

ELLEN CREAGER: Savvy low-fare shoppers add to airlines' woes

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FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

September 15, 2005

As **Northwest Airlines**, **Delta Air Lines** and other major carriers fall into bankruptcy and disarray, I keep having this guilty twinge: Are passengers partly to blame for the unstable state of air travel?

Yes. Because it is so easy to shop for airline tickets, we ruthlessly shop by price alone.

That rewards the lowest-fare carriers, no matter how they treat their workers, how much legroom they have or how green their pilots are.

Crazed airline executives (who must be sniffing way too many jet fumes) keep selling their product way below cost. Result? Delays, cancellations, tiny seats, bare-bones service, pressure from Wall Street, then, oops, bankruptcy.

That is so common that the traveling public just shrugs.

"I'm getting a lot of calls about Northwest," Cathy Daldin, owner of **Shamrock Travel** in Rochester, said Wednesday. "But I tell people, 'Do you know how many other airlines are in Chapter 11? You've been flying United or **US Airways**, and they're already in it.'

"I tell them, 'Listen, all those other airlines are flying. Don't worry.' "

In exchange for low fares, passengers are willing to put up with instability, said Farmington Hills' Bob Cowen. He travels 100,000 miles a year on business.

And Northwest's troubles? "It doesn't bother me," he said Wednesday. "They've proven they can fly reliably and safely, and I'm not canceling."

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Patrick DeTine of Roseville has more than 100,000 Northwest WorldPerks frequent-flier miles saved up for a trip to Russia he's planning in eight years. He figures he'd better start spending the miles soon.

But after learning more about the bankruptcy process, he's not running out to book a trip today.

"Naive people like myself hear 'bankruptcy' and we think that means, you know, bankruptcy," he said Wednesday. "But if I know these things take time, I wouldn't shy away from traveling Northwest."

The sad truth for airlines is that a knowledgeable customer is a ruthless customer.

For that, blame circles back to the airlines. When they decided to save a few bucks, cut out the middleman travel agent and put prices online for all the world to see, passengers suddenly gained the power, said airline analyst Michael Allen. The chief operations officer of **Back Aviation Solutions** in New Haven, Conn., foresees more instability.

United, USAirways, Hawaiian and **Aloha** airlines are already operating under Chapter 11.

But to make money, the most troubled airlines like Northwest really need to raise ticket prices by 15%, said airline analyst **Bob Harrell of Harrell Associates in New York**. That's nearly impossible to do given the cutthroat competition.

So as Delta and Northwest join the ranks of the bankrupt carriers, passengers can only wait and watch.

"I couldn't assign any blame to passengers," **Harrell said** Wednesday, "except there are not enough of them, and they don't pay enough."

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If you're traveling

- If you are flying on Northwest or Delta today, head to the airport. Your flight is going. Your ticket is good.
- You cannot get insurance on a ticket issued by a bankrupt airline.
- If you want to fly on another airline, you'll have to pay any applicable penalties and higher fares. No restrictions have been waived because of the bankruptcy filings.
- There are some good reasons not to book future trips on a bankrupt airline. The further off your trip, the greater the possibility something bad will happen. But with United, Delta, Northwest and USAirways all in bankruptcy, it might be impossible to get where you are going without using one of them.
- Your frequent-flier miles and redemption program have not been affected by the bankruptcy.