



# PLANE COURTESY:

## HOW PASSENGER ATTITUDES ON BOARD CAN DECREASE THE AIR RAGE PHENOMENON

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### Abstract

*What was once known as common courtesy is rapidly disappearing in the air travel industry, and the violent behavior known as air rage is a constant threat. Once sought after by other industries for advice because of its expertise in customer service, the air travel industry has now slipped to the lowest rungs of companies with unhappy customers. As airlines cut corners in order to avoid bankruptcy, passengers' patience is tested by the stress of flight delays, crowded airports and close-packed seating on airplanes. This article examines the situation, strategies used by passengers and ways the airline industry might better inspire courteous behavior in passengers.*

*A cultural expectation of entitlement and competitiveness for limited resources has led to a breakdown in civilized behavior throughout society, both in the United States and internationally. Air travelers faced with rude and intrusive behavior from others on the flight are beginning to find their own ways of coping, such as high quality headphones to block offensive noises, and mechanical devices to keep the seat in front from reclining to the point where it hits their knees.*

*The most potentially effective remedies will come from airlines that enlist cooperation by offering effective passenger education and possibly even incentives. Acceptable airline behaviors need to be plainly defined and stressed for passengers, both before boarding and onboard. In this paper, some methods are suggested to motivate passengers and to inspire courteous behavior.*

## PLANE COURTESY: HOW PASSENGER ATTITUDES ON BOARD CAN DECREASE THE AIR RAGE PHENOMENON

### ● Introduction: Heroic Aviators

In the earliest days of air travel, the public imagination embraced aviation with an almost religious fervor. Charles Lindbergh's solo transatlantic flight in 1927 made him an international sensation. Early aviation heroes/heroines such as Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart were the superstar celebrities of their day. Their record-setting flights established an aura of adventure and excitement around airplanes and flying.<sup>1)</sup>

### ● Very Important Passengers

Early commercial air travel was reserved for the upper classes and very important people whose time was valuable enough to make the high fares worthwhile. One of the most frequent flyers of the 1930s was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who criss-crossed the country.<sup>2)</sup>

The importance of air combat in World War II gave an added patriotic component to the flying experience. After the war, the increased prosperity of the 1950s meant that more people could fly, but strict government regulation of the industry kept air ticket prices high, and flying was marketed as an elite experience.

### ● Air Travel as an Aspiration

People dressed in their best clothing to fly and marveled at the view from the airplane window. By the 1960s the term "Jet Setters" referred to an elite group many aspired to join. It took 65 years from the time the airplane was invented before 25% of Americans had flown in one.<sup>3)</sup> That situation began to change dramatically in 1978. By the end of the 20th century 80% of Americans had flown in an airplane.<sup>4)</sup>

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1) Rumerman, Judy (no date), *Social History of Aviation and Space Flight, an Overview, Part 2*, <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Social/SH-OVI.htm>

2) Rumerman, Judy (no date), *Commercial Flight in the 1930s*, [http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Commercial\\_Aviation/passenger\\_xperience/Tran2.htm](http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Commercial_Aviation/passenger_xperience/Tran2.htm)

3) Milken, Michael (2000, September 5), "Amid Plenty, the Wage Gap Widens," *The Wall Street Journal Online*,

4) Pearman, Hugh, (2004), *Airports: a Century of Architecture*, Laurence King Publishing, retrieved

### ● The Mass Marketing Problem: Effects of Airline Deregulation

Airline regulation had been put in place to ensure that less profitable destinations were served and to keep fares at a uniform rate. The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 ended that era and signaled the beginning of fare wars. New budget carriers emerged to offer serious discounts to the more popular destinations. Estimates show that passengers paid 37% less for air fares in the 24 years between 1978 and 2002.<sup>5)</sup>

Passengers enjoyed being able to fly more cheaply, and a whole new “mass market” flying public emerged. The competition meant that airlines had to scramble to be able to serve this much larger, budget-conscious flying public. Many airlines went bankrupt, despite every cost-cutting measure.

