

Cancelled flights and airport chaos: Hordes in the Abyss and Beating the Lines

INTRODUCTION

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Among the truths we hold to be self evident, does everyone being equal have to pertain to stranded travelers? I'm pretty sure Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson weren't thinking about travel disruptions when they drafted the self evident truths into what is now the United States Declaration of Independence. I'm even more certain that centuries earlier the biblical scholars weren't thinking about travel as they scribed similar views but in terms of everyone being equal in the eyes with their chosen Gods. Perhaps that's why it would be hard to find anything more equalizing than how life plays out during a travel disruption caused by an Act of God (AOG). But is it really necessary that everyone be subjected to equal treatment when travel plans blow up? I'm not suggesting anything discriminatory or unfair. I'm suggesting perhaps there could be a choosable path less traveled, available to anyone, that leads to accelerated certainty. An outcome more responsive than simply waiting for whatever happens next in the great abyss of everyone else. That's the question we attempt to address through this paper. To that end, for the sake of this paper and the underpinning research behind it, let's define travel disruption as being what happens to travel plans in the face of what in contract law is commonly referred to as force majeure. For clarity, here's the definition of force majeure according to Merriam Webster:

force majeure (forss-mah-ZHUR) noun (French). 1: superior or irresistible force; 2: an event or effect that cannot be reasonably anticipated or controlled.

In the travel industry, force majeure denotes a cause, circumstance or extraordinary event that disrupts travel on a large scale. Things like storms, earthquakes, volcanos and other "Acts of God" all create uncontrollable circumstances known as force majeure. Also falling into the force majeure greatest hits collection are events like political unrest, strikes, riots, crime, epidemics and terrorism. While events as common place as gate delays and aircraft mechanical issues can certainly cause small scale, localized disruptions of travel, this paper deals with the big stuff. Large scale travel disruptions affecting large masses of people across multiple airports and wide geographic spectrums.

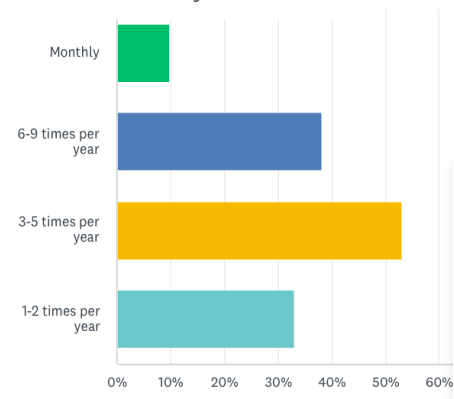
One of my favorite movies, Planes, Trains and Automobiles¹, presents travel disruption at its most hilariousness. It portrays travel disruption as a great equalizer among people. No person is more important than the next. Everyone is subject to the same pain and inconvenience. In the film you have a Madison Avenue advertising executive, Steve Martin, being treated exactly the same as a shower curtain salesman, John Candy, as together they muddle their way through a weather related travel disruption disaster in the days leading up to Thanksgiving, one of the most heavily traveled holidays in the United States. Cancelled flights, sold out hotels and motels, and car rental options that are limited to say the least, anyone who has ever flown anywhere has been there in this travelogue from hell. How many times while you were in those moments did you look around thinking how you would do pretty much anything to be anywhere but where you are. How much would you pay for a spot at the front of the line or at the top of the phone queue as people wait to book alternative plans. How about that last row, middle seat that doesn't recline, snuggled amidst that hygiene challenged family with loud kids...YES, I'LL TAKE THAT SEAT thank you very much! What's wrong with that picture? You're in it and there's seemingly nothing you can do about it.

Or is there? That's what this paper is all about.

This paper offers some thoughts, grounded in research, on how to mitigate and solve for what happens with travelers during force majeure driven travel disruption events. The team at safetravelRX commissioned this work because they believe they have an idea for a bespoke service intended to minimize the effort it takes to get you where you want to go, under the most extenuating circumstances, in the shortest amount of time with the least amount of resistance. But more on that idea later as well as some thoughts on alternative service models for consideration.

