



**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
Chaat Butsunturn, 415-391-7900 x1214  
[cbutsunturn@kearnswest.com](mailto:cbutsunturn@kearnswest.com)  
OR Amanda Roberts, 202-535-7800 x1114  
[aroberts@kearnswest.com](mailto:aroberts@kearnswest.com)

## **ACSI Travel Report: Consumers Happier With Airlines, Prefer Smaller Travel Websites**

*Trio of Hilton, Hyatt and Marriott Tops Hotels; JetBlue Keeps Lead Among Airlines*

**ANN ARBOR, Mich.**, (April 20, 2015) – Passenger satisfaction lifts 2.9 percent for airlines, historically one of the lowest-scoring categories tracked by the [American Customer Satisfaction Index \(ACSI\)](#). Airlines reach an ACSI benchmark of 71 on a scale of 0 to 100 for 2015—approaching the category’s peak score of 72 in 1994. Nevertheless, airlines remain among ACSI’s bottom four categories, ahead of only Internet service providers, subscription television and health insurance.

Although airfares have yet to mirror falling oil prices, travelers give the airline industry higher marks compared with a year ago across many key aspects of the booking and flight experience.

“Airlines are doing a better job of getting travelers to their destinations on time, with less frustration over baggage,” says ACSI Director David VanAmburg. “ACSI findings show that timeliness and baggage handling have improved, which is in-line with Department of Transportation data on reductions in both flight delays and baggage mishandling over the past year.”

The on-board experience still lags, however, with seat comfort remaining the worst part of flying (ACSI benchmark of 65). Passengers are happier with in-flight services such as entertainment options, up 7 percent to 72, but there is still room for improvement.

The *ACSI Travel Report 2015* covers customer satisfaction with airlines, hotels and Internet travel agencies. The report is available on the ACSI website at [www.theacsi.org/news-and-resources/customer-satisfaction-reports/reports-2015/acsi-travel-report-2015](http://www.theacsi.org/news-and-resources/customer-satisfaction-reports/reports-2015/acsi-travel-report-2015).

### **JetBlue Remains Satisfaction Pacesetter; Spirit’s Low-Cost Model Yields Low Scores**

Low-cost carrier JetBlue, up 3 percent to top the field at 81, increases its lead over rival Southwest. JetBlue has been number one for passenger satisfaction since 2012, but the airline’s plans to start charging for bags and reduce legroom may make it difficult for JetBlue to keep its title.

Southwest is flat at 78, but still maintains an edge over the remainder of the field. ACSI newcomer Alaska Airlines debuts at 75, ahead of three other ACSI entrants: Allegiant Air (65), Frontier Airlines (58) and Spirit Airlines (54). The major legacy carriers also are unchanged from last year, with Delta (71) holding an advantage over American (66) and United (60).

One year into its merger with US Airways, American has avoided any negative impact on satisfaction. This may reflect the airline’s slower approach to combining operations, with integration of loyalty programs and reservation systems happening well into 2015. United, by contrast, remains at 60, ahead of

only budget operators Frontier and Spirit. Spirit's customer satisfaction level of 54 reflects its low-fare, low-service model that caters to consumers who fly on price alone.

"Southwest appears to have successfully managed its AirTran acquisition, but its expansion into international travel may cause some turbulence ahead," says Claes Fornell, ACSI Chairman and founder. "On the other end of the spectrum, Spirit may offer low fares, but its score reflects its minimalist approach to customer service."

### **Hotel Satisfaction Reflects Price as Upscale Chains Top the Industry**

Guest satisfaction with hotels is steady at an ACSI score of 75. Upscale and luxury brands top the category, while budget chains lag far behind. Travelers paying more at a range of higher-priced properties from Marriott, Hilton and Hyatt are the most pleased (ACSI scores of 80), while economy operator Motel 6 enters the Index at an all-time industry low of 63.

Wyndham stays out of the industry basement despite a 6 percent decline to 68, with Choice and Best Western coming in just shy of average at 73 and 74, respectively. Midscale operator La Quinta debuts at 76, tying InterContinental and Starwood. According to guests, hotels do an excellent job when it comes to reservations and check-in (ACSI benchmarks of 86 and 85, respectively). Staff courtesy is lower than a year ago, but still quite good, as is website satisfaction (both 83). Strong user satisfaction with hotel websites is advantageous as the industry seeks to reduce its reliance on Internet travel sites for booking.

The ACSI study also includes guest satisfaction with over 30 hotel brands offered by the major hoteliers. Hilton's upscale property Homewood Suites and luxury brand Grand Hyatt are tied for first place at 83, followed by Hilton's upper midscale Hampton Inn and the Hyatt brand (both 81). Five other Hilton, Hyatt and Marriott brands fill out the upper tier at 80. Along with Motel 6, Wyndham's Super 8 (62) and Choice Hotels' Econo Lodge (60) fall at the low end. The below-average tier also includes two upper upscale chains: Starwood's Sheraton and Wyndham Hotels and Resorts (both scoring 74).

"The hotels that fail to offer guests an experience in keeping with their price points are in the weakest position with regard to their market segments," says Fornell. "Customers expect to get what they pay for, which spells trouble for upscale properties with lower scores."

### **Users Have Better Experiences Booking Travel Online**

Customer satisfaction with online travel agencies edges up 1.3 percent for a second year to an ACSI score of 78. While this matches the category's previous high points, customers continue to prefer booking directly with hotels or airlines.

Travel websites occupy a crowded field that includes numerous start-ups and search engines, as well as hotel and airline websites. Mergers are a major industry trend, but for the most part these are transparent to consumers as sites maintain their brand identities. Among the major agencies, Expedia holds a small lead with a 1 percent uptick to 77. Travelocity, recently added to Expedia's website portfolio, and Orbitz are deadlocked at 75. User satisfaction drops 3 percent for Orbitz just as Expedia pursues a merger.

Outside the potential Expedia family, Priceline is flat at 75 as well. Beating out all four is the combined score of smaller travel websites, stable at 78, which includes both Internet start-ups and direct booking on the websites of hotels or airlines.

“The big advantage that the major Internet travel sites have over the competition is their comprehensiveness and global reach,” says VanAmburg. “Domestic travelers can compare fares and schedules for multiple airlines at once, while smaller hotels and accommodations can attract an international traveler looking for something more intimate. Meanwhile, airlines and hotels are doing more to encourage customers to book directly and eliminate the middle man, whose commissions cut into their revenue. Recent mergers among the big travel sites suggest that they may be feeling the pinch of higher satisfaction for the smaller websites—including those of hotels and airlines.”

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#### **About ACSI**

The [American Customer Satisfaction Index \(ACSI\)](#) is a national economic indicator of customer evaluations of the quality of products and services available to household consumers in the United States. The ACSI uses data from interviews with roughly 70,000 customers annually as inputs to an econometric model for analyzing customer satisfaction with more than 300 companies in 43 industries and 10 economic sectors, including various services of federal and local government agencies.

ACSI results are released throughout the year, with all measures reported on a scale of 0 to 100. ACSI data have proven to be strongly related to a number of essential indicators of micro and macroeconomic performance. For example, firms with higher levels of customer satisfaction tend to have higher earnings and stock returns relative to competitors. Stock portfolios based on companies that show strong performance in ACSI deliver excess returns in up markets as well as down markets. And, at the macro level, customer satisfaction has been shown to be predictive of both consumer spending and GDP growth.

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