

Consumer Affairs

by Dolah Saleh

It May Be True We Get What We Pay For

If selling is the lifeblood of a business, service can be its silent killer. Because of an eternally optimistic bent I insist on at the moment, I recently took good service from a company for granted. My good faith was doomed from the start. I had purchased "business class" tickets on a discount airline to get from Florida to Buffalo; however, because I had changed my flight time, they were unable to accommodate me as paid. I was promptly informed that there were no business class seats available on this "full" flight.

"My recourse?" I ask, since the lady on the phone never offered.

"A refund," she responds plainly.

A full fifty-dollar refund would be made for the difference between a business class ticket and a coach seat.

"Okay," I say, realizing I have no choice. Successive calls made days before the flight yield more disappointment: There are no business class seats as the flight is "full." On the way to the airport, I make a last ditch effort to save myself from scrunchy seats on a discount, bare-bones, absolutely no perks airline. A call on my mobile phone puts me in touch with someone who has great difficulty comprehending my situation. I reword my request four separate times during the fifteen minute phone call, and, finally, she curtly indicates that she "sees nothing available."

After a considerable wait in line to check my bags, I am finally in front of a live ticket agent. I explain the situation, and then ask "Could you please check to see if any seats have become available on business class?" And Ben, because she is unresponsive and her body language is not positive, I add very politely: "If there is a seat, may I please have it?"

"But you have been credited the difference, she informs me.

"Yes, I know, the fifty dollars." Great, I fink I much prefer the seat. "Any available?"

She looks silently on her screen, her somber countenance never once cracking into a smile.

"No. None. All seats are taken." Now she is compelled to educate me in an admonishing tone: "Sunday is a big travel day, you know" Everyone, she says, wants to get home.

Yes, I am sure.

After all this waiting, I am so glad that I had arrived more than an hour early because now it is 3:15 p.m. and my flight is scheduled to depart at 3:40 p.m.

When I arrive at the gate, I notice the gate door open. I look over at the agent and say, "Wow, they've boarded already."

"Yes," she yells over to me, "And you'd better hurry or we give your seat away."

It is uncanny. When I am early for a flight, they board late, and never ever leave on time. When I am on time, they decide to board and leave early. It is 3:35pm.

As I rush onto the aircraft, passing the so called "business class" section, I notice that there are at least four seats empty. Seating myself in the middle seat next to a young boy who tells me that he is five and a half years old and his dad is seated somewhere "in the back," I decide that, because if this plane is about to take off and those seats up front are empty, surely I will get one of those empty business class seats!

I arise, find the father to the young boy, and motion to him to sit next to his son. I head up to the front, where I now count FIVE empty seats. I explain once again, and one host allows me to be seated-"as long," he says, "as they haverit sold the seats."

What do you mean, sold the seats -- When, NOW??? Now they sell the seats? To standbys!????

"Yes, mam."

"REALLY? Have I not been clear about what I have just explained to you?"

"Yes," he says, "it should not happen." Now it is well after the scheduled 3:40 p.m. departure time and I do not understand why or how-at any of the points of my inquiry-all these agents could not know that FIVE seats were available.

But before I could complete my thinking, several "stand-bys" rush on to take their

seats and the host now turns to me. "Sorry," he says, "Back to plan B."

As I reluctantly make my way back to the seat from which the young boy's dad had moved, I begin to consider what my partner had warned me about: be careful of discount airlines, you may get what you pay for. Cliche, I thought then, but now, I am not so sure.

My story, unfortunately, is not over. When we arrive late in Atlanta, I quickly check the monitor, and see that I have about two hours or so.

An hour passes, and I head over toward the monitor once again to check. No change. I proceed on to the gate, but as I approach I can see that something doesn't look right: There is no one there. Have they left? I check my watch. No way. I am at least one half-hour early.

I look at the lone, glum-looking agent. "What is going on?" I ask "Oh," she yawns, "flight time has been changed. There is no plane that can go to Buffalo at 7:30. We are having a flight that comes in from Washington take the Buffalo people around 9:45."

I recall Murphy's Law and the futility of protest.

We do not leave Atlanta until midnight that night. When we land in Buffalo, it is 1:35 a.m. and it no longer matters that I am returning to 40 degree weather when I left 80 and 90 degrees. What does matter, however, is the obligation I feel to tell my story. I realize why people place themselves on National Television to reveal a horrible story only to "save others from a similar fate."

What is it that businesses fail to comprehend about their obligation to their paying customers? A new business does need to offer something that sets it apart from the competition. Often, particularly with rising airline rates, price is a very attractive feature.

But getting someone in the door will not matter a hill of beans if they never return. And one way to guarantee that they will not return, particularly if they have other options, is to mistreat them.

In the end, most of us would prefer to pay a bit more and be treated with consideration and courtesy.