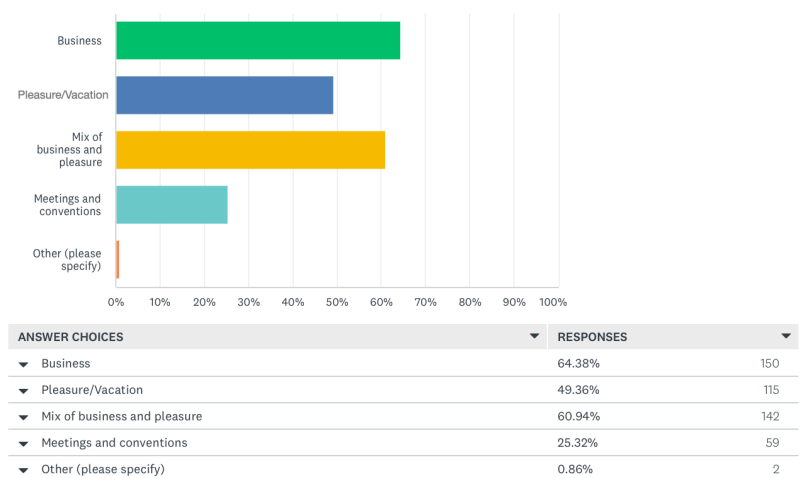
The research behind this paper began with a survey distributed to more than

How often do you travel?



500 people, all traveling by air at least once per year for whatever purposes. Roughly half of the respondents were derived from the In the Black Group (ITBG) database amassed over the years

What is generally your purpose for traveling? (check all that apply)



¹ Written and Produced by John Hughes, Distributed by Paramount Pictures November 25, 1987

from travel industry advisory clients, independent contractors (ICs) and, collectively, their consenting traveling customers. This group of respondents skews towards business travel and a mix of travel for both business/pleasure. They are largely 25-65 years of age, consisting of mid to high net worth individuals, living mostly in the northeastern part of the United States. In addition to the ITBG base we also purchased a 250 person survey audience from Survey Monkey² who describe their respondents as being aged 18-99, of all income brackets, residing throughout the United States. In all, we received feedback from just over 450 people who graciously completed a 15 point questionnaire on the topic of travel disruption.

So without further ado, welcome to my first paper for 2025. For those of you familiar with my writing style, this paper is set to be the page turner that you have come to expect. For those not familiar, welcome to my world. This piece should relate to your own personal experiences and will hopefully exceed your expectations. Lots of facts. No shortage of opinions. New and disruptive ideas. All the usual jazz that people have come to expect from a paper written by yours truly.

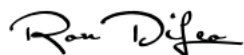


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BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

First, here's the **problem** we are looking to solve:

We live in a travel universe with no shortage of zippy technology, more and more fueled by artificial intelligence (AI) that is an art and science that I've yet to find anyone fully understands. AI reminds me of the old parable coined by Dan Ariely, Duke Professor and three time New York Times Best Selling Author, comparing Big Data to teenage sex³:

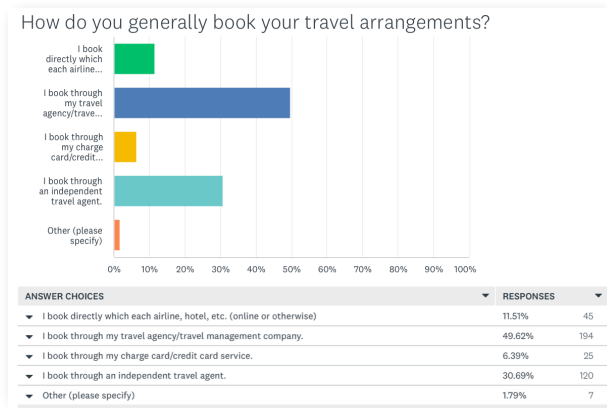
- ✓ Everyone talks about it.
- ✓ Nobody really knows how to do it.
- ✓ Everyone thinks everyone else is doing it.
- ✓ So everyone claims they're doing it.

