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Airlines lost 10,000 bags a day in '05

By Marilyn Adams, USA TODAY

U.S. airlines last year lost about 10,000 bags a day on average, the worst performance since 1990.

The rate of lost suitcase reports per 1,000 passengers on flights soared 23% from a year earlier, according to recent numbers from the U.S. Department of Transportation. Among the reasons: a surge in the number of passengers, airline budget cuts, backed-up flights and tighter inspections of luggage.

LOST LUGGAGE

| Airline | Reports per 1,000 passengers | Year-over-year increase |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| US Airways | 9.62 | 81% |
| Delta Air Lines | 7.09 | 37% |
| American Airlines | 5.92 | 25% |
| Northwest Airlines | 4.86 | 15% |
| America West Airlines | 4.33 | 9% |
| United Airlines | 4.28 | 9% |
| Southwest Airlines | 4.25 | 27% |
| Continental Airlines | 4.12 | 15% |

Source: Dept. of Transportation

In all, passengers filed with airlines more than 3.5 million reports of lost bags, most of which eventually find their way back to owners. Inside the 2005 numbers:

- US Airways, which exited Chapter 11 bankruptcy last year, had the highest lost-bag rate of major carriers.

- Southwest Airlines' rate of lost bags jumped nearly 27%. Southwest blames the airline's cranky new bag systems in Baltimore, Las Vegas and Phoenix.

- Delta Air Lines, third-biggest airline, lost more bags than any other carrier. Its customers filed 573,419 lost bag reports.

Barry Maher, who gives speeches on customer service, was one. Delta lost both his bags last April on a trip from Ontario, Cal., to Roanoke, Va. Maher rushed out to buy a shirt, slacks and underwear so he could give a speech. His bags arrived at his hotel in time for him to return home. On the trip back, Delta lost both bags again. Delta's staff was "uncaring," he says.

Delta spokeswoman Chris Kelly said Delta, now in Chapter 11 bankruptcy, knows its bag system needs work.

"Delta is focused on making significant progress," she said.

US Airways gave flier Rex Greer heartburn last year. The auditor flew US Airways 26 times. It lost his bags six times. He says he's "lucky" because the losses usually happened on his way home.

US Airways customer service chief Anthony Mulé says, "It will get better." US Airways, which merged in bankruptcy with America West, has added ground workers and new equipment for handling bags.

Wine executive David Kelly lost his suitcase when American Airlines canceled his flight to New York last summer but didn't take his bag off the plane. His bag reappeared 48 hours later. This, he says, is why "overhead compartments are always overflowing."

Contributing: Barbara Hansen

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