

# Marie Gale

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Pamela Coslet  
General Manager, Customer Relations  
United Airlines

cc: Glenn F. Tilton, Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer  
Peter D. McDonald, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer  
Gerald F. Kelly, Senior Vice President

June 11, 2007

Dear Ms. Coslet,

I am writing to share the story of my recent trip on United Airlines, and to tell you why I plan to avoid flying your airline in the future. Maybe my information will help you improve your service before your company goes into the ground.

Before I start, let me say that I KNOW that the underlying difficulty was the weather, and that's not the airlines fault. I'm not complaining about the weather. I'm not even complaining about sleeping in the airport – sometimes that happens. My complaint, and the degree of dissatisfaction I have is on the WAY IT WAS HANDLED. That aspect of it was *appalling*.

On June 8<sup>th</sup> I arrived in Burlington, VT at 3:30 pm check in for the first leg of my flight back to Portland, Oregon. I was booked on Flight 526, scheduled to leave at 5:20 pm. There were weather issues, and it was known that Flight 526 and my connection out of O'Hare, Flight 215, would be delayed. In order to cover all the bases on my connection from O'Hare to Portland, the ticket agent 1) left me confirmed on Flight 215, 2) put me on standby on United Flight 345 ( I was number 10 on the list as of about 3:50 pm), AND 3) confirmed me on Flight 549 the next morning (just in case).

Flight 526 arrived in Chicago around 8:30 pm. My scheduled flight out, Flight 215, was delayed until 12:00 midnight. The next flight to Portland, Flight 345, on which I was booked standby, was scheduled for 10:50 pm and supposed to be on time. Knowing that, I bided my time and waited in the gate area for about an hour.

Around 9:00 it became apparent that lots of flights had been delayed and there were many people to be handled. The line at the ticket counter for Flight 345 was growing. Just to make sure, I got in line to talk to the ticket agent.

There was ONE ticket agent handling all the people. I waited in line for over an hour and was 4<sup>th</sup> back from the counter when boarding was started. The same single ticket agent handled all the boarding checking. She was calling stand-by names, (about 50 of them I think). My name was not called. When I tried to find out what was happening, she was very rude and just said "I'm reading the names off the list". In the end, after the plane was boarded, I was one of about 15 or so people who didn't make it on. We were then told to go down to the customer service area near Gate 18 and see an agent there. The ticket agent closed the gate area.

So, I had waited in the gate area, actually standing in line, for about 1 ½ hours. During that time, not a single (NOT ONE) announcement was made to tell those waiting what was

happening, where to go, what the options were. Nothing. Not one single show of caring in the least for the people waiting or delayed.

I found out from another passenger that the flight I was actually scheduled to go out on, Flight 215, was canceled.

Following the agents directions, I went down to the customer service area. There were probably 100 - 150 people in line. I waited in line there until just after midnight. Again, not a single announcement, check, explanation, etc. Nothing to show that anyone even cared. And, while I am relatively healthy for my age, I noticed that no one checked with the elderly people or the people traveling with small children to see if they needed anything.

At just after midnight, while I was still about 30 people back from the counter (and there were probably 100 – 150 people behind me), a customer service agent said that the counter was closing in 15 minutes (at 12:15 am) and that all people would be handled at the baggage claim desk. He told us to go down there and he would be sending all the customer service agents down there.

I specifically asked him if we went down there would be we be able to come back into the secured area. “Of course,” he said. So I, and probably another 30-50 people when downstairs (out through security).

Looking back at it, I can only assume that the UA Rep who told us to go downstairs was intentionally trying to get rid of as many people as possible so they didn't have to deal with us. (As an additional note, I found out later from another passenger that they didn't close the customer service desk and that additional people were added to handle the remaining passengers.)

What I found when I got downstairs (with the other passengers that went):

- The woman in baggage claim had no idea why were were sent down there.
- She couldn't (or didn't) issue me a boarding pass for my next flight (and the boarding pass machines closed at midnight).
- She didn't know (or indicate she knew) about all the delays.
- She made NO offer of any kind of assistance. When I asked about hotel vouchers she handed me a coupon good for discounts with an 800 number on it. That's it.
- No other staff were sent down to handle the people in line.
- Security was closed, so no one could go back into the secure area.

I ended up sleeping on a bench in the baggage claim area. No security, freezing, no offer of a blanket or pillow. Nothing. There were others also sleeping there; including those who didn't have space on a bench or rug, who were sleeping on the marble floor.

