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2013 airline performance best ever, according to Airline Quality Rating; Virgin America still No. 1

Airline performance in 2013 was the highest since the Airline Quality Rating started in 1991. The 24th annual Airline Quality Rating was released today (Monday, April 7) at the National Press Club.

Of the 15 carriers rated for performance in both 2012 and 2013, eight airlines improved, six airlines declined and one is new to the rankings.

The Airline Quality Rating (AQR) is a joint research project funded as part of faculty research activities at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kan., and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott, Ariz., campus.

The industry improved in two of the four elements of the AQR: involuntary denied boardings and customer complaints. However, performance declined in on-time performance and baggage handling in 2013.

The airline industry has performed well in recent years, according to the researchers. In addition to 2013 being the best year ever, Dean Headley, associate professor of marketing at the W. Frank Barton School of Business at Wichita State University, says the strong performance by Delta shows that a large, merged airline is able to compete with the best performing smaller airline.

"Bigger hasn't always been better, but in Delta's case we are seeing a large airline perform at levels usually only seen by smaller low-fare carriers."

The AQR score reflects commendable efforts by the airline industry to serve customers in a capacity-limited air travel system.

"When you look at the past 14 years, you find that the airline industry performs most efficiently when the system isn't stressed by high passenger volume and high number of airplanes in the air," said Headley. "With continued capacity limits and consolidation, one would hope that a less congested system would perform better."

"The challenge is whether airline performance quality improvements at this level can be maintained as more people choose to fly. Or does the infrastructure and air traffic control technology limit what the airlines can actually do?"

Brent Bowen, dean of College of Aviation at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Prescott, Ariz., campus, said, "While airline operational performance is at an all-time record high, this does not translate to customers being happy."

"Because airlines are solving operational issues and advancing in AQR elements, it is time to begin a new focus on serving travelers and expanding customer service."

"These results show that airlines that intend to do better, are doing better and improving. Those losing focus have declined."

“With all this good news, the flying public should be informed of and alarmed about the very real pilot shortage caused by congressional mandate and the looming personnel crisis in Air Traffic Control because of arbitrarily changing hiring rules that eliminate the most qualified applicants,” said Bowen.

An electronic version of the full report, with details on each airline, is available at <http://airlinequalityrating.com>.

Inside this year's rating

Below is the 2013 numerical ranking of the nation's leading 15 airlines, according to the Airline Quality Rating, with the 2012 ranking in parentheses:

1. Virgin America (1)
2. JetBlue (2)
3. Hawaiian (5)
4. Delta (4)
5. Alaska (6)
6. Endeavor (new to the rankings this year; formerly Pinnacle)
7. US Airways (9)
8. Southwest (8)
9. American (10)
10. AirTran (3)
11. Frontier (7)
12. United (14)
13. ExpressJet (13)
14. SkyWest (12)
15. American Eagle (11)

Virgin America and JetBlue remained No. 1 and 2 in 2013. Hawaiian, US Airways and United all improved two spots in the rating, to No. 3, 7 and 12 respectively. The biggest drop was AirTran from No. 3 to 10. Frontier and American Eagle each dropped four spots in the rating for 2013.

On-time performance

Hawaiian Airlines had the best on-time performance (93.3 percent) for 2013, and American Eagle had the worst (72.1 percent).

Only two airlines improved their on-time arrival performance in 2013. Six of the 15 airlines rated had an on-time arrival percentage of better than 80 percent. On-time performance for the industry in 2013 was 78.4 percent compared to 81.8 percent in 2012.

Denied boardings

JetBlue and Virgin America are clearly the industry leaders in avoiding denied boarding incidents with a rate of 0.01 and 0.04 per 10,000 passengers, respectively. SkyWest had the highest involuntary denied boarding rate at 2.55 per 10,000 passengers.

Eight airlines improved their denied boardings rate in 2013. United recorded the greatest improvement, and Frontier had the largest decline.

