

## **What Passengers Did Not Expect When Their Flight Was Overbooked**

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### **Abstract**

Lost luggage, delays, overbooked flights, or assigning separate seats to passengers from the same party are only a few examples of service failures in the airline industry. When complaints are met with a lack of empathy and promptness of service recovery, passengers may experience frustration, disappointment, and a feeling of betrayal. Due to increased competition, airlines need to accept responsibility and resolve service failures. Once an airline company neglects to resolve service failures, no apology will fix the damage done to its reputation, which could translate to loss of customer loyalty.

*Key words:* airline passenger transportation; overbooking; service; recovery; customer-orientation

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### **The Story**

While returning to the US from an international trip with his seven-year-old daughter, a passenger encountered an overbooked flight which put him in an uncomfortable spot. The passenger learned his flight was overbooked and there was a chance he and his daughter might not be able to board their flight and arrive home for a very important meeting the next day. After minutes, the check-in agent informed the frequent flyer that there were only two seats left, and if he wanted to get on this flight, he and his daughter would be seated in different sections of the aircraft. The passenger explained that he had selected adjacent seats when he purchased his tickets. The attendant said there was nothing she could do from her desk, but assured him the flight attendants would assist him once they boarded the

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\*The article consists of two parts. The authors of the case study, Mohammed Lefrid, the Editorial Commentary at the end of this case was written by Po-Ju Chen. Send correspondence to Mohammed Lefrid (corresponding author), University of Central Florida, Rosen College of Hospitality Management, 9907 Universal Blvd. Orlando, Florida, USA, telephone: (+853) 8590 2517, Mohammed.Lefrid@ucf.edu.

plane. Assuming his seating concerns would be resolved by the on-board airline attendants, the passenger agreed and did not give it another thought as the pair made their way through customs.

As he was boarding the plane, the passenger approached the first flight attendant to ask for help with his seating needs. To his surprise, the flight attendant explained there was nothing she could do. Instead, she advised him to ask other passengers if they would switch seats with him. The passenger was not quite sure how to take this and simply asked a second flight attendant for help. Unfortunately, he received a similar response – the only change was the tone of indifference from the last attendant. Out of frustration, he started arguing with the flight attendant about the way he had been treated, but the passenger quickly realized that escalating the situation could result in him being escorted off the plane – ensuring he would not make it home on time for his meeting the next day. Therefore, he swallowed his pride and made his way down the aisle to ask other passengers for assistance. The first passenger stated she would only switch seats if the other seat were next to a window. As neither he nor his daughter had window seats, no additional help was provided. Finally, after asking multiple passengers, someone was willing to exchange seats! Reflecting on his experience during the flight, the passenger felt this airline company could have been done more to help – especially as he was a frequent flyer who has flown with this specific airline on this specific route many times before! The situation resulted in feelings of anger, disappointment and, a diminished sense of customer loyalty.

### **Possible Solution Options**

- A. Since the flight was overbooked, the passenger and his daughter should have been bumped off the flight, since the last two seats were not next to each other.
- B. Since the flight was overbooked, there was nothing the airline employees could have done.
- C. The airline company employees could have contacted the flight attendants on the plane and informed them of the situation. By the time the passenger arrived, the issue could have been solved.
- D. The flight attendants could have assisted when they were approached by the passenger for help.
- E. The flight attendants could have shown empathy, explained to the passenger their company policy and offered to accompany the passenger while looking for a person willing to exchange seats.

### **Assessments**

#### **Surface Assessment**

Allowing a passenger's issue to remain unresolved after requesting help from three employees, indicates this airline is focused on maximizing profit at the

expense of customer satisfaction. In addition, the employees at this airline company lack appropriate training on how to handle service failures. Because of this type of experience, unhappy passengers either have to accept sub-standard service or find a competitive airline for future flights.

### **Deep Assessment**

This story is about a passenger who faced the uncertainty of boarding his international flight because the plane was overbooked. Fortunately, the passenger and his daughter were able to secure seats, but not being able to sit next to his child resulted in dissatisfaction with the airline company. The passenger was naturally concerned about his child being forced to sit next to strangers for the entire 10-hour flight. He was also naturally concerned for his child's safety and hesitated to entrust a total stranger with the survival and safety (place an oxygen mask on if necessary) of his child if there were to be an emergency evacuation. Lack of help from the flight attendants made the passenger feel powerless and disappointed – especially as he felt his status as a frequent flyer did not translate into being treated as a respected customer.

According to the disconfirmation paradigm theory, introduced by Howard and Sheth (1969), satisfaction is the customers' evaluation of the service encounter and whether they are rewarded for any sacrifices they may have made. In this case, the passenger did not feel he was rewarded for doing business with this airline company because he did not have a worry-free travel experience. Furthermore, when he asked for help, no effort was made by airline staff to assist with his situation or provide some form of service recovery or personal assistance.

### **References**

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### **Appendix: Solution Points for Multiple Choice Selections**

A. Since the flight was overbooked, the passenger and his daughter should have been bumped off the flight since the last two seats were not next to each other. 0 points. The airline employees should have tried to accommodate the passenger's need to be seated next to his child.

B. Since the flight was overbooked, there was nothing the airline employees could have done. 0 points. The airline employees should have tried to assist before he boarded the plane.

C. The airline company employees could have contacted the flight attendants on the plane and informed them of the situation. By the time the passenger arrived, the issue could have been solved. 5 points. Proper communication and making every effort to solve customer service issues are critical to ensure customer satisfaction and the company's long-term success.

D. The flight attendants could have assisted when they were approached by the passenger for help. 3 points. Flight attendants represent their airline, they should take ownership of the customer situation and solve it in a timely manner.

E. The flight attendants could have shown empathy, explained to the passenger their company policy and offered to accompany the passenger while looking for a person willing to exchange seats. 2 points. The least an airline company employee could do is show empathy, especially when unable to solve a problem.

**The points received for the answer you circled: \_\_\_\_\_.**

### **Editorial Commentary**

This case study examines a passenger's request for assistance with seat assignments for himself and his young child. Due to overbooking (already not a good way to going about business), the check-in counter employee could only assign seats located in different sections of the aircraft. Given the importance of his business meeting at the destination the next day, the father reluctantly accepted the assigned seats.

It is the airline's responsibility to ensure children are seated with parents, especially on long international flights. By accommodating family seating needs, airlines proactively avoid unforeseen complications that may arise during flights or in unforeseen emergency events.

Airlines can assist with special seating needs during the reservation process and at the check-in counter – as boarding passes are issued. In this case, the check-in counter employee could have reviewed the seating map to identify lone passengers who may have been willing to switch seats to accommodate the father. In addition, a boarding gate announcement could have been made asking for volunteers willing to exchange seats – perhaps offering an incentive such as a free drink, complimentary movie, travel miles or points, or even vouchers for a free upgrade on a future flight in return. Flight attendants could also have assisted by personally asking passengers to help as they boarded – perhaps benefitting from passengers who reconsidered after assessing the situation, or late arrivals who failed to hear the boarding gate request.

Even if unsuccessful, taking action at different stages of the check-in, boarding, and seating process would provide the father with a sense that the airline took his best interest to heart. All or any of these actions by the airline staff might have

assured the passenger that his best interest was at the heart of the staffs' response and added (or at least not distracted) to his enjoyment of the flight.