But in our research we couldn't find anyone even thinking about AI as a solution for dealing with disrupted travel service needs. One would think that with so many simultaneous equations likely required to solve this issue, AI seems like a sure bet. Yet only human intelligence continues to be applied. A call from a person in need to a person that can enable assistance while only solving one traveler circumstance at a time. That's pretty much where we are and where it seems we will be for at least the

² Copyright © 1999-2024 SurveyMonkey

³ Twitter post January, 2013

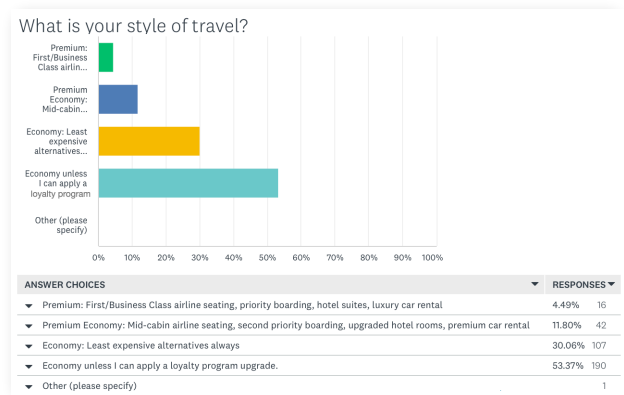
foreseeable future. Too many people calling too few people for assistance and no discernible way to prioritize calls.



Got it. Duly noted.

Airline and credit card loyalty programs seemed like a good place to start in terms of discovering some best practices around organizing a process around status based prioritization. These programs are applied through a dizzying array of overlapping

and sometimes interdependent schemes but they are largely disconnected beyond the marketing purpose that are designed to serve. These programs are so complex, entire businesses such as The Points Guy™ have been built solely to decipher and optimize benefits of the various programs available throughout the marketplace. What we quickly learned through our research, however, is that when travel stuff hits the fan, none of any of these programs seem to make much of a difference. Even if you are in the top top, “double secret probation” level of rarified air status with the any given airline, no implied VIP status seems to make much more than a negligible difference when the disruption chips are down. What really matters in the end is who you are able to talk to and how fast can you get to them. In other words, being in the right place at the right time. Whether that means connecting with that “I know a guy” person who has influence or being the person who serendipitously makes their way to the front of the new line opening just now to assist passengers...there’s not much more to having a winning hand than right place, right time dynamics.



In order to ground our research in data we reached out to our respondents, posing questions they may ask themselves when faced with a travel disruption at the airport:

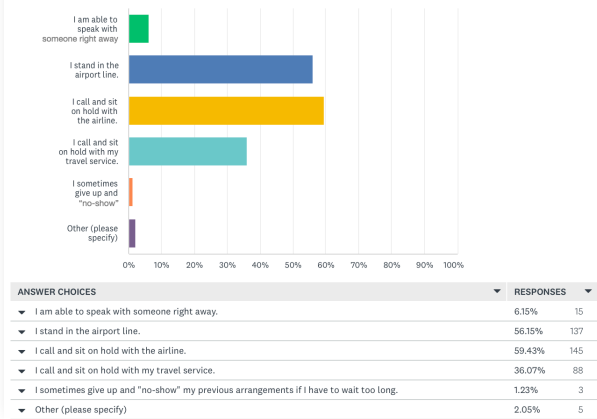
- ☐ “Should I wait in the line at the gate and await further instructions or return to the main check-in area?”
- ☐ “Should I call my travel agency/travel management company emergency service?”
- ☐ “My travel agent gave me their direct number and said I could call them anytime 24/7...is that the call I should make?”
- ☐ “Should I just call the airline directly since I have special status?”

- ☉ “I paid for my existing tickets through my credit card company. but they didn’t book my flights. Can they just book me something now?”
- ☉ “My credit card company enrolled me in some fancy club membership for VIPs... maybe I should call them?”

