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LARRY YANG is a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center with a master's degree in Law and practices before California State Courts, United States District Courts, the California Appeals for the 9th Circuit and U.S. Bankruptcy Courts.

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US airlines took some hassle out of flying in 2008

WASHINGTON—US air carriers led by Hawaiian Airlines took some of the hassle out of flying last year.

The airline industry had its best performance in four years in 2008, private researchers said Monday, April 6, in their annual study of airline quality, based on government statistics.

Right behind Hawaiian in the overall ratings of 17 airlines were AirTran Airways and JetBlue Airways. The legacy airlines—AMR Corp.'s American, Continental, Delta and UAL Corp.'s United—were clustered in the middle, while regional air carriers filled out the bottom rungs.

After its worst year for customer complaints in more than a decade in 2007, the airline industry last year flew fewer people but treated them better, arriving on time more often and losing fewer bags. Passengers also were not as apt to be bumped from flights by overbooking, which was a big problem when airlines were running at or over capacity.

The downside: Less flights, higher prices—some airlines now charge extra for any luggage—and fewer frills.

The study found consumer complaints dipped from 1.42 per 100,000 passengers in 2007 to 1.15

in 2008. Southwest Airlines had the best rate, only 0.25 complaints per 100,000 passengers; US Airways had the worst rate, 2.25.

Half of all complaints involved baggage or flight problems such as cancellations, delays or other schedule deviations.

The average on-time performance last year was 3 percentage points better than the year before, yet nearly one-quarter of all flights were late. The study said 12 airlines improved from the previous year, but only three airlines had better than an 80 percent on-time rate: Hawaiian, 90 percent; Southwest, 80.5 percent; and US Airways, 80.1 percent.

American, the nation's largest air carrier as measured by passengers flown the most miles, had the worst record, arriving on time only 69.8 percent of the time.

The rate of passengers denied boardings—usually bumpings due to overbooking—dipped slightly, from 1.14 per 10,000 passengers to 1.1 in 2008. Jet Blue had the lowest rate for the second year in a row, 0.01 per 10,000 passengers; Atlantic Southeast Airlines had the highest rate, 3.89.

All the airlines did a better job handling passengers' baggage. The mishandled baggage rate fell from 7.01 bags per 1,000 passengers in 2007 to 5.19 bags in 2008.

AirTran did the best job, with 2.87 mishandled bags per 1,000 passengers; American Eagle Airlines, which operates regional flights for American Airlines, did the worst, at 9.89.

The study, compiled annually since 1991, is based on Transportation Department statistics for airlines that carry at least 1 percent of the passengers who flew domestically last year.

The research is sponsored by St. Louis University in Missouri and by Wichita State University in Kansas.

The improved performance was not surprising because 2007 was the worst year for airlines in the study, researchers said.

The aviation system suffered close to a meltdown in 2007 as domestic carriers recorded 770 million passengers—the busiest year for air travel since before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Aviation experts said the air transport system had reached capacity.

There were 741 million passengers in 2008, and airlines are reporting weak travel demand through the first quarter of this year.

Co-author Brent Bowen, chairman of aviation science at St. Louis University's Parks College, said airlines are suffering from the poor economy despite lower oil prices.

"It remains to be seen if the airlines can benefit from lower oil prices alongside a severe drop in passenger revenue this year," Bowen said.

Dean Headley, an associate professor of marketing at Wichita State and co-author, urged Congress to take advantage of this "breathing room" to move forward on a system that would replace decades-old radar technology with satellite-based technology.

That new system is forecast to increase air transportation system capacity by enabling planes to fly closer together and more directly to their destinations, saving time and fuel.

"It's crazy to think we can keep going the way we were going with the volume of planes we have in the air," Headley said. (AP)

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The Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles invites proposals from qualified, experienced Program/Project Management firms to provide Program/Project Management services to the Authority for the planning, administration and development of its capital asset projects involved in Federal stimulus funding and other capital projects including redevelopment and new development. Copies of the RFP may be obtained beginning April 1, 2009 online at www.hacla.org/ps, or by calling (213) 252-5405. Proposals will be accepted until 2:00 P.M., May 1, 2009.

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