In the morning (around 3:30 am – after about 1 ½ hours of semi-sleep), security people started arriving. I got up and at 4:00 got a boarding pass from the machine when it opened. Then I went to Security and got in ANOTHER line – my 4<sup>th</sup> for this trip. Turns out security opens at 3:45 for the employees, but not until 4:30 for passengers. However, the line was sufficiently long that they did open up a little early.

I got some warm tea and looked for my gate. B16, and the end of the B concourse. I went down there and bunked down on the bench to get a little more sleep before my flight (Flight 549), which was scheduled to board at 7:50 am.

At 7:30 I woke up (alarm on my phone) to get ready to board. The area was pretty quiet and there was no one at the ticket counter, so I decided to check. My gate had been changed from B16 to C19. Not a single announcement was made. (I spoke with another woman who was in a similar situation and she said she found out about the gate change because she overheard some other people talking. She also almost missed the flight.)

I grabbed my stuff and hustled down to the other concourse. I arrived as the flight was in the process of boarding. So I got on the plane, which did leave on time, and was shortly winging my way to Portland.

Arriving in Portland, I went to baggage claim to get my bags. They weren't on the carousel.

I went to the Baggage Claim office to check, thinking they might have come in on the flight the night before. A woman at baggage claim announced that if we were originally scheduled on Flight 215, to bring her the stubs as they were on a special truck or cart in the back. She took my ticket stubs and went to check. She didn't find them and said they were "on the carousel". They were not – I had just been watching the carousel for the past 20 minutes (while my daughter and grandson drove around the airport 6 times). Okay then, she told me to "Please stand in line." I lost it.

A manager came down and his first words were "I understand you don't want to stand in line". Yeah. I was extremely upset (and tired, and hungry and really, really, really pissed off about the way things were handled.) I was just in the process of ranting about my past 24 hours in the care of United Airlines when the woman brought my bags out. The manager asked her where they had been and she said they "were on the belt" – that was a complete lie.

I can't tell you how happy I was to get out of there.

As I said in the beginning of this letter, I don't hold United Airlines accountable for the flights delayed due to weather. I don't even hold UA responsible for the fact that I (and many others ended up sleeping in the airport).

What I find absolutely unbelievable is the lack of communication, bad and wrong directions, and absolute lack of any kind of care for fellow human beings that was displayed by the UA staff in handling the situation. In specific:

- No announcements when Flight 215 was delayed.
- No announcements or explanations to those whose flights were delayed on how things were to be handled.
- Only 1 ticket agent at the gate handling all the confirmed, re-routed, and standby passengers (so not everyone was handled).
- I wasn't able to find out about my standby on Flight 345 (why didn't I get on the plane when I was #10 on the list as of 3:00 pm .... 8 hours earlier?).
- No announcements when there were over 100 people in line to see Customer Service and it was getting late.
- No announcements asking if anyone had health or other concerns.

- Sending people to Baggage Claim with the statement that the counter would be closed in 15 minutes. I found out from another passenger after deplaning in Portland the next day that the customer service counter wasn't closed (in fact, more people were added) and that there were blankets and pillows handed out (although she found that out from another passenger, not from customer service).
- Saying that we could get back into the security area. Security was closed at 11:00 pm; the staff should have known that. (One woman went down while her husband was still in the secure area and then couldn't get back to him.)
- Not advising the poor woman in Baggage Claim that people were being sent down who had delayed and otherwise traumatic flying experience.
- Doing NOTHING to assist those who ended up in baggage claim with no way to get back – no blankets, pillows, etc.
- Arriving in Portland and getting treated like cattle about the bags.
- All told, I spent nearly 4 hours standing in line with no result or help of any kind from any UA personnel.

Excluding time actually on board a plane, from the time I left the ticket counter at the Burlington Airport (about 3:30 pm) until I arrived in Portland almost exactly 24 hours later, I heard NO announcements or explanations about the situation, only 3 UA service people spoke to me personally (and all 3 gave no or bad information) and NOT ONE SINGLE UNITED AIRLINES CUSTOMER SERVICE PERSON acted like they cared if I lived or died there in the Chicago airport.

I wouldn't have taken much to make it all be okay. Weather happens. An announcement of which flights were canceled and the various options available to me would have given me choices. If the customer service people had made ANY acknowledgement of the situation and said one kind word – just knowing someone cares, even if they can't do anything about it would have made a big difference to me. A blanket and a pillow and a reasonably safe place to sleep (knowing there were people watching out for me) would have been very nice. An offer of a danish or a coffee or juice would have been very pleasant.

It wouldn't have taken much. What I (and many others got) was nothing --- or even worse than nothing.

Sincerely,

Marie Gale