

You better take care ! Flyer beware

BY ROBERT SILK AND MAX NAJAR -MAY 2022

Unwary travelers using search engines to book air risk clicking through to fraudsters claiming to represent airlines. Airlines, the government and professional groups are doing little to stop the practice.

“Buyer beware, especially after COVID period is now more true than ever before. Slick marketing campaigns, advertising blurb, beautifully presented websites, smart Phone Call centres and adding color logos to newspaper adverts, websites and mailouts are only part of the problem “ says Max Najjar from Australian veteran travel agency Axis Travel Centre. Here are some 2022 USA based examples of true travel industry examples of how simple frauds take place!

Dubious search engine results

Consumer Affair records and publicly accessible complaints show that in case after case , many flyers claim to **have been duped after making a phone call** to what they erroneously believed was the customer service number of a U.S. airline. In most cases, those complainants found the number **through an internet search** and likely responded to misleading or fraudulent advertisements. It’s a practice that has become increasingly common in recent years, say various airline and travel industry officials.

“We are definitely getting a lot more reports from a global audience about this becoming more of an issue,” ARC’s Hattingh said. He added that the environment for perpetrating this scheme is increasing as more people return to the skies now that the pandemic appears to be easing.

Meanwhile, a well-placed U.S. airline industry official, who requested that his name be withheld, said that carriers formed a working group to combat the problem in late 2018. The official said **that people misrepresenting themselves as airline agents is one of the most common frauds that the carriers deal with, along with ticket agents hiking airline fees in violation of their contracts or simply making up service fees that are far above what a typical agency would charge for ticketing.**

The official noted that the perpetrators of the imposter schemes vary from **outright fraudsters that aren’t accredited travel agencies** to those that are. Some are also ticket consolidators working under a contract with an accredited ARC or IATA agency, though the accredited company doesn’t always know what its contractor is up to.

“This is something we’ve seen. It’s increased during Covid. It’s not an overwhelming amount of fraud, but it’s definitely something that’s there, and we’re discussing how to combat it,” **said the airline official, who added that the vast majority of OTAs and brick-and-mortar travel agencies are honest and reputable.**

American, Delta, United, Alaska and JetBlue all either declined to comment or did not respond to requests for comment for this article. But the proliferation of this imposter scam raised enough hackles at Alaska in late 2020 that the airline posted a warning on a blog to customers.

“Scamming websites will often use Alaska’s logo without permission and offer extraordinarily low (and often fake) Alaska fares,” read the post. **“If a deal seems too good to be true and can’t be replicated by booking directly on our website or with a reputable travel agency, it’s probably a scam. Some sites also mislead callers by posing as actual Alaska Airlines reservation agents.”**

Southwest, whose customers, FTC records suggest, seem to be especially alluring targets for this scam, also declined an interview request. But in a statement, the carrier said that it has been “actively working to detect and stop online scams on search engine platforms that confuse and defraud consumers.”

“Because this is an industrywide problem, the airline trade group (Airlines for America, which represents passenger airlines) is also actively engaged in identifying ways to stop this travel fraud scheme,” the carrier said.

For now, though, queries on search engines such as Google and Bing readily turn up advertisements that appear designed to deceive consumers. For instance, the top two ad results that were returned for a “Delta tickets” search that I conducted on Bing one late March afternoon were separately titled “Delta Air Lines Reservation — Official” and “Delta Reservation.” Clicking either leads to toll-free phone numbers, neither of which brings the caller to Delta. When I called one of those numbers, 866-833-9466, and asked the agent if I was speaking with Delta, **she evasively responded that they are a reservation desk for Delta.**

Other queries bring similar results. For example, a Bing search on March 23 for “Alaska Air Tickets” yielded, as its top ad hit, a link described as “Alaska Customer Service — Airline Tickets Alaska Airlines.”

When I clicked, I was prompted to call 888-520-0406, where the agent repeatedly insisted that I was speaking with Alaska Airlines. But I was not. By doing a subsequent cross-reference search of the phone number on Google, **I learned that number belonged to an entity called Bestaerfares.com, which indicates it is Nashville-based. I called the number back twice, explained I was a reporter and asked to speak with a supervisor. The first time, the person who answered the phone claimed he was giving me a supervisor’s number, which, when I called it, turned out to be the real customer service line for Alaska. The second time, the agent answering the phone hung up on me.**

Hattingh, the ARC fraud investigator, said that ARC has attempted to build a relationship with Google geared toward tackling misleading advertising related to air ticket sales, but while the search engine recognizes the issue, little progress has been made.