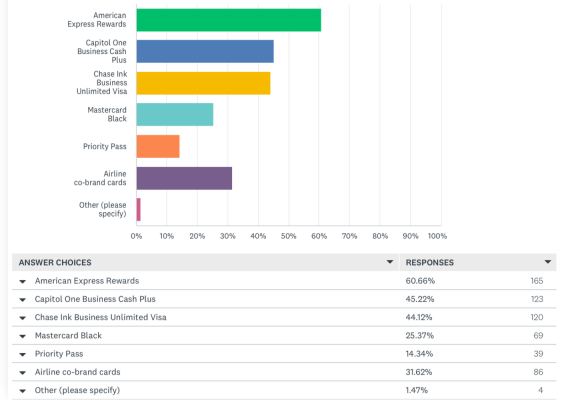
When we asked them what they do when facing circumstances like this we found that many choose at least two of these options at a time, like calling somewhere while standing in line (DUH). And if they’re traveling with a companion, the companion also exercises two or more different options at a time in a race to see who gets through first to someone who can achieve nirvana (double DUH).

Here’s the reality: There are a finite number of seats available on a finite number of aircraft on a finite number of airlines flying between any two airports. When you take into account potential flight connections rather than non-stop flights from where you are to where you want to be, your options increase exponentially. All of those flight

What has generally been your experience when you've sought flight assistance during a travel disruption? (check all that apply)



Besides your airline loyalty programs, what are your membership program enrollments? (check all that apply)

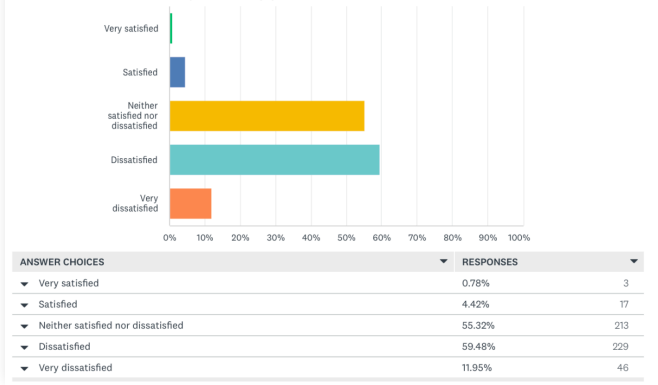


possibilities and combinations are housed in a series of inventory management systems imbedded in global distribution systems (GDS) utilized universally by airlines. The systems at the gate and main check-in counters all draw from that same GDS inventory. The credit card travel counselors, your travel agent and your travel agency services all use systems drawing from the same GDS inventory as well. The VIP membership services are also plugged into those same systems. In short, the race isn't

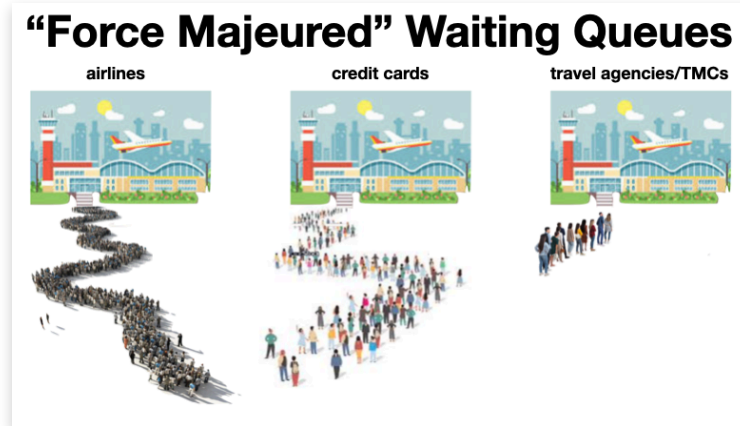
as much about who you call, as it is about who gains access to that seat inventory first. Even the “I know a guy” person has to deal with someone with access to the GDS inventory.

