

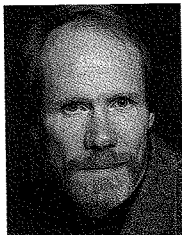
been heard in the U.S., our libel laws would have required him to prove that a statement injurious to his reputation was both false and the product of intent or negligence. But British Commonwealth countries, including Aus-

A much wiser approach was recently adopted by a U.S. Appellate Court when it decided that people can't be sued for libel in every state their Web postings are accessed. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled in favor of

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N O R B T A T R O

Customer service? Give three cheers for Southwest



Treat the customer right and he or she will respond with loyalty and repeat business. It's an old concept and the idea behind frequent-flier programs. But it has fallen off the radar of some airlines.

Except one.

In early January, my wife and I were on a packed flight to Florida. The throttle to one engine stuck in a half-open position, and the pilot told us he would shut down the engine and land in Nashville. Experienced fliers would feel something unusual as the plane adjusted to the situation, but he assured us that the Boeing 737 was designed to fly with one engine.

Except for the emergency trucks along the taxiway, there was nothing unusual about the landing.

We were asked to fill out a form before anyone deplaned. I thought the airline just wanted an accurate passenger list. My wife suspected more.

But neither of us anticipated

what arrived in the mail a few days later: a copy of a letter to all passengers detailing what had gone wrong—plus vouchers for an unrestricted round trip, good for 12 months, on Southwest Airlines.

Contrast that with an experience in August 2001 on an American Airlines flight from Dallas to Santiago, Chile. After two delays at the gate for mechanical problems, the pilot encountered a third, potentially more serious, situation shortly after takeoff: Lights in the cockpit indicated a line was losing fuel. Because the plane was too heavy to land immediately, we circled for the better part of an hour while the crew dumped 80,000 pounds of fuel.

Back on the ground, American decided to put everyone up for the night and substitute another plane.

The next morning, the captain informed passengers of problem No. 4. Like the first problem on the ground the night before, an auxiliary power unit had overheated. This convinced many nervous passengers that they were on the same MD-11 as the night before, and they stormed off the plane.

Most reboarded a few minutes

later, but one who did was questioned twice by airline officials and escorted off the plane by police. We took off 14 hours after the original scheduled departure.

American's response? Nothing.

In his Dec. 23 column on this page ("Crummy service is the root of UAL, McDonald's woes"), *CRAIN's* Editor in Chief Rance Crain recounted a recent incident in which his daughter and her family were yelled at by United Airlines personnel on a flight from Chicago to Orlando, Fla.

My wife and I were on the Southwest flight because a case of food poisoning had forced a last-minute change of plans. The airline's personnel were most helpful—and, unlike many airlines, there was no \$100-per-ticket charge. In fact, we have a modest credit toward another flight.

No airline, with thousands of employees encountering thousands of passengers each day, can be perfect. Any frequent flier can recount bad experiences. But, with fewer customers, staying at the top of a traveler's list is all the more important.

Southwest gets that. American and United don't.

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