

Flexibility

BY MIKE SUTTON

I never pass up an opportunity to quote one of my partners, Vern Allison, who said something a number of years ago that stuck with me like a bad habit. He was talking about a vendor's product and the lack of quality therein. In response to a client's question about whether a newly discovered bug had come as a surprise, Vern said, "I've ceased to be surprised, but I continue to be appalled."

I'm doing a lot of flying these days. I know this is probably small potatoes to some of you real "road warriors," but I now average two to four flights a week. In fact, as I write this, I'm at about 35,000 feet somewhere over West Virginia.

Most of my travel is up and down the east coast. I spend two days a week in a client's New York City office, which allows me to fly up on a shuttle in the morning and back that night (I really prefer to sleep in my own bed). I must say, I've been very impressed with the service between D.C. and New York. The flights are on time, clean, and generally the center seat is not filled, so you don't feel like a sardine traveling via air freight.

I also travel quite a bit between D.C. and the San Francisco area. The client uses a different carrier for transcontinental flights. These adventures, however, have not been as impressive as the other flights.

Of course, this airline has a Frequent Flyer program and they cater to those who fly 25,000 miles or more each year. So what? Most airlines do that. However, this airline reserves most of the seats for these serious frequent flyers, so until you reach this nirvana level of Frequent Flyer-dom, about the only place you can get a seat assignment that isn't the dreaded "center seat" is at the airport when you check in for your flight. Now, that wouldn't bother a lot of people, but

I hate loose ends, so until I have a seat assignment, I'm uncomfortable.

For those of you who know me, I don't fit very well in the middle seat of a Rolls Royce, much less one in "economy" class (an oxymoron if I ever heard one). To quote South Park's Cartman character, "I'm not fat, I'm just big boned."

So there I am this morning at Dulles International, with my laptop and my carry-on bag. I walk up to the counter and tell the ticket agent what flight I'm on and present her my ID.

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The first thing the agent says is, "You'll have to check your bag."

"No," I answer. "It fits in the overhead compartment with lots of room to spare."

"We've changed our policy," the agent counters. "Your bag has to fit under the seat in front of you." I asked if the aircraft was a crop duster or other open cockpit plane, since apparently there was no overhead storage space. She was not amused. I explained to her that I had a very tight schedule and had to get to a meeting in San Francisco as soon as I got off the plane. I didn't have time to do the Texas Two-Step at SFO's chrome carousel. At this point, she measured the bag and determined it was "marginally" acceptable.

Next, she looks up my seat assignment on her monitor and prints a boarding pass.

As she was stuffing it into an envelope, I asked what seat she had assigned me. "Twenty-three-E," she answers. Anyone who has been on a plane in the last 30 years knows that generally "Cs" and "Es" are bad letters. Real FFers immediately go into withdrawal when presented a boarding pass so inscribed.

"Is there an aisle seat available, preferably in the emergency exit row?" I asked. "Oh! You'd like an aisle seat? Sure, I can give you one." Now I'm thinking that this is either her first day on the planet or at least at this job. Why else would she give me a bad seat without looking to see if there might be a better one? She prints a new boarding pass, looks up at me and smiles as she hands it over the counter. "You know our baggage policy just changed the first of this month?"

"It was clear that something changed," I said, "since I've flown a lot of flights with this bag and never had any problem getting it stowed." She smiled, clearly impressed with my definite grasp of the obvious. "But," I continued, "I think you'll find that a lot of business passengers will object to your new policy for the same reason I did." She shrugged, with an accompanying "I don't care" smile that would qualify her for a senior position at any state's main DMV office. "Then they won't be flying with us," she said, proudly.

It's not often that we get to offer a new concept to someone else. "I'm sure your competitors would love to hear you say that," I said. She thought for a moment and then said "Next!" As it turns out, the aircraft is only about half full and there was no one in the center seat, proving that there is a Divine Power.

Let me say, before I get a tractor-trailer load of hate email, that I understand

carry-on baggage is a real problem for the airlines. On the shuttle flight from LGA to DCA last night a woman came down the aisle with enough stuff to support a reinforced company. I don't object to an attempt to improve safety — which is what the onboard baggage issue really boils down to. However, the “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude is something that no company can afford. That applies to an organization's internal customers as well. In today's outsourced world, it's too easy to replace people, or whole departments, with bad attitudes.

My brother-in-law, Ken Pike, puts it well when he is faced with a vendor's “policy” that is counter to his own best interest. “I have a policy too,” Ken says. “I don't (fill in the blank) with a company that isn't flexible enough to meet my needs.” 



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