So let’s talk about your “phoning a friend” alternatives when under travel duress and where you can call. If you call an airline directly you are likely looking at up to three hours to connect

What is your level of satisfaction with your current membership benefits in terms of travel disruption support?



with a live service counselor. They are dealing with stuck people like you looking for the next flight(s) out of Dodge in addition to dealing with their “business as usual” calls. They are unable to prioritize calls based on the urgency of any given circumstance so you are going to be in a holding queue waiting for the next available agent for as long as it takes. There may exist special phone numbers for higher level status flyers but when force majeure strikes it is “one for all” time and everyone is taking whatever is the next call in the queue.



With the credit card companies, you’re probably looking at more like a 1-2 hours wait because less people are calling them in those bleak moments. But their agents are typically not travel specialists so the call handling time may take a bit longer. Those agents are trained to be generalists because they’re dealing with both credit card issues and travel services. Many

of our respondents pay a premium to be part of credit card and VIP membership services but even with those services you will face up to a one hour wait. They are dealing with a comparatively smaller size audience seeking assistance but they also have proportionately less people available to serve.

Travel agencies and travel management company (TMC) emergency services serve the smallest size population of potentially disrupted callers. But, like the membership groups, they have a smaller force providing assistance and a wait of up to an hour is not uncommon. Many agencies and TMCs also offer membership programs of sorts for their VIP/executive services but there will still be a wait longer than anyone thinks is reasonable.

Minimizing wait time is the out loud secret to being in the right place at the right time because everyone ahead of you in line or in the call waiting queue is potentially chasing the same seat(s) as you and we all know there’s absolutely no difference between you, the Madison Avenue advertising executive, or the shower curtain salesman. It’s all about who gets there first.

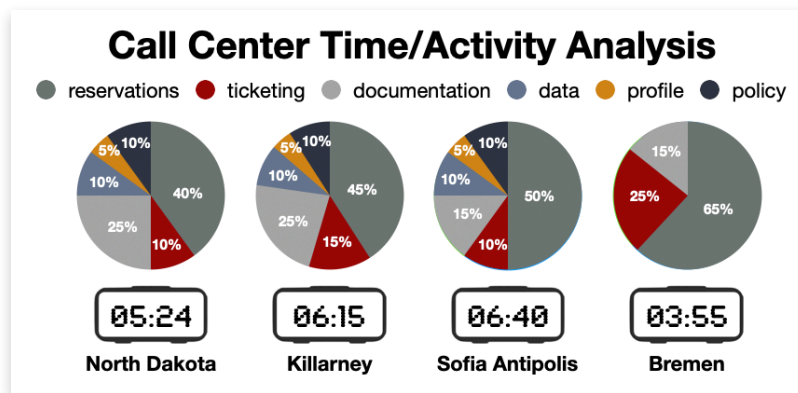
So you might be asking yourself, why is there so much of a wait everywhere? Don’t these services anticipate storms and staff themselves accordingly? Are they even hiring the right amount of people to begin with?

These are all reasonable questions but the answers are complex. No call center service can afford to have people sitting around staring at phones waiting for them to ring. The call center world is a small margin business for even the most efficient service providers. Call centers staff for cycles of activity that are fairly predictable for business-as-usual days. They staff up for national holidays like Thanksgiving in the

US, and other festive holidays. They might even staff differently for hurricane seasons. But just like in Monty Python’s famous “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition” sketch⁴, nobody expects force majeure events. After all, if you can anticipate something that’s coming unexpectedly it’s probably not going to qualify as a force majeure, at least according to Merriam Webster. So when unexpected events take place and swarms of unanticipated calls blanket these call centers, these operations move into an all hands Plan B formation which helps but is rarely enough. On the call center side of the equation everyone moves as quickly as they can. They know exactly how many calls are waiting, how long is every call and what everyone is talking about, and how many people quit and hang up before getting through. They rush to move all of those numbers in the right direction but the results are generally unhappy callers who often voice their frustrations once they finally get someone to help which only serves to slow the process down even further.

SOLUTIONS

Okay, we’ve described enough of the problem and hopefully it’s easy to see how everything builds upon itself and layers into a lasagna map of grief compounding the actual trip disruption tension at the root of it all. Without taking you into the depths of how to run a call center, let’s strip everything down and take a look at all that transpires on any given travel disruption call.



