

Barnett on Business Travel: US Airways needs a new passenger service flight plan

by *Chris_Barnett*

Business travelers and vacationers should fall to their knees and thank the god of mergers and acquisitions that US Airways never got its clutches on Delta Airlines in its \$8.5 billion buyout offer last year when the Atlanta carrier was fighting for its life.

Chances are that shotgun marriage, an end-run wooing of bankrupt Delta's non-secured creditors, would have been a catastrophe for passengers. The fact is the US Airways Group and America West Holdings Inc. merger nearly two years ago is a joyless mess punctuated with turf warfare, labor battles and ludicrous cost cutting.

I flew four legs on US Airways recently and shudder to think what it would be like if Delta had been bolted on.

It all started, no surprise, with reservations. Northwest had quoted \$601 for a San Francisco-to-Minneapolis-St. Paul nonstop round trip; US Air quoted \$460 for a one-stop but I wanted to test their live reservations system that, like most of Big Six airlines, is outsourced to either India or the Philippines. It took 10 minutes of explaining to a very nice Indian chap that Minneapolis and San Francisco were not an hour apart. No big deal.

Check in at SFO, the San Francisco airport, was a long, snaking line. When the self-check-in terminal glitched and I asked for help, I was "shushed" like some 5-year-old. One grumpy guy manned the gate check in and then doubled as the collector of boarding passes. I watched him. Not one smile in 25 minutes. He did mutter a "thank you" when he took my pass but made no eye contact.

Aboard a tired 737 on our way to Las Vegas, two senior flight attendants - America West lifers - were pleasant and apologetic for the condition of the plane. With a little prodding, I learned flight attendants haven't had a raise in five years, flying without a labor contract for four years and paying more out of their own pockets for their health benefits. Still, they were pros who smiled through their pain.

US Airways CEO Don Parker has lived up to his rep as the Rambo of airline cost butchers. His cleaver is sharp, if wielded foolishly. Not that I'm addicted to those micro bags of pretzels and nuts, but I was told US Air doesn't pass them out on flights under an hour and a half. Come on, what do they cost, a nickel?

A flight attendant took pity and brought me two tiny bags of almonds and a biscotti from first class. I could have bought a snack box of chips, salsa, cheese, crackers, candy and a fruit bar for \$5, but that's too much calories and fat for breakfast.

The airline's squeezing every possible nickel at the passenger's expense. While it's selling advertising space on its drop-down tables and paper coffee cups, the \$5 movie headsets are so cheaply constructed they are laughable. Forget fresh milk. Seat pitch or legroom in economy is 31 inches but feels like 29 inches. The woman in front leaned back and I couldn't really work on my laptop.

At times, US Air seems like a bad Keystone Kops movie. The connecting at Las Vegas was 15 - count 'em - 15 minutes.

"We not required to call ahead to hold a plane but you'll probably make it," I was told. The trick if you connect on US Air? Carry on everything and book a seat up front. It was like a land rush, but we made it.

The Minneapolis-to-San Francisco flight was even worse. I was told it was a "through flight" - we'd stop at Phoenix Sky Harbor but stay on the plane. So this time I checked a garment bag. But 10 minutes before landing, we were told that we had to connect to another flight, with no explanation. This time we had 30 minutes to scramble. Turns out we had two hours and 30 minutes of waiting around because the incoming flight, we were told, had a "mechanical" in Chicago and takeoff was delayed.

At 1 a.m. in SFO, the baggage level was chaos at the US Air carousel. Suitcases from earlier flights were strewn all over. A couple in from Philadelphia insisted only 25 percent of the luggage on their flight arrived. That seemed bizarre, but I couldn't get a baggage claim person to confirm or deny it. My bag finally showed up 45 minutes after landing.

It was hard to find happy fliers at that hour. Eleanor Keare, founder/CEO of Circle of Friends, a maker of hair and bath products for children, credited "most" of the flight attendants for "trying" and liked her exit row seat on one leg of her trip.

"But when I asked for a second water, the flight attendant was salty about it," said Keare. "Then from LA to Phoenix, the plane was so small, my knees were under my chin and I'm only 5-3."

Far more vocal was Art Pushkin, a sales manager in the digital imaging industry, who says he's part of 867-person group who've protested US Air's policies since 2002 and have largely defected to other carriers. He says he was Chairman Preferred status on the airline's frequent flyer program for seven years, but "we all voted with our wallets when we could not count on US Air to get us where we wanted to be on time."

Meantime, the effort to join US Air and America West drags on. The human sides of the deal, the two

employee cultures, are poles apart over money, seniority and scheduling.

"No way will we ever be one airline," said a flight attendant loyal to America West, which she joined 20 years ago.

As for the front-line staffers I spoke with, all are "delighted the merger with Delta collapsed," said one gate agent. "What were they thinking? It would have been a mess."

Now out of bankruptcy, Delta seems to be courting its old customers. I just received a mailer inviting me to buy discounted tickets to a circus coming to the Silicon Valley.

As one of my US Air flights landed, a flight attendant came down the aisle passing out something. Hot towels, mints, a cookie? As he got closer, I could see the in-flight amenity - a box of tissues. Take one please.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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