"If you do not know the actual bricks-and-mortar travel agent or agency, then you may be risking not only your money but also your credit card, passport and home address data and also opening up details of when you will not be at home" stated Max Najar from Axis Travel Centre in Australia.

New York resident Paula Abreu was looking for a refundable ticket to Montreal last December when, she says, she Googled the simple phrase, "Delta phone number."

A moment later, when she dialed the first number that appeared on the search result, her guard was down, she says, as the agent answered the phone with the greeting, "Air tickets."

Over the conversation that ensued, according to Abreu, the agent offered inaccurate advice, telling her that she couldn't book a refundable ticket through the Delta.com website and also saying that she would have to buy a first-class ticket if she wanted refundability. Throughout the call, the agent led her to believe she was speaking with Delta.

As the call was winding down, the agent emailed Abreu a contract for a \$1,489 ticket, which she says she signed without reading. Though the contract did not specify it, subsequent documents showed the price included a \$520 agency fee, in addition to the Delta ticket price of \$969. **The contract also stated that the ticket wasn't refundable.**

Abreu, 40, said she only began to realize that she hadn't dealt directly with Delta when she attempted to cancel the flight a week later and was told that she couldn't.

"I travel at least four times per year internationally," she said. "It's not like I was fooled because I'm a fool. The guy misled me in a way that someone like me, **who is experienced in traveling, fell for.**"

The company Abreu had actually done business with was Naples, Fla.-based Travel Service Pad, which also operates as Airtickets and which is a subsidiary of U.K.-based A1 Travel Deals.But it wasn't the money that was most upsetting to Abreu. **"What made me most angry is that he lied,"** she said of the Travel Service agent.

Interviews with other alleged victims — as well as complaints received by the Better Business Bureau (BBB), posted to Facebook and made to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) — show that Abreu is far from the only apparent victim of Travel Service Pad. But it would seem that Travel Service Pad's practices are deeply ingrained. One apparent victim was San Diego resident Jeri Kwieraga, who says she thought she was dealing directly with Delta by phone on March 22 when she signed a contract to spend \$1,579 on two refundable roundtrip tickets to the East Coast.

The contract, later viewed, said that the cost would be billed in two separate transactions, but it didn't specify that one of those transactions would be an agency fee. Kwieraga said that she only figured out that she hadn't been dealing with Delta and that she'd been charged a \$466 fee by Travel Service, after following up on the matter with Delta because something about the transaction didn't feel right. They're not the only agency whose practices have generated complaints of deception. Not by a long shot.

Whose problem is it anyway?

Google didn't respond to requests for comment. But Neal Dennis, a threat intelligence specialist at the cybersecurity firm Cyware, said that Google, other search engines and social media outlets have much more to deal with than just the air travel sector when it comes to predatory advertising.

"Probably half of the ads on Facebook or Google are fraudulent to some degree," Dennis said.

ASTA general counsel Peter Lobasso agreed,The existence of cyber predators is among the reasons for consumers to work with a trusted travel advisor, Lobasso said.

"We would definitely want to make the point that there are lots of benefits of working with advisors," he continued. "Getting individual attention. Getting assistance with unexpected changes. We wouldn't want people to be turned off from working with an advisor just because there are a few bad apples out there."

But Lobasso also wondered if the airlines are doing as much as they should to go after the bad actors.

"What are they doing to root this out?" he asked rhetorically. "If they know this is happening and there are certain search engine results that are misleading people, there are steps they can take to filter that out."

While no airlines agreed to be interviewed for this story, Southwest said in its statement that it has "approached industry groups and search platforms to propose and identify ways to stop this travel fraud scheme."

The U.S. airline industry official I spoke with who did not want to be identified said that carriers have filed complaints with the FTC and will happily participate in investigations when contacted by the FTC. **(To date, neither the FTC nor the DOT has brought charges related to a ticket seller deceiving buyers into thinking it is an airline.)** Go figure!

But the official also said that it is challenging for carriers to go after many of the perpetrators, especially the rankest of the fraudsters, which are often located outside the U.S. or otherwise can easily close up shop and reinvent themselves.

"You must wonder and consider how can major Airlines hold onto their falsely based ethics and morals. They seem acceptable to allocate huge marketing dollars to promote their fares and products whilst knowingly fully aware of frauds happening worldwide that exposes and erodes a travellers trust, monies and private data. I think the old adage that you need to establish and maintain links with a professionally accredited Travel Agent is more important than ever before, with travelers needing to use their intelligence wisely and walk away from dealing with shonky sites or committing their data to Airlines who in many cases sell your data onwards into fancy new marketing campaigns or one-off travel entities" said Max Najar