Several of my In the Black Group colleagues and I happen to have had first hand experience in managing travel oriented call centers in several parts of the world: North Dakota (United States) servicing the US and UK, Killarney (Ireland) servicing the US, UK and Europe, and, Sophia Antipolis (France) servicing Europe. These centers

provide primarily corporate travel services to clients of large multinational TMCs headquartered in the US, UK and Europe. Our German colleague has had oversight for a call center business in Bremen, Germany largely providing 24/7 reservations services for several European based airlines. While each of us managed these functions at an executive level we were all very tuned into the front line mechanics of running these asset heavy components of our businesses. As part of the research for this paper each of us reached into our archives and found former colleagues who were able to produce performance statistics. In the chart above you will find a subset of some of the key performance indicators (KPIs) we were able to mine. What the chart reflects are average handling times (AHT) for each call center as well as the percentage of time spent on five different sets of call disciplines. The results of these analysis begin to shape a narrative around how the counselors spend their time on each call.

⁴© Monty Python’s Flying Circus 1970

As you can see in the data, much of the time counselors spend on each call isn't just about making bookings and issuing a ticket. A great deal of time is spent documenting all of what is discussed on a call and all the corporate client policies and procedures that go into issuing or reissuing tickets. Have a look at how much more efficient the Bremen calls are than the other call centers. That's because they are serving airline customers and don't need to worry about travel policies and traveler reporting requirements. They also spend less time on refunding/reissuing tickets because they only do so if there is a non-refundable or penalty ticket in the mix.

Imagine how many more calls a counselor could take if all they needed to do was book reservations and issue tickets! But lest we not get ahead of ourselves.

So to recap, we are seeking solutions on how to better deal with travel disruptions caused by the effects of force majeure in its various forms. We can't control force majeure but we need to be better prepared for how to deal with the resulting service bruises they bring about. This requires solving for two problems:

- ⊖ Traveler Problem: Traveler panic and anxiety as everyone chases what they are sure to be the last seats on the next flight, the last room in a hotel and the last car to rent in the parking lot. They need somewhere to turn for expeditious support and a path out of the chaos. This creates a surge of calls to various travel service providers none of which are prepared for any significant onslaughts. These surges cause excessive waiting and stress about potential outcomes.
- ⊖ Travel Service Provider Problem: Profit margins are too thin for call centers to always be staffed to the requirements of their worst case force majeure scenarios. Through trial, error and experience, they are left to settle for some form of a one-size-fits-all staffing approach that finds them slightly overstaffed when call volumes are normal but significantly understaffed for force majeure driven levels of activity. The overstaffed scenario makes shareholders unhappy and the understaffed scenario makes customers unhappy. In short, they can rarely please everyone and most times can't please anyone. They need a new model that spreads the burden of cost to the extent they can at least please most of the people some of the time.

Duly framed. We have the problems surrounded. Let's move the discussion to what a new model might look like that somehow connects at least some of these dots. We came up with two possible solutions, both involving the traveler paying some form of a premium for comparatively more responsive service:

