourism industry, and airline passenger organizations.

