

11 ways to treat flight attendants for a smoother trip

What to do when your flight is canceled or delayed

How to save money on an overseas trip

How to efficiently pack for vacation

As a road warrior, you are thrilled as competition between budget airlines and legacy carriers pushes ticket prices down.

You are less thrilled as leg room shrinks, services like checked baggage is unbundled and food is sold in coach.



Many people might say: “They are just doing their job.” or “I’ll never see this...”

IMAGE PROVIDED BY GETTY IMAGES (IZABELA HABUR)

Now imagine if looking after these folks was your job description. Welcome to the world of the flight attendant.

The uniformed person asking your seat number has the power to make your flight incredibly pleasant. FYI: They also have the power to get you arrested upon landing.

You also have the power to make their life more pleasant, at least for one day.

On a recent American Airlines flight to London, I saw a flight attendant (joined by others) find a passenger's missing passport by climbing on a seat and spotting it loose in the back of an overhead bin. That same attendant remarked how she can serve dinner to an entire aisle of passengers and only get a "thank you" from one person.

How to get along with flight attendants

These simple steps often yield great results:

1. Dress well — Perhaps you've seen the photo posted to LinkedIn of three young guys in suits seated together. It's gotten 10,000+ views. Since many passengers appear to travel in pajamas or gym clothes, wearing business dress stands out.

- ***What might happen:*** They might remark: "Nice suit." They might offer to hang your jacket.

2. Engage with them — Make eye contact. Smile. Address them by name. You are treating them as equals, not servants.

- ***What might happen:*** You will likely be noticed. They might provide extra attention, ask what they can do to make your flight better. A business class pillow and blanket might appear. I love my American Airlines pajamas.

3. Chat when activity slows down — Flight crew operate from bases. Theirs is likely your departure or arrival city. They may actually live across the country. Tell them where you live. Mention family details.

- ***What might happen:*** It's one more step in treating people as human beings. Maybe your liquor improves. Perhaps you just make them feel better.

4. Relate to their situation (1) — The primary job of a flight attendant is to evacuate you safely in event of an emergency. Most people don't get this, thinking they are flying wait staff. Let them know you understand they are safety officers.

- ***What might happen:*** They realize you "get it." They might share stories about the baby they delivered in flight a few months ago.

5. Relate to their situation (2) — As a business journal reader, you know the airline industry went through a period of consolidation. Everyone tightened their belts. This affected the size of flight crews, how flights are assigned, pensions and lots more. You realize everyone made sacrifices. It doesn't matter how many frequent flier miles you accumulate if the airline goes out of business.

- ***What might happen:*** You are making their day. Other passengers assume the cramped seats and stuffed overhead bins are the flight attendant's fault. Not you.

6. Meet the purser — That's the chief flight attendant. On longer flights I introduce myself, let them know I'm a fan of the airline, and realize the crew works hard. I explain "I don't want anything" and let them know where I am sitting.

- ***What might happen:*** Actually, the chances are excellent they will ask where you are seated before you get the words out. This likely means you are entered in the "discretionary sweepstakes."

7. Bring quality chocolates — On those longer flights, we hand the purser a half-pound box of chocolate truffles. I attach a business card with "Thanks for looking after us" with our first names and seats. I ask the purser to share them with the flight crew when things slow down. I repeat: "We don't want anything."

- ***What might happen:*** Amazingly, few people offer anything to the people who will be serving them for the next few hours. If there is anything they can do once everyone is seated and the door shut, the odds are heavily in your favor.

8. Use those reward coupons — Frequent fliers are often given cards you hand to a staff person who does something nice or delivers great service. Always keep one or two in your wallet.

- ***What might happen:*** They will be amazed you remembered. These coupons often enter the employee into a prize drawing. Note: I've heard it's illegal to give a flight attendant cash. This is an alternate thank you.

9. Offer advice — You know the destination city cold. You know reasonably priced restaurants with great food. Tell them about the bands and events that night.

- ***What might happen:*** They likely have a layover between flights. They may be in unfamiliar territory. You share insider tips.

10. Ask for advice — It's your first time in this city, yet they fly the route regularly. They have plenty of restaurant and shopping tips to share.

- ***What might happen:*** One flight attendant I met carried a two-inch stack of business cards for restaurants and shops. You explained what you wanted, she peeled off a couple and turned them over. You will likely have a great experience. Merchants avoid offending flight attendants because they can influence lots of travelers.

11. Write the president — We had a sick passenger on one flight. I only realized it because a flight attendant bounded up to a bin, pulled out the defibrillator and medical kit and headed towards the back. An announcement "Do we have any medical personnel on board?" followed. Everything came back to normal and an ambulance met the plane upon arrival. I wrote the airline president a physical letter.

- ***What might happen:*** We don't expect to hear back, but we often do. Most important, it goes into someone's personnel file. Your letter stands out because most people send e-mails if they bother at all. Those that make contact are often complaining about something. You are praising someone.

Many people might say: "They are just doing their job." or "I'll never see this person again." Make the effort. At the very least you have brightened someone's day.

At the other extreme you might be greeted by the words: "Great news! Your upgrade came through! Please follow me..."

What to do when your flight is canceled or delayed

“Time to Spare? Go by air” is an old aviation saying that many air travelers may be saying to themselves after computer glitches and power outages led to the cancellation and delays of thousands of flights over the last couple of weeks at Southwest Airlines and Delta Air Lines.