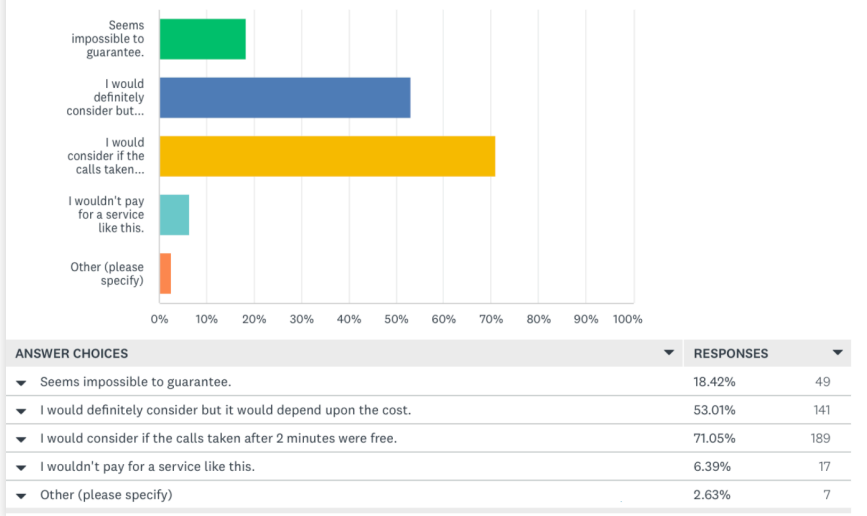
- ⊖ Membership Model: Travelers pay an annual fee, and perhaps a cost per call, to know that their calls will always be answered within some pre-defined acceptable amount of time if not immediately. Call centers and their shareholders will be happy with this approach because they will be able to afford staff for the worst case force majeure scenario. They may also be able to deploy those staff for other functions such as outsourced data entry or sales support functions such as cold calling. Travelers will be happy because there are more people available to assist.
- ⊖ Pay to Play-as-You-Go Model: Travelers pay no membership fee but simply pay a cost per call when they are in a hurry and can't wait. The cost per call will be

higher in this model than what may be in the membership model but they know where to find just-in-time (JIT) support when they need it without the upfront membership cost.

Again, just as in the membership model, call centers will be happy because they will be able to staff for the worst case force majeure scenario and possibly some revenue generative outsource functions. Travelers will be happy to be gaining assistance in a fraction of the time it would take otherwise.

So now there are

How would you feel about subscribing to a fee based membership that guarantees to deliver optimal alternatives during a travel disruption within 2 minutes of reaching out for help?

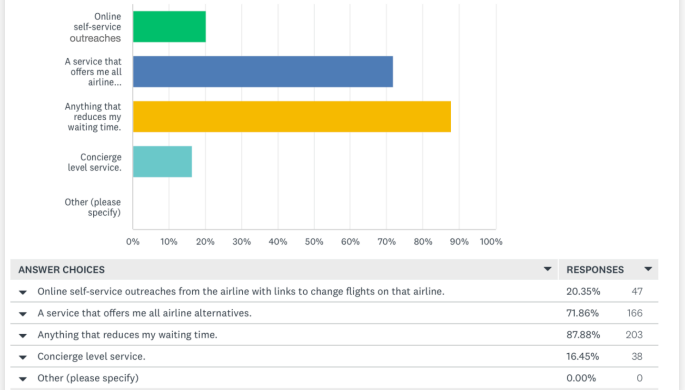


choices for everyone besides what exists today. As part of our research for this paper we asked our survey audience about their willingness to pay a premium to have only a minimal if any wait for assistance and under what conditions.

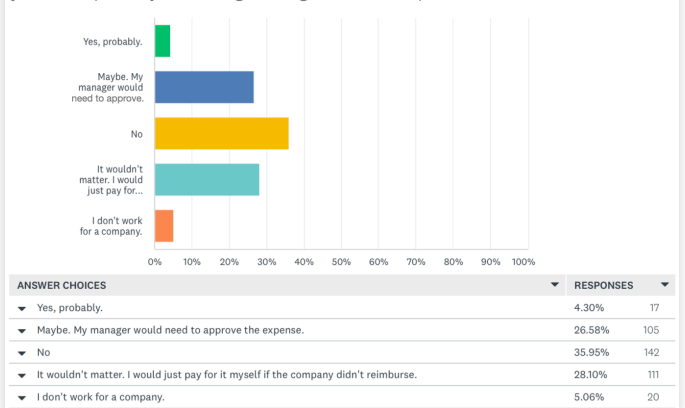
As you can see from the first chart above, there is natural skepticism around a traveler's willingness to pay and have guarantees around service. Collectively the story being told by the pay-to-play analysis is that people's expectations were pretty straight forward. Basically, "I want my call answered quickly. I want the complete picture of what are my options. And then just get me out of here."

