

Airlines' challenge: conquer fear of flying

CONFERENCE LOOKS AT PREPAREDNESS

Heightened security means higher passenger stress, and that's hurting the industry, experts say

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Canadian air travel is among the safest in the world – the challenge is to convince passengers that it is also fun, an industry spokesperson says.

Heightened security means higher stress levels for air travellers, and that is a major worry for airlines, said Warren Everson, vice-president of the Air Transport Association of Canada, a national lobby group for commercial air carriers.

“Older people find airports an intimidating environment,” Everson said yesterday during a break at an international aviation conference in Montreal. “We have to build a more relaxed atmosphere, notwithstanding security.”

The weekend conference, sponsored by the McGill University Institute of Air and Space Law, is the lead-up to the 35th annual assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organization this week in Montreal.

Delegates discussed the current plight of the airline industry as well as increased security costs and preparedness worldwide in the aftermath of 9/11.

Aviation expert Peter Belobaba, a researcher and professor at Concordia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told delegates that the U.S. airline crisis began well before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, with a general economic downturn and customer dissatisfaction.

Canadian airline officials noted a similar change in passenger behaviour and revenues in early 2001, Everson said. “There was the sharpest reduction in business-class travel we have ever seen.”

Larger airlines, like Air Canada, took longer to react to the drop in revenues, paving the way for an explosive growth in low-cost domestic carriers, he added.

Everson applauded the Canadian government for improving travellers' security and peace of mind since Sept. 11, 2001.

“Our goal is to make aviation a hard target for terrorists, and that has been done,” he said.

Among the changes: A national airport screening system to monitor passengers, crew and luggage. Armed air marshalls (undercover RCMP officers) on domestic, international and trans-border flights. Installation of sealed, bullet-proof cockpits.

Perfect security does not exist, Everson noted.

“Canada rates very highly for its security systems, but the ingenuity of the attackers cannot be dismissed.”

