



How to Fight Back When Your Flight Is Canceled

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As thousands of passengers who were caught up in the latest bout of snowstorms along the East Coast can attest, when weather disrupts the system, travelers are basically on their own. Just getting someone on the phone to confirm a new flight was a major headache for travelers who had been stranded for days in cities up and down the East Coast during the holidays.

Take Adam J. Brill, an analyst at a software company from Jersey City, N.J., and his wife, Elizabeth. When their JetBlue flight home from Fort Myers, Fla., was canceled on Dec. 26, the couple called the airline no fewer than 25 times in an effort to confirm their seats on a new flight. Each time they heard the same recording: JetBlue was experiencing unusually high call volume because of the storm.

Eventually the Brills were rebooked on a return flight four days after their original flight home was scheduled. It too was canceled the day of travel, but not because of the storm, which had stopped. Rather, the plane didn't make it to the airport because it was stuck in a different city. Unable to afford any more time away from work, the couple rented a car and drove home to Jersey City — a 22-hour trip.

“Ultimately I understand that weather has the power to negatively impact travel plans,” Mr. Brill said. “While this started out as a weather delay, the way my trip ended was entirely preventable.”

While flight delays and cancellations are unavoidable during bad weather, some of the related service issues are not. That's why it's important for travelers like the Brills to know what they can — and cannot — expect from the airlines so that they can act quickly when flights go awry. It's not just enough to know your rights. You need to be persistent and use everything at your disposal, from social media to the fine print in ticket rules. Here are some guidelines.

Tweet for Help

Even though problems like bad weather, air traffic delays and mechanical issues are hard to predict and often beyond the airlines' control, most carriers automatically notify travelers — at least those who have signed up for flight alerts by e-mail, text message or phone call. Those alerts, which many passengers fail to sign up for, combined with Twitter, can put you ahead of the pack.

Increasingly airlines, including JetBlue, Southwest and Delta, are using Twitter to notify passengers of major flight cancellations and assist in rebooking. Last year, Delta created a dedicated Twitter account for customer service issues, @DeltaAssist, with reservation agents online Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Eastern time. Because of the viral nature of Twitter, with Twitterers habitually “re-tweeting” one another’s posts, customers who reach out to the airline via Twitter may get a quicker response than they would by phone or another communications channel as airlines attempt to quell any negative publicity.

For example, Mr. Brill was disconnected on two separate calls, after holding for nearly 20 minutes each time, when trying to find out what happened to his canceled Thursday flight. While waiting to speak with an agent on the third try, he reached out to JetBlue via Twitter and received a response. The Twitter team at JetBlue rebooked the couple on a flight from Southwest Florida International Airport to Kennedy Airport in New York the next day. But because there was no guarantee that the flight would leave, and the couple needed to return to work, they decided to drive instead.

Ultimately, JetBlue reimbursed the Brills \$431 in hotel, toll and car rental expenses, which might have had something to do with the 25 Twitter messages Mr. Brill sent out to the airline during the long drive home, and the detailed follow-up e-mail he sent to the company about the ordeal.

Read the Fine Print

The Department of Transportation doesn't require airlines to compensate passengers for damages when flights are delayed or canceled, according to the Aviation Consumer Protection Division. Each carrier spells out how it handles canceled flights in a “contract of carriage,” which can be found on the airline's Web site. Print this out before you head to the airport, so when issues arise you will have the pertinent pages on hand for reference and even show to an airline employee who may not be familiar with the details.

For example, JetBlue's customers whose flights are delayed for an hour after departure because of a “controllable irregularity” like a maintenance issue are entitled to a \$25 credit good for future travel and \$50 for delays from two to five hours. Delta says it offers meal vouchers to passengers delayed for more than four hours after departure time and will put passengers up in a hotel when the delay is between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. You may also demand a refund for a canceled flight from any airline — even if it's because of inclement weather — if you decide not to take the trip.

Europe does better by passengers. European Union airlines flying to or from a member state are required to pay customers up to 600 euros, or about \$790 at \$1.31 to the euro, depending on the length of the delay and length of the flight, when the problem is the carrier's fault. Even for weather delays of at least two hours or more, passengers are entitled to hotel rooms and meals. The rules also apply to any flight by any airline departing the European Union, though enforcement outside Europe can be difficult.

Avoid Being Bumped

The last passengers to check in for a flight are often the first to be bumped when a flight is oversold. So be sure to check in before you head to the airport. Many airlines allow customers to check in online, as much as 24 hours in advance.

If you do get bumped, ask for cash, not a voucher. Passengers who are involuntarily bumped and rebooked on another flight within two hours after their original domestic flight time (or within four hours for international flights) are entitled to \$400 in cash, according to the Department of Transportation regulations. If they are not rerouted within that two-hour window, they are eligible for up to \$800.

Even stricter rules apply in Europe, where compensation ranges from 125 euros to 600 euros, depending on the length of the flight and the amount of time the passenger would be delayed.

At least one airline, Delta, recently introduced another twist to the bumping game. In November, Delta started taking bids from passengers at check-in willing to give up their seat on oversold flights. The move, the airline stated on its blog, blog.delta.com, eliminates the “auction process” at the gate and avoids inconveniencing passengers. But it’s also a way for the airline to pay less for freeing up seats when a flight is oversold.

Report Lost Bags Immediately

If your bags don’t make it off the plane, report the lost luggage to airline personnel before you leave the airport. The Department of Transportation makes this clear in its Fly-Rights guide, adding: “Insist that they create a report and give you a copy, even if they say the bag will be in on the next flight. Get an appropriate phone number for following up (not the Reservations number).”

Most airlines will try to return your bags within 24 hours but make no promises about reimbursing you for your costs. In fact, liability rules favor the airlines, not the passengers. For a trip within the United States, an airline can invoke a ceiling of \$3,300 a passenger on the amount of money it must pay if the bag cannot be found, according to the Transportation of Department.

Airlines generally determine the amount of compensation they pay based on the depreciated value of the baggage. But it’s up to you to submit a claim, and waiting too long to do so could invalidate that claim. Many airlines require travelers to file an initial complaint before they leave the airport. If the bag is never found, American, for example, must receive a written claim no later than 30 days after the initial report. For Delta, it’s 21 days. All the more reason to pack light and carry on.

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