Anticipating that business travelers would be most likely to pay a premium for comparatively instant gratification, we asked about their ability to have their company

What membership features would you like to see more of in terms of travel disruption solutions? (check all the apply)



Do you think your company would reimburse you for calls that provided you with priority handling during travel disruptions?



reimburse them for the premium. Judging from the responses to this question, people seem to be mostly willing to pay regardless of whether their companies would allow reimbursement in their travel policy. It's important to note that most TMCs charge \$50-125 per call for emergency services, so a business traveler should not be left holding the bill for a similarly priced pay-to-play service, albeit without the corporate policy and reporting actions.

CONCLUSIONS

To be sure, there are risks around these pay-to-play models. Financially the risk falls mostly on the call centers in terms of the advance investment requirements that come with any "build it and they will come" business speculation. In other words what happens if they build the model and nobody calls. No amount of research is going to mitigate this risk but think back again on that last time you were in a force majeure moment and how much you would have paid to be anywhere else. Our bet is if people know there's a place to call, the calls will come. Our conclusion is this is a solid bet.

For travelers the risk is they pay the premium, speak with a counselor posthaste, but don't like the choices available to them. It doesn't take a crystal ball, however, to envision what choices might have been made available to them had they waited an hour, or two, or three to speak with someone else without paying a premium. They know intuitively that had they waited, everyone ahead of them in the line will have already picked everything over. Waiting is free but most people's time is worth more than that especially in that force majeure moment. Travelers unable to internalize that will most likely not make the call, nor should they. More space for everyone else.

It's important to note that travel agencies and travel management companies (TMCs) provide carefully crafted, meaningful emergency services for their corporate clients. As was mentioned previously, they charge a cost per call but they too are subject to service delays during force majeure events. The reason behind the wait is two-fold. First, they are performing corporate services such as applying special corporate programs like airfares and hotel rates negotiated by their clients. They explain policy when necessary and curb the options they present accordingly. They document policy infractions and quantify them for reporting purposes. They manage ticket exchanges and process charges or refunds for incremental differences, all as part of issuing a simple ticket. This all takes time which corporate buyers are willing to pay for when business is usual but generally are not willing to pay for in terms of staffing to unanticipated surges in call demand. Of all of the options available to business travelers, the travel agency/TMC alternative will likely be the most expeditious path in a force majeure event, but there will still be long waits when nature strikes. In the end, managing surging call volumes well comes down to whether someone pays out of pocket for special handling sooner or pays later with time as their currency. In other words, you can pay now or pay later but someone has to pay. The math is easy and compellingly straight forward.

We also discussed previously the work of Independent Contractors (ICs) who are accounted for in the ITBG data. This swath of business exists for both business and leisure travel. ICs basically have their own client books of business and often set themselves up to work under the commission and support umbrella of large travel agencies/TMCs or agency networks. It is not uncommon for ICs to operate on a 24/7 basis with their clientele rather than having their customers speaking with their host agency's emergency after hours service. An IC can be one person or several in collaboration. Their clients can generally get through to them without a great deal of waiting but these ICs are people chasing solutions on behalf of their customers. These are the "I know a guy" people referenced earlier. In the end, however, being a middle-person puts the ICs at the same place in queue as you. Their customers pick up some convenience dealing through their IC but not necessarily a time advantage.

Bringing all of this back to safetravelRX and their decision to sponsor this paper and the underlying research. SafetravelRX are considering the launch of a new service, made available through their free-to-download app, that would connect travelers to a 24/7 service center consisting solely of travel experienced counselors. Their stated objective would be to present the most immediate and convenient options for flights, hotels and ground transportation available to callers. In this scenario they will confirm the space, issue tickets and book hotel and car rental reservations. They will not offer ticket exchanges or refunds. They will not take into account travel policies or corporate reporting. They'll be singularly focused on booking, ticketing and sending callers on their way. Our research tells us safetravelRX should be able to do all of that in less than half the time it would take an ordinary call with any other service. They are essentially building a service solely for the purposes of force majeure events.

So how about that Spanish Inquisition!

About safetravelRX and the In The Black Group

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