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A Faster Answer for Lost Baggage With a Hidden Benefit for Airlines

American, Delta, United and others are prepping streamlined systems that could skew their lost-luggage stats



By

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March 29, 2017 10:57 a.m. ET

An innovation aiming to streamline how air passengers reconnect with their lost luggage comes with a major asterisk: Airlines would no longer count that luggage as lost.

Several carriers already alert travelers when their checked baggage doesn't make their flight. Those texts or emails save passengers from waiting needlessly

at baggage carousels. Customers can go straight to the baggage-service office and fill out paperwork, including where to deliver the bag when it does show up.

But soon United, Delta and American and others say they'll be able to not only alert travelers but also let them give electronic instructions for where they want the lost bag delivered.

That's a huge timesaver for passengers. It's also a quiet, clever way for airlines to improve their baggage-handling stats.

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No stop at the baggage office means no paperwork. No paperwork means no report to the Transportation Department. Those lost bags will never be found in government statistics.

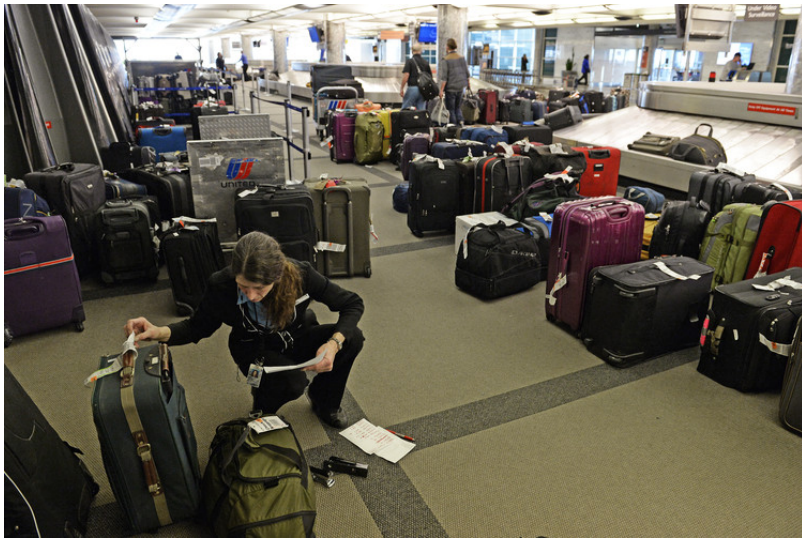
Baggage handling is one of the biggest sources of travel hassle and complaints. Passengers still chafe at the \$4 billion annually paid to U.S. airlines in baggage fees. Lawmakers have forced airlines to alter baggage rules, such as requiring refunds of those fees when bags aren't delivered in a timely manner.

The DOT statistics, which count the number of mishandled bags on domestic trips, are a factor in the Middle Seat's annual scorecard of airline performance. The Airline Quality Rating, an annual study based on analysis of DOT data, also relies on mishandled baggage reports to compare airlines.

"This would create a false impression in the performance of an airline," says Dean Headley, associate professor of marketing at Wichita State University and one of the authors of the annual airline ranking. "If they start hiding what they are doing, how can you make a good consumer decision?"

The DOT says current regulations require airlines to count only passenger-filed mishandled baggage reports. If a passenger agrees to a rerouting of the bag on a later flight and doesn't file a report with the carrier, the late bag won't be counted. Asked if the DOT is concerned that its data will no longer reflect the true number of mishandled bags, the department says it's monitoring the situation.

American, Delta, United and Alaska airlines say they will implement mishandled-bag response systems for customers this year.



A maze of bags like this one at United Airlines's baggage claim in Denver can be daunting and discouraging for travelers. Airlines say new technology will help them get mishandled bags like these delivered faster and give customers more information about their bag's location. *PHOTO: PATRICK SEMANSKY/DENVER POST/GETTY IMAGES*

American says its system will eventually sync with its baggage-delivery company so customers can track bags after the airline turns them over. The first version, which American is rushing to launch before summer, will let customers give delivery instructions and avoid waiting for the last bag to come up the carousel and then wait in line at the baggage-service office to file a claim.

“We view that as one of the worst customer experiences, because the minute that plane took off, American Airlines knew that bag wasn’t going to fly with the customer,” says Julie Rath, managing director of customer service recovery.

The system means the mishandled bag won’t be reported to the DOT unless the customer files a separate complaint. “Our goal here is really make it as easy as possible for the customer and don’t make them wait,” Ms. Rath says.

Alaska says only that it will have more to say about baggage changes later this year. Delta is downright guarded on the topic: “We will comply with direction



Airline baggage handling has improved. But still, on average, one passenger from every two domestic flights will end up with a lost bag. *PHOTO: PATRICK SEMANSKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

from the DOT,” a Delta spokeswoman says.

United says its electronic-response system will launch later this spring. Text messages will allow customers to immediately set up delivery options by clicking on a link that connects to United’s website, spokesman Charles Hobart says. The alerts are likely to be delivered to customers in-flight, if they use the plane’s Wi-Fi service, or upon landing.

United confirms the change will reduce the number of mishandled bags reported to the DOT. “That’s not why we are doing this,” Mr. Hobart says. “We’re offering this option purely as a way to improve the customer experience and provide more self-service options.”

United bought equipment to increase the number of times a bag tag gets scanned along its journey to five from three, enabling the airline to have better information on each bag’s location and send alerts about mishandled bags to

customers, Mr. Hobart says. United has contact information on about 90% of its customers, so many get alerts now when bags miss flights, he says.

Baggage handling has improved throughout the airline industry. In the U.S., the DOT says passengers filed 1.7 million mishandled baggage reports from domestic flights in 2016, down 19% from 2.1 million in 2014. The rate of mishandled baggage reports showed even bigger improvement, since more passengers flew in 2016 than 2014. Last year, there was one mishandled baggage report for every 370 passengers, compared with one for every 276 passengers two years earlier.

Baggage fees have funded investment in better tracking technology and baggage-handling equipment. Airlines that charge baggage fees also have seen fewer bags checked by customers and more luggage carried onto planes.

The DOT does plan some changes to baggage-reporting regulations starting in 2019. Airlines will be required to report the total number of bags checked, so the rate of mishandled bags can be compared with checked bags, instead of the number of passengers, to give a more accurate reading on each airline's reliability. And instead of counting passenger reports, the DOT wants to know how many bags get mishandled, since under current reporting one report could cover multiple bags.

But the DOT says the new regulations don't include changes that would impact the reporting dodge. Only passenger-filed reports will be counted.

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