

To Buy or Not to Buy:



An Extra Seat

By William Hignett and Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA

Southwest Airlines spends tens of millions of dollars on several television ads promoting the fact that bags fly free on their airline. A baggage handler yells in one advertisement, “Why pay up to \$120 round-trip for bags?” That’s ridiculous to pay for baggage, Southwest’s Web site claims. Yet, if you carry extra pounds on your body rather than in your bag, then Southwest may require you to purchase an extra seat.

How will you know if you must buy another seat?

The answer to this is not always clear for millions of Americans with excess weight. Airlines will tell you their policy is clear, but it is often difficult to find the policy on an airline’s Web site. US Airways and Delta do not post their policies, and on other airline Web sites the policy is difficult to find (try searching “customers requiring extra seating”). It turns out that most airlines have similar policies. But, a non-uniform application of the policy can occur due to the power of gate agents, pilots and flight attendants to decide whether a person needs to buy an extra seat.

A look at major U.S. airlines and what their policies are for individuals of size may be found on the next page.

Enforcing the rules

These policies provide guidance, but can still create confusion. If you have not flown for a while, how do you know whether you will fit the airline’s seat? If a passenger purchased one ticket and is not able to sit in one seat (by the policy criteria) on a full flight, does this always result in the person having to leave the plane?

Enforcement of seating rules can result in travel disruption. And, how do you purchase two tickets for a flight online? Most airlines recommend calling their reservations staff and will waive the fee for phone reservations for this purpose.

To some people, these airline policies are clearly discriminatory. If customers with excess weight must pay for another seat, why aren’t tall people required to buy a second seat so their legs don’t push into the seat in front of them? A customer with a baby who cries for the entire flight also makes passengers very uncomfortable, as does a customer wearing too much perfume. Yet, they fly for the price of one seat.

Whether or not the policy discriminates depends on the meaning of purchasing a ticket. Does the ticket buy transportation to a destination or merely a designated space on

Policies of Major U.S. Airlines

American Airlines

Passengers may be required to buy an extra seat if they cannot fit into a single seat in their ticketed cabin, and/or unable to properly buckle their seatbelt using a single seatbelt extender (available upon request), and/or unable to lower both armrests without encroaching upon the adjacent seat or another customer.

For more information, visit www.aa.com. To view the policy, click "Travel Information" and then "Special Assistance."

Continental

A customer is required to purchase an additional seat or upgrade if they do not meet one of the following criteria:

1. The customer must be able to properly attach, buckle and wear the seatbelt, with one extension if necessary, whenever the seatbelt sign is illuminated or as instructed by a crew member.
2. The customer must be able to remain seated with the seat armrest(s) down for the entirety of the flight.
3. The customer must not significantly encroach upon the adjacent seating space.

For more information, visit www.continental.com. To view the policy, click on "Travel Information," then click on "Special Travel Needs."

Delta/Northwest

A customer must be able to safely and comfortably fit in a single seat, or if not, is required to purchase an additional seat for each leg of their itinerary. The second seat may be purchased for the same fare as the original seat, provided it is purchased at the same time. A customer who does not purchase an extra seat in advance may be required to do so on the day of departure for the fare level available on the day of departure. The criteria for fitting in a seat are consistent with other airlines – armrests must be all the way down and the seatbelt with one extender must be able to be fastened.

US Airways

Customers who are not able to safely and comfortably fit in a single seat are required to purchase an additional seat for each leg of their itinerary. The criteria are the same as other airlines described above.

United

For the comfort and well-being of all customers aboard United, we have aligned with other major airlines' seating policies relating to passengers who:

- are unable to fit into a single seat in the ticketed cabin;
- are unable to properly buckle the seatbelt using a single seatbelt extender; and/or
- are unable to put the seat's armrests down when seated.

If unused seats are available on the flight, then a customer meeting any of the above criteria will be re-accommodated next to an empty seat.

More information is available on the United Web site at www.united.com. To view the policy, click "Services and Information," then find the link for "Children, pets and assistance." Then you will want to find the section for "Customers with Special Needs."

Southwest

Customers who are unable to lower both armrests and/or who compromise any portion of adjacent seating should book the number of seats needed prior to travel. The armrest is considered to be the definitive boundary between seats and measures 17 inches in width. This purchase serves as a notification of a special seating needs and allows us to process a refund of the additional seating cost after travel (provided the flight doesn't oversell). As long as the flight does not oversell, we will refund the additional seat purchase after travel. A "Refund Advice Slip," a guide for conveniently requesting refunds, is provided to the Customer at check-in. And, if it appears a flight will oversell, the option to purchase a second seat and travel on a less full flight is available.

More information is available at www.southwest.com. To view the policy, visit the "Travel Tools" section and click on the "Southwest Policies."

Please note: These are actual excerpts from each individual airline's policy.

the plane? The Canadian courts have ruled the former and forced airlines to accommodate passengers with excess weight by offering a second seat at no additional charge.

They considered it a human rights issue. The result of the Canadian ruling makes it more pleasant for all passengers, including large individuals and passengers sitting near them. U.S. courts have not acted, and airlines have created the policies themselves.

How the airlines measure up

Southwest Airlines says that 90 percent of the complaints received in one year came from travelers angry that their seat space was violated by fellow passengers. Perhaps the complaints to the airlines about passengers encroaching on

The OAC Responds . . . The OAC has developed a policy statement regarding airline seating policies. To view the OAC's full policy statement, please visit the OAC Web site.

personal space should be directed at airlines for having small seats. All Boeing jets in use have 17" wide seats in coach. That is limited space for all passengers. (Airbus jets have 18" seats, Embraer 190 jets have 18.2" seats, and first-class seats can be as wide as 20.5 inches. But, the majority of airlines fly jets with only 17" wide seats).

Due to the economy, airlines have reduced the number of flights and oversell more flights, making comfort on crowded airplanes a challenge for all passengers. Since as many as 64 percent of the U.S. adult population is now considered either overweight or obese, perhaps airlines should widen seat size as car and furniture makers have.

Summing it All up

Airlines advertise with friendly faces and tag lines that stress customer service and concern for your well-being. To actually provide exceptional customer service, airline policies should be clear and uniformly applied, respecting customer dignity.

The airline policy for customers requiring extra seating penalizes a significant number of passengers because of their weight. Though the size of airline seats is not easy to change, airlines can take steps to avoid adding insult to injury by eliminating the humiliation, confusion and neglect passengers feel.

If you have a bad experience related to airline seating policies, consider registering your complaint clearly and factually. As a paying airline customer, you have an opportunity to influence how airlines conduct their business. You can find tips on how to make an effective complaint about airline service at: www.airsafe.com/complain/complain.htm.

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ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



JOIN TODAY: GO TO OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN

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