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Airline Quality Rating reveals effect of pandemic on airlines

By WSU Strategic Communications



Customer complaints filed against major U.S. airlines soared amid the coronavirus pandemic, even as the carriers generally did better with on-time arrivals and baggage handling during the health crisis, according to the annual Airline Quality Rating released today by Wichita State University.

Complaints against the carriers climbed by nearly 400% from 2019 to 2020, driven by aggravation over refund requests as many travelers canceled their flights, AQR researchers Dr. Dean Headley and Dr. Brent Bowen found. Refund-related grievances amounted to nearly 83% of all complaints last year, pushing down overall quality scores for most airlines included in the report.

Southwest Airlines was the only rated airline to maintain a nearly level score for 2020. The nine others saw their scores worsen by 40% to as much as 800% from 2019.

“If you did travel by air in 2020, chances are good that you had good performance by the airline. Better on-time performance, fewer mishandled bags and very few denied boardings were all to be expected with many fewer people flying in the system,” said Headley, emeritus associate professor of marketing at the W. Frank Barton School of Business at Wichita State University. “The airlines had a big challenge in working through refund issues presented by canceled travel plans, but most were able to respond and quell customer concerns in a timely manner.”

Now in its 31st year, the AQR originated at WSU’s Barton School and ranks as the premier statistical study of major airline performance in the U.S. An objective comparison of airline quality, it is the nation’s longest-running study of its kind.

Data from the U.S. Department of Transportation are instrumental in informing the analysis. The federal figures show that as refund complaints rose, the three other metrics tracked in the AQR —on-time arrivals, involuntary denied boardings and mishandled bags — all improved substantially last year from 2019 levels.

Bowen, Headley’s co-author, observed that “the traveling public is eager to fly again. Consumers have renewed confidence in air travel and are putting in action the plans they made during the pandemic. The industry is seeing a solid return to passenger volumes.”

An electronic version of the full report, with details on each airline, is available at wsu.news/aqr2021.

Inside this year’s rating:

Below is the 2020 ranking of the nation’s largest 10 airlines, according to the Airline Quality Rating, with the 2019 ranking in parentheses:

1. Southwest (3)
2. Allegiant (1)
3. Delta (4)
4. Alaska (5)
5. Spirit (8)
6. JetBlue (6)
7. American (10)
8. United (9)
9. Hawaiian (2)
10. Frontier (7)

On-time performance

Hawaiian Airlines had the best on-time performance (88%) for 2020.

Allegiant had the worst on-time performance (71.3%) for 2020.

Eight airlines improved their on-time arrival performance in 2020. Nine of the 10 airlines rated had an on-time arrival percentage over 80%. On-time for 2020 by the industry was 83.6% compared with 79.4% in 2019.

Involuntary denied boardings

Frontier had the highest involuntary denied boardings rate at 0.24 per 10,000 passengers.

Allegiant, Delta, Hawaiian and JetBlue had the lowest rates of involuntary denied boardings at 0.00 per 10,000 passengers.

Seven airlines improved their denied-boardings rates in 2020, and three airlines had the same rate as in 2019. Allegiant recorded the largest improvement in denied boardings. Allegiant (0.00), Delta (0.00), Hawaiian (0.00), JetBlue (0.00) and United (0.01) are clearly the industry leaders in avoiding denied-boarding incidents. Industry performance was noticeably better in 2020 (0.08 per 10,000 passengers) than it was in 2019 (0.19).

Baggage handling

Allegiant had the best baggage-handling performance under the new measurement approach (1.48 mishandled bags per 1,000 checked bags) of all airlines.

American had the worst baggage-handling performance (6.38 mishandled bags per 1,000 checked bags) of all airlines.

The mishandled baggage rate for the industry changed from 5.57 per 1,000 checked bags in 2019 to 3.96 per 1,000 checked bags in 2020.

A reminder is needed here regarding a change in the way mishandled bags are reported. Starting with the January 2019 Air Travel Consumer Report, the ratio used for measuring the rate of mishandled bags was adjusted to reflect a more useful number for the consumer. In all years prior to 2019, mishandled bags were reported as a ratio of mishandled bags per 1,000 passengers. The current (new) reporting uses the ratio of the number of mishandled bags per 1,000 checked (enplaned) bags. This gives consumers a better assessment of the risk they face when checking a bag. It also provides a more accurate measure of the airlines' performance relative to the number of bags entrusted to their handling.

Consumer complaints

Southwest had the lowest consumer complaint rate (2.64 per 100,000 passengers) of all airlines rated.

Frontier had the highest consumer complaint rate (49.30 per 100,000 passengers) of all airlines rated.

The industry rate for customer complaints per 100,000 passengers increased from 1.06 in 2019 to 11.75 in 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all airlines received record numbers of customer complaints. The majority of complaints (82.8%) to the Department of Transportation were regarding refunds. In 2019, refunds were the subject of only 6.6% of complaints filed. In 2019, flight problems accounted for 40% (2.7% in 2020) of complaints, while customer service (12.6% in 2019 and 3.1% in 2020); baggage (12% in 2019 and 1.4% in 2020); and reservations, ticketing and boarding (9.4% in 2019 and 2.4% in 2020) all were of less concern to the flying public in 2020.

The pandemic had a dramatic impact on the number of people choosing to fly for most of 2020. Enplaned passengers started to drop off in March for all airlines as the scope of the coronavirus became clearer. Total enplaned passengers for 2020 were only 38.9% of the number of enplaned passengers for 2019. The over-60% reduction in travelers across the year certainly helped the on-time, baggage-handling and denied-boardings performance for most airlines. As mentioned before, the increase in customer complaints was the primary performance issue for airlines. How quickly each airline addressed customer complaints helps tell the story of how each airline's AQR score was achieved.

More about the Airline Quality Rating

As the nation's longest-running study of airline performance quality, the [Airline Quality Rating](#) sets the industry standard, providing consumers and industry watchers a means to compare performance quality among airlines using objective performance-based data.

The AQR is the only study in the country based on performance measures. Criteria included in the report are screened to meet two basic elements: They must be readily obtainable from published data sources for each airline, and they must be important to consumers regarding airline quality. The resulting criteria include areas such as baggage handling, customer complaints, involuntary denied boardings and on-time arrivals.