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What's New from the World of Tech

FrontSide



Defeat Airport Delays

A bit of tech savvy is all you need to avoid getting stranded.

Anyone who flies these days knows that the experience can often be as enjoyable as root-canal surgery. I learned this all too well during a five-leg, multicity trip this summer. Between Burbank, Philadelphia, and Chicago, my journey was plagued with a raft of hassles, including a 45-minute delay in Dallas, a broken Jetway, an hour spent on the tarmac while the pilot argued with the control tower, and a checked bag that went missing for 20 hours. Such annoyances are becoming increasingly common. According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, this year has had more flight delays than any other year in the past decade.

But you don't have to abandon air travel altogether. You'll be relieved to know that

with some know-how and a little help from technology, you can avoid problems before you arrive at the airport and rebook quickly if your flight is delayed or canceled.

The first step is to minimize your chances of delays before you book. Many flights are chronically late, with some tardy 90 percent of the time. At FlightStats.com you can enter the flight numbers you're considering and you'll get the odds of the flight being on time.

Then, the day of your departure, visit the FAA's special Web page (www.fly.faa.gov) to learn if there are any delays specific to your travel destination. And if you book with Orbitz, you can sign up for OrbitzTLC Alerts and receive a text

message or automated voice mail ahead of time if your flight is delayed. Even if you didn't book with Orbitz, you can still check its Traveler Update site (updates.orbitz.com) for real-time updates from other travelers at your departure airport. Want to find out how long the security line is? Although not in real time, the Transportation Security Administration's wait-time page (waittime.tsa.dhs.gov) will give you a very good estimate of how long you'll spend trudging through the rope maze.

So what about when you're already at the airport and your flight is delayed or canceled? If you have to rebook, you don't want to wait at the back of the line at the service counter. Be aware that every airline

HEADS-UP FROM FELLOW FLIERS At Orbitz's Traveler Update, you get real-time warnings on security, terminal, or airline delays.

has at least three telephone numbers—you'll need them all if there's a cancellation and 200 other passengers are scrambling to get through. Before you set out, program every number into your cell phone under Airline Contact Info. This can make the difference between getting rebooked on a flight the same day or having to spend the night in your connecting city.

Also, don't forget about those check-in kiosks. According to Delta Airlines

spokesperson Ashley Black, the quickest way to get rebooked when your flight is canceled or delayed is by checking in at a self-service kiosk. The kiosk is tied in real time to the airline's database, so it will offer you other flight options the moment your originally scheduled flight is canceled or delayed. If you've already gone through security, pull out your phone, open the Airline Contact Info group you preprogrammed, and start dialing. More

than likely, a customer-service rep can rebook you on the next available flight in less time than it would take you to reach the front of the line at the gate desk. If you do get stranded, you may be entitled to a confirmed seat on the next flight, meal vouchers, or hotel reimbursement under Rule 240. But the rule's specifics vary by airline, so check your airline's 240 policy online, print it, and bring it with you. —Logan Kugler

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS At each airline's Web site, you can read its specific policies on cancellations, refunds, and other passenger rights stemming from Rule 240.

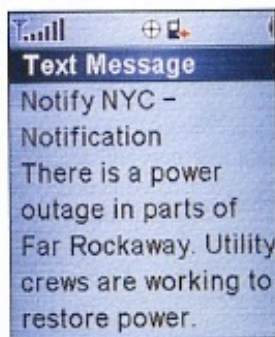
The Proving Ground for Text Alerts

Governments, colleges, and others are launching text-messaging alert systems at an increasing rate to warn against safety hazards and severe weather. But are they working?

For the millions of cellular subscribers in the U.S., the cell phone is primarily a social-communication tool. But public-safety organizations (such as police and fire departments), college campuses, and government entities are also realizing its potential as a safety device. In particular, these groups are launching text-messaging alert systems. Cell-phone users voluntarily sign up to receive texts alerts for emergencies such as fires, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and child abductions.

For example, after residents of Larimer County, Colorado, complained of not being notified after a water treatment plant explosion last year, the local government created a text alert system that it's set to implement by this fall. And Anderson, South Carolina, is urging its citizens to opt into the FAST (First Alert System Text) program, an independent nationwide provider of emergency notifications that eschews SMS for short-message-peer-to-peer (SMPP), a closed network that does not jam up the telephone system.

On the federal level, the FCC approved a new nationwide Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) and gave wireless providers a timetable for compliance by the expected rollout date of



2010. Though the government still needs to cull the resources to man such a system, many wireless companies support the measure.

"Cell phones are, at their core, a safety tool," says Debi Lewis, a spokesperson for Verizon. "We forget that when cell phones first started, it was about keeping a phone near you in case of emergency."

Whether such programs are actually effective, however, is still under debate. The voluntary system of submitting cell-phone numbers and personal information has a low response rate. For example, Anderson residents supported the text alert system, but public safety grants and accreditation manager

Anita Donley says that enrollment still only "trickles in" at five to ten people per day. And even at Virginia Tech, where last year's shooting tragedy inspired many other colleges to augment emergency services with a texting component, only two-thirds of the student body and one-half of the faculty have signed up for the VT Alert system. Backers of the CMAS program hope that widespread adoption by carriers and having it become standard on new cell phones will boost the number of people CMAS can reach in an emergency. —Jonathan Flax