Bags Awry

Air travel used to be a luxury, a perk to be savored. But the post-deregulation, post-airline bankruptcy, post-9/11 world of long lines, security pat-downs, and small seats have, for the vast majority of travelers, made the prospect of another journey through an airport abhorrent.

On top of the routine indignities, how pleasant is it to stand at a baggage carrousel to finally realize, that no matter how long you wait, your baggage is just not going to appear? By Murphy's Law, these losses seem to manifest just before an important client meeting, a key presentation before your board, a special celebration, or a long anticipated vacation. And when you fill out a baggage loss report, the baggage claims agent offers no clue as to where your bags are or if and when you will see them again.

Each day a dance of six and a half million shipments plays out on 669 aircraft flying between 375 airports in 220 countries. Since 1979, FedEx has used computerized tracking systems, and since 1994, they provided their customers with real-time status of shipments. A miniscule number of those parcels are lost or delayed.

Wouldn't it be nice if airlines could get baggage to arrive with passengers? Failing that, couldn't they inform the aggrieved party exactly where their missing bag was, and how soon could they be reunited? So why don't airlines provide their customers with the reliability and transparency demanded from package couriers, especially as mishandled luggage costs the airline industry an estimated three billion dollars annually?

To be fair, FedEx run their own aircraft and facilities with their own staff and an integrated process, while the baggage scrum is played by a loosely coordinated mélange of separate airport authorities, airlines, independent contractors, airline employees, and government staff who each take a comfortably circumspect view of their responsibilities. Airports lay off all of the responsibility onto the airlines. The airlines in turn blame sky congestion delays and are lobbying furiously for new government funds to develop an expensive, GPS-based air traffic control system.

When you check luggage, a bar-coded bag tag is generated linked to your itinerary and passenger information. The industry standard tag provides the airport code of your final destination and any intermediate transfers. Typically, the tagged bag moves from the check-in podium or kiosk to security, where x-ray and bomb sniffing equipment check its harmlessness. Then the bag is conveyed through the airport to a "make-up" area where it sorted, dispatched to a cart, and towed out to be loaded onboard your flight. Depending on the airport, the path the baggage takes could be 100 yards or over a mile with the sorting either purely manually or highly automatic.

Mishaps tend to occur during peak periods when staffing is inadequate, overburdened, and potentially less attentive. Connecting flights are particularly error prone if staff prioritize getting luggage to the arrival carousel rather than trucking it to the connecting

flight. Arrival delays shrink the time available to transfer the bags and compound the problem as do volume delays at security screening checkpoints.

Feeder airlines running smaller regional jets from Embraer or Canadair are prone to recurrent baggage mishandling stemming from weight and balance issues. If the pilot finds that his passenger, baggage, and fuel load exceed the safety norms appropriate to weather or flight traffic conditions, bags will be offloaded and left behind, missing subsequent connections. Unfortunately, airlines are neither forthcoming nor inform passengers that the luggage delay was deliberate.

Airport design can exacerbate or ameliorate the problem. New York JFK, London Heathrow, Paris Charles de Gaulle or other sprawling multi-terminal legacy airports originally designed for point-to-point travel, have more difficult times moving luggage around quickly. Newer airports built for hub-and-spoke or those with a single main terminal, such as Schiphol, generally handle luggage more efficiently, making them better bets for getting bags to arrive without mishap. However, brand new airports are notorious for having catastrophic baggage meltdowns, as witnessed at Denver, Hong Kong, and Bangkok.

Airports that successfully adopt new technology can speed bags around faster and more accurately. Las Vegas McCarron and Hong Kong International now embed a microchip with a miniature antenna in each bag tag. These radio frequency identification (RFID) chips provide the airlines with a precise, real-time picture of where each bag is and significantly reduce handling errors and congestion problems. Unfortunately, airlines are disinclined to adopt an RFID solution, as the new tags cost them more.

The systems exist already to monitor baggage flow as carefully as FedEx tracks packages. An airline that could provide its customers with trouble-free baggage handling would have a unique market positioning and competitive advantage. But due to the tyranny of low expectations, and despite the processing costs and passenger dissatisfaction stemming from mishandled baggage, the travel industry is still not inclined to unite and seriously address this problem which is only getting worse.

Deficient performance reporting makes it difficult for passengers to make informed travel choices or demand improvement. Airlines routinely report the minimum information required by law in a manner that potentially understates the problem by as much as a third. Data exists, but is withheld, to report checked baggage mishandling accurately by airline, airport, equipment type, and check-in and minimum connect times. This data should be released and freely published, so that the market in travel can function properly.

For example, a recent independent study reports that 3.5% of passengers checking their bags experience lost luggage. However, the best ten airports lose less than one percent, while the worst ten lose between 5.8 to 9.5% of checked bags. Unfortunately, because the industry refuses to make public the statistics, you will have to guess which are which.

Sidebar

Traveling in an imperfect world
Top 10 travel strategies to reduce the risk of losing your bags and sanity

10. Stay home. Teleconference. Skip security and check-in lines, be comfortable, and keep your clothes safe and unwrinkled at home.
9. Fly private aviation. Indulge yourself and let your own pilot safely load, clear customs, and unload your bags. If you can't afford, for short trips, take the train.
8. Don't travel with luggage. Send your bags and papers ahead using a reliable baggage courier service (FedEx, Luggage Concierge, or Virtual Bellhop), or, if you repeatedly travel to a particular destination, find a hotel you like and store your suitcase with the concierge between visits.
7. Carry on. Travel light. If you are made to check your bag at passenger boarding, it is more likely to make the flight with you. If you have fluids, repack them into acceptable three ounce travel portions. If you need other contraband, check only a small satchel containing the restricted items.
6. Identify your bags. Attach a luggage tag with your business card outside each checked bag and place your business card, itinerary, cell phone number, and local contact information <u>inside</u> every bag. Avoid buying black roll-on luggage or at least tie a brightly colored strap around to differentiate generic-looking luggage.
5. Fly direct. Avoid any connecting flights and congested hubs, if possible. If you must connect, try to connect with the same carrier. Avoid chronically late flights. Allow at least 45 minutes on departure and between scheduled connections for your checked bags to be loaded.
4. Plan for a loss. *Never* put money, jewelry, valuables, irreplaceables, prescription medicine, glasses, or identity papers in with checked baggage. Carry paste jewelry. Always carry on all the clothes you need for the next twenty four hours. Carry a picture of the baggage in your wallet or cell phone. Make an inventory of contents for identification and claiming in case of a loss. Buy "excess valuation" insurance from the airline if your clothing is worth more than $3,000.
3. Secure your bags. Don't stuff your luggage near bursting. Before packing, inspect the seams, zippers, and latches for tears or weakness. Remove any protrusions that might snag or break during handling. Lock your bags with TSA-approved locks.
2. Be alert. Remove any old airline labels, barcodes, or bag tags that could misdirect your bags. At check-in, confirm that the new bag tag has your correct intermediate and final destinations marked with the proper IATA three letter airport codes. See that the receipt stubs match the bag tags. Be sure to keep the claim stubs with your ticket and itinerary. Don't annoy the counter agent at check in or your bags could end up in Siberia.
1. Demand Improvements. Respectfully insist that as a minimum, airlines provide that airlines provide real-time baggage tracking to their customers. If that means taking a moment to email your government representative and friendly airline CEO, it is well worth your time.