Overall, the industry had 0.89 denied boardings per 10,000 passengers in 2013, compared to 0.97 in 2012.

Baggage handling

Virgin America had the best baggage handling rate (0.97 mishandled bags per 1,000 passengers) of all airlines, and American Eagle had the worst baggage handling rate (5.90 mishandled bags per 1,000 passengers).

Only five airlines had improved mishandled baggage rates in 2013. The industry rate increased from 3.07 per 1,000 passengers in 2012 to 3.21 in 2013.

Consumer complaints

Southwest again had the lowest consumer complaint rate (0.34 per 100,000 passengers) of all airlines. Frontier had the highest consumer complaint rate (3.09 per 100,000 passengers).

Customer complaints per 100,000 passengers decreased from 1.43 in 2012 to 1.13 in 2013. The majority of complaints to the Department of Transportation were for flight problems (35.9 percent), customer service (14.4 percent) baggage (14.2 percent) and reservations, ticketing and boarding (12.8 percent).

More about the Airline Quality Rating

As the nation's most comprehensive study of airline performance quality, the Airline Quality Rating (<http://airlinequalityrating.com>) sets the industry standard, providing consumers and industry watchers a means to compare performance quality among airlines using objective performance-based data.

No other study in the country is based on performance measures like the AQR. Criteria included in the report are screened to meet two basic elements: They must be readily obtainable from published data sources for each airline, and they must be important to consumers regarding airline quality. The resulting criteria include areas such as baggage handling, customer complaints, denied boardings and on-time arrivals.

Reports from consumers to the AQR researchers have become increasingly popular during the past several years, say Bowen and Headley. The co-authors invite the flying public to participate in the Annual Passenger Survey at <http://www.wichita.edu/aqrconsumersurvey>.

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MEDIA NOTES:

Media unable to attend the news conference in Washington, D.C., may receive a copy of the AQR news release on the day of the news conference (April 7) by contacting the following: Joe Kleinsasser, Wichita State University, 316-204-8266 (cell); Lainie Rusco, Wichita State University, 316-978-3409 or lainie.rusco@wichita.edu; or Melanie Hanns, director of university communications, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 386-226-7538, 386-283-0753 (cell) or hannsm@erau.edu.

An electronic version of the full report is available at <http://airlinequalityrating.com>. Click on the "press release" tab to access the ratings directly.

Headley and Bowen will be available for interviews after Monday's news conference. To reach Headley, call the Hilton Garden Inn in Washington, D.C., at 202-783-7800 and ask for the room of Dean Headley. Brent Bowen may be contacted by calling 765-494-7027.

About Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, the world's largest, fully accredited university specializing in aviation and aerospace, is a nonprofit, independent institution offering more than 60 baccalaureate, master's and Ph.D. degree programs in its colleges of Arts and Sciences, Aviation, Business and Engineering. Embry-Riddle educates students at residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Fla., and Prescott, Ariz., and through the Worldwide Campus with more than 150 locations in the United States, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The university is a major research center, seeking solutions to real-world problems in partnership with the aerospace industry, other universities and government agencies. For more information, visit www.embryriddle.edu, follow us on Twitter ([@EmbryRiddle](https://twitter.com/EmbryRiddle)) and www.facebook.com/EmbryRiddleUniversity, and find expert videos at YouTube.com/EmbryRiddleUniv.

About Wichita State University

Since 1895, Wichita State University has been the linchpin of higher education in south-central Kansas by combining a traditional college experience with the advantages of being located in the state's cultural and industrial hub. Together with local government and the Wichita business community, WSU has built one of the most unique partnerships in Kansas, one that over the years has propelled each to new heights. It's a relationship that both supplies the lifeblood of a thriving community and makes it possible to provide the most well-rounded education in the region. In 2012, Wichita State was ranked third among all U.S. universities in money spent on aerospace research and development. For more information, visit www.wichita.edu

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