

What to Do When Bumped From a Flight

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SHARP elbows and the ability to claw your way to a ticket counter through a mob of infuriated travelers who have just learned their flight has been canceled are no longer enough to guarantee you a seat on the next flight out.

The days of gate agents scrambling to manually rebook stranded passengers, first come, first served, by looking up alternative itineraries for each one are largely over. Most airlines have started to use computer programs to rebook passengers automatically. This type of software, put to use in the last two years by American (which calls it ReAAccom) and US Airways, and also used by Delta, United and Northwest, looks at the entire flight schedule to uncover all the possible rebooking options for passengers from a canceled flight. Then it uses special algorithms to dole out seats, doing in a matter of minutes what it used to take airline agents an hour or more to accomplish.

Airline officials say the computers are more efficient – not to mention more civilized – than the days of the mad scrum. In those survival-of-the-fittest scenarios, it often didn't matter if you had a discount ticket or if you were a frequent flier. And persistent passengers, whatever their status, could often jockey their way to the front of the line and onto the next flight out. Now the computer is supposed to guarantee priority to the airlines' most important customers.

That's good for elite fliers and passengers paying full fare, since they get published to the top of the list when a flight is canceled. But passengers who bought a cheap ticket or booked their seat with frequent flier miles generally have less standing.

Take American Airlines Flight 337 from La Guardia Airport destined for O'Hare International Airport in Chicago on Aug. 24, which was canceled that day. The airline said that of the 78 passengers with a final destination of Chicago, 61 were automatically rebooked on a nonstop flight later that day. Seven were put on connecting flights through Ronald Regan National Airport in Washington or Raleigh-Durham International Airport. And 10 passengers were rebooked on flights the following morning. "Although ReAAccom considers multiple factors when looking at rebooking options," said Jim Diamond, managing director of operations research for American, in an e-mail message, "it primarily considers a passenger's entire itinerary and the best way to get them to their final destination in the shortest amount of time."

American and other airlines that use similar technology to rebook passengers say that customers who don't like their new itinerary can talk to an agent to see if there are any other options. But which flights travelers get rebooked on are ultimately up to the airline's discretion – and open seats on planes are becoming increasingly scarce.

"There are less options because there are less flights," said Walter W. Stumpf Jr., an agent at Xanadu Group, a Linden Travel Bureau affiliate in Lafayette, N.J. "And if there is a flight it may be filled already."

So is there anything a passenger can do to beat the system? It's possible if you know what to ask for and how far each airline is willing to bend. Of course, if weather or air traffic problems are to blame for a cancellation, everybody's in the same fix. Here are some guidelines on what to do if your airline cancels your flight.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT AIRLINE Fly on one that still rewards those with sharp elbows. Some airlines, including Continental, JetBlue and Southwest, still rebook passengers manually for most, if not all, canceled flights. In such cases, a passenger typically has to wait in line to speak to a gate agent or customer service desk agent at the airport or call a reservation line to be rebooked. But either way, who gets on the next flight out "basically ends up being whoever gets to the desk," said Sara Anthony, a Continental spokeswoman. "It's as simple as that."

START DIALING Call your airline or travel agent as soon as you learn your flight is canceled. This can help you jump ahead of passengers waiting in line to be rebooked on airlines that still reaccommodate passengers manually. It can also put you ahead of passengers looking for alternatives when an airline automatically rebooks you on a flight you're not crazy about. In certain flight cancellations, American and US Airways will provide passengers with a hot line to reach ticket agents with special training in handling canceled flights.