### ● Stresses on Travelers: The Crowded Cabin

In an effort to maximize profits by carrying more passengers on each flight, the seats were made smaller and more seats were installed to maximize the number of tickets that could be sold per flight. Some travelers began to experience actual physical pain throughout an airline trip, due to the ever-shrinking airline seat.

What makes matters worse is the marketing of flying as luxurious, when the majority of flyers in coach have no such experience. The disconnect between what they thought they were buying and what happens when they fly adds to the irritation on the part of many air travelers.

### ● Symptoms: Passengers Behaving Badly

Passenger rudeness can be exacerbated by close quarters, alcohol, lack of oxygen (often intensified by cigarette withdrawal in some passengers who normally would smoke), fear of flying, claustrophobia and the inevitable culture clashes when large numbers of total strangers are crammed together.

Reports of the most atrocious behavior have become commonplace:

- pushing and shoving during boarding,
- assault on crew members or passengers

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April 1, 2008, from [http://books.google.com/books?id=AKHW3onueNQC&pg=PT14&dq=percent+of+american+population+that+has+flown+in+airplane&sig=xg1yik\\_IgRck46PWbJdqwITRvHU](http://books.google.com/books?id=AKHW3onueNQC&pg=PT14&dq=percent+of+american+population+that+has+flown+in+airplane&sig=xg1yik_IgRck46PWbJdqwITRvHU)

5) VanDoren, Peter, and Firey, Thomas (2002, June 27), “Facts And Fictions About Deregulation: *What Consumer Reports Didn't Know (or Didn't Want You to Know)*,” retrieved April 1, 2008, from <http://www.cato.org/research/articles/vandoren-firey-020627.html>

- fights among intoxicated passengers
- child molestation
- sexual harassment and assault
- illegal consumption of drugs on board flights
- refusal to stop smoking or consuming alcohol
- unauthorized use of electronic devices
- vandalizing of airline seats and cabin interior
- fighting over the shared armrest for those in the middle seat,
- reclining seats without consideration for the pain of the passenger behind them,
- entirely filling the overhead compartment with personal luggage, leaving no space for others' luggage,
- aisle hovering of "butt invaders" who rudely present other passengers with close-up, extended rear-end views,
- hammering on bathroom doors rather than waiting politely,
- drunken passengers who do not even try to reach the airplanes' restrooms, choosing instead to urinate in the aisle (or, in one extreme case, defecate on the first class beverage service cart, and
- at least one mother's disposing of soiled baby diapers by handing them to a flight attendant.

● The list could go on and on,

Behavior that has generally been seen happening in the "streets" is now being seen happening onboard the aircraft. Sometimes, some of these acts seriously threaten the safety of the aircraft.

#### ● Factors Causing Stress

Some passengers are on their worst behavior or simply clash culturally or physically with other passengers. Close quarters intensify the irritation factor, whether due to different hygiene standards—or a lack of them. People with larger than average body size suffer as they are badly crammed into already tiny seats, and those who are squashed next to them also suffer. Some travelers behave rudely when they are forced to sit next to other ethnic groups against whom they have prejudice.

At airports, flight crews and gate personnel who are cursed at, screamed at, shoved, spat upon and sometimes seriously assaulted, sometimes find themselves reacting with angry outbursts as well. A minor cottage industry has arisen to teach

crowd-control tactics to flight crews, and handcuffs and restraint devices are now part of the safety equipment on many airlines.

### ● The “I Want It All, and I Want It Now!” Air Traveler

Rude behavior in the early 21st century is not unique to airlines. Before the term “air rage” was used, the term “road rage” referred to angry confrontations between motorists. A new and very popular form of entertainment is the television “reality” show, which incites the most dramatic possible social confrontations and rewards the winner. The loser in these scenarios may be society as a whole.

If airlines mirror the society they serve, how can the members of the public be persuaded to change its evil ways simply because they have boarded an airline?