Delta grounded its entire fleet because of worldwide technical issues with their computer systems, disrupting travel plans for thousands of business and leisure travelers on. Fortunately, inbound flights were not affected, probably because they were already in the air.



Passengers in the Delta special services line at MSP airport on Monday.

PHOTO BY NANCY KUEHN, MINNEAPOLIS/ST. PAUL BUSINESS JOURNAL

As either a road warrior or casual leisure traveler, your plans might be thrown into chaos. What should you do?

The Ideal Solution

Perhaps your company travel department did your booking. Great. One call might make this their problem now. If you use travel agents, they can usually be relied upon to help. But it might be midnight. It might be Sunday. In that case, you may be on your own.

Why Is This Happening to Me?

The Delta problem is an unusual example. Weather delays are far more common. You might wonder why your airline delayed your flight (or put a ground stop on incoming flights) if the weather isn't that bad? Can't planes fly in the rain? There are a few reasons:

- **It's Worse Elsewhere** — Nearby airports are having problems. You are next.
- **Lightning**— Airports don't want ground crews working outside if there are risks of lightning strikes. Airports are wide open spaces dotted with tractors, fuel trucks and metal walkways.
- **Where's the Crew?**— You need two elements to reach your destination: An airplane and a crew to staff it. Delays often cascade when problems elsewhere prevent flight crews from flying into the airport for their departing flight.

Delays are caused by other reasons like mechanical problems. If you are in Europe, add “strikes by airport personnel” to the list.

The Problem Grows

The problem might be limited. Your flight is delayed. Everyone else's are fine. In that case your airline should be able to put you onto an earlier or later flight, a different routing or book you onto another airline's flight. That's the theory, anyway.

If a snowstorm closes the airport or your flight from a feeder airport is cancelled because of equipment problems (at the same time as a rock concert breaks up, absorbing every available airline seat beforehand), the airline will logically do something for you, usually issuing meal vouchers and getting you a hotel room. Don't expect your favorite hotel.

When I was delayed once in Dallas, we were shuttled to a hotel that was empty because it was in the middle of changing brands. As I walked away from the reception desk, the clerk called out: “Will you be wanting any towels?”

10 Tips to Solving Your Problem

Regardless of the scope of the problem, here are some standard guidelines:

1. **Dress Well When Flying**— People who dress better often get treated better. Legacy carrier airlines often have flight and ground crews with seniority. They remember when flying was an event. They have respect for people who dress well for the occasion.
2. **Be Polite, Treat People as Equals**— The person across the counter isn't your adversary. They can be your advocate. Smile. Acknowledge it's a tough day for them. Their shift may have ended hours ago. If it's a really difficult travel situation, you want to be "The person with the good attitude."
3. **The Airline Wants to Get the Plane in the Air**— Yes, your flight is delayed. Once it lands, it's cleaned, fueled and made ready for another flight. The airline wants to get your plane to its destination so they don't have to cancel another flight. They are on your side. Chill out.
4. **You Want to Be on the Plane**— Forget First Class. Forget legroom. You just want to be on the plane. Make it easy for them.

OK, we have addressed people skills. So how do you get some attention?

1. **Airline Clubs**— Time in the airport is a major reason you belong to an airline club. If you don't, walk up to yours, pay the daily rate and join for that day. You will have a dedicated service team who can help you with rebooking.
2. **Frequent Flier Status**— This determines which line you stand on (higher levels get you on the shorter first class line) and which customer service desk is taking your call. Take advantage of your perks. Keep your membership card or ticket with identifying codes in hand.
3. **Smartphone**— You want a human helping you. There's 20 people ahead of you in the line to a human at the airport. There's another human available when you call their frequent flier service desk. Do this while you are standing in line.

Here are some additional strategies that have helped me. These require advance planning.

1. **Primary Airline**— Try to get everywhere using the airlines where you have status. If it's a connecting flight your travel agent arranged and it doesn't have a flight number (codeshare) with your airline, they probably can't help you.
2. **Use Hubs**— New York's JFK and Chicago's O'Hare are major hubs for American Airlines. If something goes wrong, they can likely find another flight or another airline to offer as an alternate.
3. **Carryon Luggage**— Unless you are traveling on a long vacation (think cruise) stick with carryon luggage. When that lone seat on another flight turns up, the first question the counter person asks is: "Did you check any luggage?"

What Doesn't Work

Temper can get frayed. People are anxious about connections. You might see others trying things.

- **Yelling**— Perhaps in their office or home life things get done when they lose their temper. Not at airports.
- **Flaunting Your Status**— I'm a Top Crown Ultra Platinum Member! The airline wants to help everyone. Playing the status card will only infuriate others. The customer service agent knows your status from the screen.
- **Bribing**— Offering cash to airline personnel is illegal, as I understand the rules. Let's not make the problem any worse.
- **"You Aren't Working Hard Enough"**— See "yelling" above.
- **"I'm Never Flying Your Airline Again"**— With 200 people to rebook, this is the least of their problems.

Final Thoughts

There's a delay, but don't stress out. The airline and the airport have procedures in place. Let the people in your destination city know you are experiencing a weather delay. Keep them updated. They should understand. It's happened to them too. This too shall pass.

Oh, and the rest of the "Time to spare, go by air" quote? "More time yet? Go by jet."