
Writing 2111FG
Globe Airlines: Communicating a Negative Message

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(Program in Writing, Rhetoric, & Professional Communication)

You are employed in the Customer Relations office at Globe Airlines (Globe), a major North American passenger airline. Your supervisor, Rita Simmons, has just copied you with an email letter of complaint from a passenger from Canada – a copy of which is printed below. A response is required.

Background

Globe, a major carrier (5th largest by passenger volume in the U.S.), in common with many U.S. carriers, operates on the ‘hub’ system. It relies on connecting flights running from and through various ‘hub’ airports. One of Globe’s major hubs is in Charlotte, N.C. However, this operations model is rather notoriously dependant upon ‘smooth’ and on-schedule flights across many widely scattered locations; a disruption at any one or more airports can disrupt flights all across the continental U.S. and beyond. That is clearly what has happened here – a very common event, and one of the major sources of customer complaints about poor service against U.S. air carriers.

In order to try to minimize the effects of these disruptions, Globe – again, a common practice in the industry – has ‘*reaccommodation*’ agreements with other carriers; one of Globe’s major reaccommodation partners is BlueSky Air. Under these agreements, airlines routinely re-route passengers from unduly delayed or cancelled flights of their own onto flights with other carriers, depending on availability. Under these agreements, however, the passenger’s contract remains with the original carrier.

All of these arrangements work well enough when airline operations are running relatively smoothly, but can break down – simply due to sheer passenger volume – very quickly when weather or other conditions cause a disruption. That is what has happened in this case, as detailed in Ms. Smith’s letter (see below). Rita Simmons has done some checking here, and has found out that on the day in question (March 1st) there were in fact severe disruptions affecting Globe’s operations at Charlotte airport. Weather delays at other major centres had resulted in aircraft arriving either very late or not at all (flight cancellations) in Charlotte, and so being unavailable to carry on to scheduled destinations. In addition, operations at Pearson in Toronto had been suspended that morning (snow/ice), although normal operations had resumed by noon that day.

How to Respond: Considerations and Constraints

Rita Simmons is anxious to respond to this, or any other complaint, in order to preserve customer goodwill. However, there are problems. Formerly Globe, like many major airlines, routinely provided cash compensation and/or hotel accommodation directly at the airport when customers were unduly affected by flight delays or

Subject: Lyn Smith/Customer Complaint File #ez5u8g

I am writing (email) to confirm and detail a complaint (your file #ez5u8g) that I initially made by telephone to Lula in your customer relations office. I was advised by Lula to pursue this complaint by email. This is my story.

My husband James and I, hoping to have a special 'get-away' due to the horrendous year we had just lived through (2 sisters with advanced cancer, the death of my mother and double brain-aneurysm surgery my brother went through), decided to go to Naples, Florida in honour of my late mother. She was responsible for saving the historic fishing pier there from being torn down, and for its being designated an official historical site. We booked return flights [Toronto(Charlotte)Ft. Myers] with Globe.

The first leg of our trip (February 23), although we arrived at our destination 5hrs. late due to flight cancellations resulting from weather conditions in Charlotte, went pretty well; however, coming home was another story.

We left Ft. Myers as scheduled (Friday, March 1st 1:40 p.m.) and arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina to find out our flight to Toronto was cancelled due to 'air traffic' and to be told further by your agents that because Globe does not fly on weekends out of Charlotte to Toronto (?? we were told the next day that indeed it does so, and as well, of course, we were scheduled to fly Toronto-Charlotte-Ft. Myers on our trip down??), the next flight available would be Monday Mar. 4, 2010. I asked if there was anything they could do as I myself had a cancer clinic appointment that very day (Monday). Globe then offered to fly us to Buffalo, where we would be left to figure out our own means of getting to Toronto; considering that we were now being told that the weather there was not very good (snow storm), we took a second option offered to fly to Chicago where I would be booked to take the BlueSky 3131Y flight (Chicago – Toronto) at 0646 and my husband the BlueSky 4325Y flight at 0859 on the following day. This was very disconcerting as I really did want to fly home with my husband.

On arriving in Chicago at 11pm (10pm Chicago time) we decided to go to the Globe desk and see if there was anything they could do to get us on a flight together...yes they could! ... and we were both re-booked (we thought) onto BlueSky flight 1214Y at 1130am Mar. 2. However, due to the history of surprises I felt it would be in our best interest to check in with BlueSky right then so we went immediately to the BlueSky counter to be told 'no we were not booked on the 1130 flight that the original 646am and 859am flights were the only ones we could do.' When we asked how this could be, they simply told us that it was because Globe agents did not do their job properly when re-booking us. We, of course, really have no way of knowing if this is true, or just a result of a representative of one airline dissing another.