### ● Remedies: Expanding on Existing Passenger Education

In fact, airlines already ask passengers to behave in several unusual ways during an airplane flight. For example, smoking is no longer allowed on most flights. Freedom of movement is restricted by a seat belt during take-offs, landings and turbulence. Passengers cannot leave the airplane at 30,000 feet, no matter how much they may wish to do so. Passengers have learned these behaviors because cabin crews have taught them, and flight attendants continue to teach them to each new group of passengers during the safety demonstrations.

Good manners in the air could be briefly taught before each take-off, using the same sort of tools: “Courtesy Counts” cards with three or four simple rules provided with each ticket and included in every seatback, an informative video and cabin crew instructions. Delta Air Lines is one of the first airlines to take steps in introducing humorous videos referred to as “Planegauge” onboard their aircrafts to help raise awareness of proper behavior in the air. All of this would drive home the simple message: This is how to behave on an airplane; these courtesies are expected, and these sorts of rudeness are unacceptable.

### ● The Danger of Doing Nothing

If airlines do not take leadership by providing clear boundaries for passenger behavior and give cabin crews the training to protect all air travelers from the thoughtless few, nothing will curb the growing willingness among put-upon passengers to take matters into their own hands.

### ● Avoiding the “Every Passenger for Him or Herself” Syndrome

Even mild-mannered passengers, who see themselves as alone in a hostile situation, may turn on other passengers.

A deadly example of this was on August 11, 2000, when an out-of-control, violent passenger threatened the lives of all aboard. He was subdued, and even after he lost consciousness, he was beaten by a group of other passengers, who had essentially become a mob. He later died of injuries sustained during the struggle.

More recently some passengers began carrying small, plastic devices that can be installed on their tray tables to keep the seat in front from reclining far enough to smash their knees. The website of the company that makes the devices suggests that a minimal amount of knee room while sitting in an airplane seat can be a matter of life or death from deep vein thrombosis. When airlines attempted to ban these devices, FAA spokesman Paul Takemoto went on record in the October 28, 2003, edition of *The Washington Post* as stating that the clips were not against federal aviation rules as long as they weren't used during taxiing, takeoffs or landings.<sup>6)</sup>

An anointed expert on courtesy, etiquette advice columnist Miss Manners, advised an uncomfortable traveler in an October 6, 2004, column that legal action might work better than etiquette to obtain “...minimal comfort standards—or even minimal health conditions—for long-haul flights.”<sup>7)</sup> When Miss Manners seriously contemplates lawsuits, it demonstrates that there is a serious problem.

Therapist Gregory Moffatt, in examining the current culture of violence, suggests that the illusion of entitlement is not serving the nation well: “As a culture we must move away from our erroneous assumption that the U.S. Constitution grants us freedom to pursue our own personal happiness at the expense of others.”<sup>8)</sup>

### ● Consequences of Not Educating Passengers

Some passengers simply do not know what courteous behavior is. Others have gotten away with discourteous behavior in the past and expect to do so in the future.

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6) Alexander, Keith L. (2003, October 28), “Knee Defender Keeps Passengers Upright, Uptight,” *Washington Post*, p. E01, retrieved April 2, 2008, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2003/10/28/AR2005033109087.html>

7) Martin, Judith (2004, October 6), Space Considerations, Miss Manners Column, *Washington Post*, p. C12, retrieved March 31, 2008, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A10010-2004Oct5.html>

8) Moffatt, Gregory (2002), *A Violent Heart: Understanding Aggressive Individuals*, Praeger Trade

If airlines do not set clear boundaries for unacceptable behavior, activist passengers will move into the vacuum and set up their own defenses.

### ● Costs of Adding Passenger Airline Etiquette

Airlines could economically educate passengers by using “Courtesy Counts” cards that explain, perhaps with cartoon illustrations, just exactly what courteous behavior is expected, for example:

- letting children, the elderly and handicapped passengers go through first,
- not taking up all the overhead baggage space, and
- checking with the passenger behind before reclining the seat all the way.

### ● Delta’ s Videos

Effective December 2007, Delta Air Lines has made a start with a series of videos on “plane-guage,” which humorously depict unacceptable behavior. Unfortunately Delta did not choose to provide an airline etiquette video to all passengers as part of the preflight information. Instead, it offers these only as a menu item among all the other videos available on those airplanes that have seat-back on-demand video monitors. It is unlikely that passengers who don’t already have good manners will seek out a video on how to behave better.

