

YOUR MONEY

Flight-Change Roulette

By HILLARY CHURA NOV. 24, 2008

So you booked your flight early to get a good fare. Good for you. But now, a couple of weeks before you are scheduled to fly, some important meetings at work have come up and you have to change that flight.

You have two choices: You can immediately alert the airline, which would improve your chances of getting a seat on a particular flight, or you could wait until the day of your scheduled flight to notify the airline. The first option would certainly give you peace of mind. But that would probably cost you much more than waiting.

Depending on the airline, travelers seeking a flight change may have to pay a fee to exchange the ticket, a fee that covers the difference in cost between the old flight and the new or a combination of both. The cost can range from a nominal amount to several hundred dollars.

Travelers who wait until the day of their scheduled flight — but before the plane takes off — to make a change will probably pay less because the airlines, awash in red ink, would prefer to fill the seat than leave it empty, said Anne Banas, executive editor of **SmarterTravel.com**. Two weeks before the date of departure, for example, the airlines are still hoping to sell the seats.

“The early bird doesn’t catch the worm in this situation,” Ms. Banas said.

Of course, you could buy a nonrestrictive airline ticket, which permits itinerary changes without penalty, but generally at significantly higher fares.

Virginia M. Sheridan, president of M. Silver Associates, a New York marketing and public relations firm, said she needed to change a Dallas-to-New York flight three times. On top of her \$600 ticket, she paid the \$100 change fee three times. If she had waited until closer to the time of departure, she could have saved \$200.

“It’s impossible for business travelers today to stick to a hard and fast schedule,” she said. “Meetings move. We try to book far out in advance to get the best fares and end up being penalized when we have to make changes.”

Some experienced travelers say they hope to find someone in customer service with compassion for their situation.

Heidi Fleischer is one of those travelers. She lives in New York and travels at least once a month for her job at the Coca-Cola Company. When she is in an airport line seeking help for a missed flight or changed plans, she says she surveys the counter for helpful agents. If it is her turn to be called but she does not think the available agent will be accommodating, she will put her cellphone to her ear and motion for the person behind her to go ahead. She waits until she is hailed by the person she wants.

Since fees vary by carrier, uncertain passengers should buy tickets with an eye toward less onerous fees, said Ms. Banas of SmarterTravel.com. Southwest Airlines, for example, has no change fee but assesses passengers the difference between the fare for the original flight and the new one. Alaska Airlines permits passengers to fly standby without a fee on the day of a trip, but levies a \$100 fee plus the fare difference for advance changes. AirTran allows free standby the day of travel but charges a \$75 fee plus fare difference in advance.

Frontier Airlines eliminated standby this summer, so travelers who miss their flight forfeit the value of their ticket. Passengers who call before their flight leaves must pay the difference between their original fare and a new ticket. JetBlue charges \$40 if passengers notify it before the plane takes off that they will not make their flight; no-shows who arrive after a flight pay a \$100 fee as well as any fare difference. Making a change early at JetBlue involves a \$100 change fee, the fare difference and possibly a \$50 telephone charge.

Ms. Sheridan said she was on a business trip in Canada when her husband fell ill at home in New York. She needed to return a day earlier than planned. When she called reservations the night before she wanted to fly, she was told that she would need to pay a \$50 change fee as well as the fare difference. Instead, she checked how many seats were available and decided that there would be a decent chance of an empty seat on her desired flight. She went to the airport early the next morning, explained her plight to the agent and was charged a \$50 standby fee.

Standby passengers are not guaranteed a seat on a particular flight. So expert fliers gamble only on direct flights where they know seats tend to be empty, on routes served by many flights and when their own schedules are flexible.

The decision on whether to book early or wait boils down to the risk-reward trade-off.

“Which is more important,” asked Chris Lopinto, co-founder of ExpertFlyer.com, “a few bucks or getting there on time?”

Ms. Sheridan, who logs about 120,000 miles a year, said the process was “a little bit like going to a casino,” adding: “There is a fairly high risk factor here, but I think frequent fliers are a bit more comfortable and savvy. If it’s going to make your blood pressure go up, and that’s not something you’re comfortable with, then go ahead and make the change.”

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