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A Wily Road Warrior's Airport Tips

By Frank Luntz

As a corporate and political communications consultant, I regularly fly at least 300,000 miles a year and stay in more than 100 hotel rooms. The thrill of getting that free first-class upgrade wore off long ago. I just want to get through airports as quickly as possible, avoid the long lines at security and waits at the gate, and spend as little time stuffed into an airplane seat as I can. In all my travels, I've gotten wise to ways to save time and money. Here are a few I'd like to share:

— **Know your airport.** Big airports are as different as the cities they're in. Las Vegas is by far the worst, with long security lines that often take 45 minutes, particularly at the newly expanded D Gates (serving American, United (UAUA), and Delta (DAL)). New York's JFK is the toughest airport to navigate if you're switching carriers because there are nine separate terminals.

The easiest airports have connected terminals and multiple security entrances that give you access to virtually every gate after you've gone through security. Philadelphia International Airport and Dallas Fort Worth are two examples. Charlotte, N.C., is relatively compact, and domestic connections are quick and painless. The new terminal in Detroit is large, yet the design makes it easy to get from one gate to another. In St. Louis and Memphis, on the other hand, you walk forever.

Also, most airports let you check in and check luggage up to 30 minutes before takeoff. But don't show up a mere half-hour early in Vegas or at LAX in Los Angeles. You'll miss the 45-minute cutoff, and you won't get a boarding pass. Denver and Miami also have a 45-minute pre-flight deadline to check luggage but require only 30 minutes if you just need a boarding pass.

— **The shortest airport security line is not necessarily the fastest.** Look at the type of people waiting in a line, not the number. A dozen businesspeople will move through security much faster than two families with young children or a tour group of senior citizens. Just remember this equation: One baby carriage equals four typical passengers.

Another tip for moving through security: Aim for the far left or far right scanner lanes. Most people just walk straight ahead and end up waiting longer as a result.

— **Early boarding is not desirable.** On crowded flights, the big planes can take 40 minutes to fully board, forcing you to spend all that extra time in a cramped seat. Unless you're afraid there won't be room in the overhead bins for your carry-on, wait.

Another reason to wait until everyone else has boarded is if you're assigned a middle seat on a flight that isn't full. Once the rest of the plane is seated, chances are you'll be able to change to a window or aisle seat in the back.

— **Planes sometimes close the door to passengers before the posted departure time.** Many carriers would rather have a flight pull away 10 minutes early and leave a customer or two behind than arrive at its destination 10 minutes late. Personally, I have missed more flights this way than for all other reasons combined. The worst offender: US Airways (LCC).

— **Frequent fliers get no preference when flights are canceled.** If you are a frequent flier with a particular airline, you're supposed to have an advantage in getting on that carrier's next flight. But it's first come, first served, baby. The person who gets to any gate agent for the airline first, anywhere in the airport, snags the first empty seats. So if you're standing in a long line at your assigned gate waiting for rebooking, look for an agent at an empty gate.

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