### ● Legal Obligations Versus Common Sense Guidelines

As it stands now, all airlines are legally bound provide a safety card, a demonstration of safety features and/or video instructions on flight safety. Some airlines on long-haul flights go further and offer suggested exercises one can do in the seat to prevent muscle cramps and circulation problems such as deep vein thrombosis. Adding an instruction card, a few words from the flight attendants, and a short, simple video on what kind of passenger courtesy is expected would set out the standards clearly.

Such behavioral tools would not cure all rude, crude or anti-social behavior, any more than turning on the seatbelt sign ensures that all passengers buckle up. But it would facilitate peer pressure by letting everyone know what behavior is acceptable. It would also allow the cabin crew to feel that the airline is backing them up when they deal with unruly passengers.

### ● Recommendations for the Airline Industry

Safety is the number one issue and concern of the airline industry. Therefore, measurements must be put into place to improve customer's on-board aircraft behavior, the measurement begin with the education of general traveling public as what type of on-board aircraft behavior is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

The general traveling public must be informed of the consequences for customers exhibiting discourtesy behavior at the airport or on-board the aircraft.

Airline personnel need to be retrained in areas related to acceptable on-board etiquette the traveling public.

Educate the traveling public through brochures, public announcements at the airport and on-board the air craft.

Insert informational packets regarding acceptable behavior in the seat pockets.

Post warning signs at the ticket counter and at the airport.

Develop an advertising campaign to increase public awareness of what is acceptable on-board behavior from passengers.

### ● Conclusion: Enlisting Passenger Cooperation

Once the simple guidelines for Plane Courtesy are make clear, they could be reinforced by announcing a Most Courteous Passenger Award for each flight, with a prize such as Frequent Flyer Miles being awarded at the end of each flight and the judges being the cabin crew. A Best Child Passenger Award could also be given in the form of a toy of some sort. In turn, passengers who wished could participate in nominating or voting for a Most Helpful Cabin Crew Member Award.

Frontline employees who deal with thoughtless, rude and sometimes dangerous passengers could provide valuable feedback if the airlines set up a system to accept, monitor and reward ideas on better passenger management from the airline employees who deal with them every day. The values of politeness and consideration for other people have survival values for all of us.



## Curriculum Vitae

Joyce A. Hunter, D.B.A.

Joyce A. Hunter spent more than 30 years in corporate America and retired from Delta Air Lines, Inc. in December 2000. During her tenure at Delta Air Lines she held various positions in Delta's marketing department such as Corporate Account Manager, Association Account Manager, Promotional Specialist, and Marketing Administrative Assistant.

In 2001 Joyce entered the University of Sarasota's doctoral program and later earned her doctorate degree in Business Administration with a concentration in marketing. She has been a full-time faculty member at Saint Xavier University in the Graham School of Management since 2002. Currently, she teaches courses in Principles of Marketing, Marketing Strategy, Advertising & Promotional Strategy, Hospitality Marketing and Hospitality Management.

Her area of research focuses on one of the most serious problems facing the airline industry within the last 15 years, commonly referred to as "air rage." Air Rage is a form of disruptive passenger behavior and has drawn considerable media attention since the 9/11 incident. She is considered one of the experts in the field of air rage and has presented papers and spoken on this phenomenon at the 13th International Colloquium in Relationship Marketing in St. Johns, Newfoundland, Canada, the 9th Annual World Conference Air Transport Research Society in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the 10th Annual World Conference Air Transport Research Society in Nagoya, Japan, and the International Conference on Nonlinear Problems in Aviation and Aerospace Conference (ICNPAA) in 2006 in Budapest, Hungary. In May 2008, Joyce has been invited to speak at the 20th Anniversary of Korean Association of Air and Space Law Conference which is being held in Seoul, Korea. Currently, she is writing a book entitled "Anger in The Air: Combating the Air Rage Phenomenon; which is scheduled for publication in January 2009.