

# U.S. AIRLINE INDUSTRY IMPROVING SERVICES - VIRGIN AMERICA IS THE BEST



Virgin America is the best U.S. airline overall. According to a study conducted last year by Wichita State University based in Kansas and Omaha's University of Nebraska and released last week, the airline offers crest-top quality service.

The study that examined various indicators of airline performance, including mishandled bags, passenger and consumer ticket complaints, and on-time arrivals for 14 biggest U.S. airlines confirmed that Virgin America offers superior customer service.

**This was Virgin America's second best achievement to 2011's best ever performance in over two decades since this research was commissioned 23 years ago.** The airline was not only the best overall leader but also the best baggage handler and second-best in handling seat over-bookings.

While Virgin America based in Burlingame, California glowed in triumph, United Airlines was ranked last. United Airlines was found to have had doubled rate of consumer complaints even after the much anticipated amalgamation with Continental Airlines. The report deduced that rough spots in the integration of the operations of the two merged carriers are injuring their performance.

The poor ranking for United Airlines was however disputed by the company's spokesman Rahsaan Johnson. "Our experience in the past six months has not been reflected in the report. We have recorded impressive performance in customer experience, diminished complaints and customer satisfaction, and our ranking does not seem to reflect those realities," Rahsaan said via email.

In the report however, United Airlines had consumer complaints of 4.24 per 100,000 passengers. The least complaints were 0.25 at Southwest. The top five airlines with low number of complaints also included US Airways, Delta, American Eagle and JetBlue. Higher number of consumer complaints was reported in June, July and August, months of peak summer travel and plane crowding.

**The report also noted that America's airline industry is making steady strides forward.** Consumer complaints did not surge as greatly as used to happen some years ago, only rising to 11,445 from 9,414 in 2011.

Dean Headley, the annual report's co-author and professor of business at Wichita state University noted that for more than 20 years of studying airline performance, the years 2011 and 2012 remain the best ever in the industry's performance.

For the airlines though, passengers complaints have failed to diminish, rising from 1.19 in 2011 to 1.43 in 2012 for every 100,000 passengers. The desire by the airlines to generate more revenue is spotted as the major cause of this rise. Carriers continuously reduce seat sizes to create more seating space and to book in more people, and the empty middle seats no longer exist. More people book and more people with tickets are turned away because of overbooked flights.

**"Airlines have made 150-seater carriers out of 130-seaters to make more money, and the increased number of complaints indicates consumer irritation,"** Headley said. With increased complaints the airlines will be compelled to stop decreasing space.

SkyWest recorded the highest numbers of involuntary denied-boarding at 2.32 for every 100,000 passengers; while Virgin America and JetBlue had the lowest denied boarding at 0.07 and 0.01 respectively.

While the rate of passenger complaints rose, the arrival at destination on time improved. Over 81.8% of flights in 2012 ended in on-time arrivals compared to 80% in 2011. Hawaiian Airlines kept time the best at 93.4% of all its flights in 2012. On the other hand, American Airlines and ExpressJet recorded poorest time management with only 76.9% of all their flights recording on-time arrivals.

The report also noted marked improvements in handling of bags. Rates of bag mishandling hit peak levels of 7.01 for every 100,000 passengers in 2007 and fell to 3.07 in 2012, even lower than 2011's 3.35. Reduced number of lost and mishandled bags is attributed to fees charged on extra bags which compel passengers to carry fewer bags.

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