Shell-shocked at this point, we booked into the closest hotel, the Hilton (which we could see from the airport terminal), as we were now tired, frustrated and upset, especially after being told that we should both be at the BlueSky desk at 4am (it was now midnight) to see if my husband could possibly, through some miracle, get on the 646am

flight with me and also because we were late at night in a city unfamiliar to us (on this, I should add that we could not get through to the 1-800# given to us re hotel discounts..tried numerous times) ...so we spent U.S. \$250 –a discount given us by the hotel as we were only going to be there 3hrs.-but some sleep is better than none considering once we got to Toronto we had a 2hr. drive back to London.

So, eyes bloodshot, we arrive at the airport at 4am...stand in line to check in and when we get to the counter (American Airlines) are told 'no you are not booked on the 0646 am flight and James is not booked on the 0859am ...those reservations were cancelled'!! What?? By whom?? No answer. However, they were then able to rebook us both on the 0646am...yes!!

BUT, please bear with me -- the story doesn't end here. We relax, then proceed to security where, lo and behold, we now find we've been designated 'SSSS' (subject to special security search). We get through that, together with a very threatening 80-something lady with a walker, and head off to our gate to board our flight. I am ahead of my husband, so get on the plane—as I'm sitting waiting for my husband ...where is he??..20min.later I see his ashen face boarding the plane...his ticket did not electronically go through so he had to go and stand in line to obtain another boarding pass at the gate...but it doesn't end there...2min.later a young woman shows up and she is also booked in the seat designated on my husband's boarding pass issued at 4 a.m. (the one which failed at the gate); when my husband looked at the replacement boarding pass he was issued it was actually IN MY NAME/DESIGNATING MY SEAT??

However, because there were remaining standby seats we did get seats, thanks to a pilot who left the cockpit to go settle the issue; I'm sure he thought it was more economical than delaying the plane so he could use the AED machine on my husband, who I have never seen so upset in all the years we've been together, including through the experiences of the past year.

...and so, although I realize that you aren't 'legally' responsible for this situation (both my husband and I perfectly well understand the IATA disclaimers re. ANY responsibility), and that we did eventually get home, nevertheless it was a bit upsetting to be told by Lula that this was not Globe's problem, but BlueSky's fault. I disagree. The fact is that we were in your airline's care, and that it was your decision to transfer your clients to the care of BlueSky. I would like to think that in a moral gesture of compensation you would at minimum consider reimbursing us the \$250 expense we incurred for 2hrs sleep; I wouldn't care about this if indeed your agent at Chicago O'Hare had in fact booked us over onto the 1130am BlueSky flight – we were even issued a confirmation slip! I would also like to think that you would want to discuss these kinds of matters with BlueSky in the interests of both your airlines' public relations. We are also somewhat concerned about the foul-up at the Chicago boarding gate, especially considering the security measures instituted after 9/11. Finally, and on a more positive note, our checked luggage did go astray (of course), although we are happy we did get it back 18hrs.later. On this, the two airlines seem to have operated very efficiently, and we

genuinely compliment you on that. In the end, fortunately, I was able to make it to my cancer clinic appointment.

To wrap this up, on leaving the hotel in Naples, Fla., we were so elated with our experience there that we booked it for next year...though by the time we got home we were deflated, exhausted and wondering. Perhaps, at minimum, you can give us some insight as to what we did wrong, if anything, and how to avoid this happening in the future. Would it have been better to book a direct flight?? Is there a way for a husband/wife/couple traveling together to ensure that their reservations aren't 'split'(as ours apparently were)? Should we wait for 2-3min. after our tickets have been issued to check if they have been cancelled...is there a way to check if someone else has your ticket...we were told at the Toronto airport that in the future all tickets will be self serve...is there a 2-3 minute delay after you've left the self ticket booth that will show your ticket did not go through??

I also would like, if it is possible, the name of the pilot (BlueSky Airl flight 3131 Chicago O'Hare to Toronto Pearson, March 2/10) who sorted out our flight home, and where I could send a letter of thanks to him.

Hopeful, concerned, but still
Yours truly,
Lyn Smith, R.N., C.D.E."