

# Big People & Airlines – Ways to Improve Our Relationship

by: William J. Fabrey, President - Amplestuff (the mail order catalog for big people)

PO Box 116 • Bearsville, NY 12409 • Phone: 914/679-3316 • Fax: 914/679-1206 • email: amplestuff@aol.com

Amplestuff is a mail order company that has been in business since 1988 serving big people – especially those who usually fall above the 95th percentile of weight and size, and who so often are overlooked by traditional marketers, including the transportation industry. In providing goods and information to this segment of the market, our customers call us to discuss questions like the following:

“Where can I buy an office chair that won’t collapse under my weight?”

“What models of cars should I consider when shopping?”

“How can I find out which hospitals near me have an MRI machine that can accommodate a larger person’s body?”

And then there is the most common question of all: “*What airline should I fly on, and what do I need to know to improve my flight experience? My last three flights were all nightmares...*”

Because so many people have the above question, we wrote a 5-page guide to air travel for larger passengers in our *Ample Shopper* newsletter (see inset below, left). It consists of tips to avoid problems frequently confronted by our customers, derived from our own experiences, and those they have told us about. For example, we suggest that they try to fly off-peak, to advise the airlines ahead of time of their special needs, and to arrive at the gate early, to help resolve some of the problems before they become harder to resolve. We also suggest that they allow more time

between connecting flights, or book direct flights wherever possible. Also, a very large passenger might want to travel with a thin companion, or even pay for an extra seat – not a desirable state of affairs, but when it occurs, such a fare should be offered at an additional discount. Some airlines do this, perhaps as an incentive for the very large passenger, but far too many do not.

We will be the first to say that many airlines have personnel who go out of their way to alleviate the problems of passengers who have special needs. I could recount many stories of those who expected bad experiences, and instead had good ones. However, I am sorry to tell you that these stories are outnumbered by the other type; it is obvious that most airlines have a long way to go in improving their relationship with their large passengers.



The Amplestuff Catalog

## AMPLE SHOPPER BACK ISSUES LIBRARY



Catch up with the timeless articles you missed by ordering a set of back issues. Issues include these highlights and more. (Issues #1 - 8 are eight pages each; #9 - 12 are twelve pages.)

#12 Special 5-page feature on Ample Air Travel. Fen-Phen Fiasco. Auto Airbags: Safety Feature or Menace? Q&A on: Larger, stronger easy chairs and office chairs; hairstyles; glasses; Sandie's Clothesline shopping directory. Reviews: *Big Fat Lies: Worth Your Weight.*

### Ample Shopper Back Issues

Be sure to indicate which issue number(s) you are ordering:

99-980	Back Issues	\$ 3.00 each
99-981	Back Issue Set, #1-12	\$ 29.00

What follows are a few of the more typical problems that we hear about, again and again:

- 1) **Seatbelt too short** – This is one that most airlines know about, and they offer seat belt extenders when needed. If existing belts were just 5 inches longer, they would probably accommodate millions more people. But extenders are an acceptable alternative, if it were not for the manner in which they are often used:

The average plane seems to carry two or three extenders on board. The plane is not supposed to taxi or take off until everyone is belted. But if the flight is running behind schedule, and if more large people are on board than there are available extenders, the problem is often not dealt with. The embarrassed passenger often pretends to be belted, and the flight attendant pretends not to notice – sort of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” situation in which the safety of all the passengers is compromised.

Sometimes the flight attendant brings the extender in such an obvious manner and with a loud voice, that the passenger is mortified. It should be recognized that overweight people in the United States are frequently stigmatized, and consequently feel embarrassment that they need special accommodation. What is needed here is not just more seat belt extenders, but flight attendants more schooled in sensitivity to special needs like this one. Yelling the length of the cabin to another flight attendant, "Hey, we need an extender back here" is not likely to improve the travel experience of the passenger in question. Nor is rudely tossing the extender in the lap of the passenger going to result in that person wanting to travel on that airline again. Nor are extenders that are colored a bright "safety orange" as they are on some airlines. The larger passenger, instead of feeling accommodated, is likely to feel stigmatized even more than before.

As a result of problems like these, **Amplestuff** sells lots of FAA-certified airline seatbelt extenders to customers that are so fed up with problems like these that they have decided to carry their own (see inset above, right). We're happy to oblige, of course, but would also be happy if our customers didn't encounter the need for them at all.

## AIRLINE SEATBELT EXTENDERS

Despite the fact that airlines make seatbelt extenders available on flights, some larger passengers just want to bring their own. If you're one of those people, here they are: FAA-approved extenders that are several inches longer than the ones passed out on planes.

Style "A" fits about 85% of planes in the air. Style "B" fits most of the rest. We're offering them singly, or in a set. But note: you may not know which style you'll need in advance, so we suggest buying the pair. Note: Neither belt works on Southwest or Quantas airlines.

### AIRLINE SEATBELT EXTENDERS

**51-201      Style A (teardrop buckle)      \$ 59.50**  
*(the one to buy for most general airline travel)*

**51-202      Style B (square buckle)      \$ 52.50**  
*(fits older aircraft and many private planes)*

**51-200      The Pair (one of each-save \$13)      \$ 99.00**

- 2) **The problem of seat widths, armrests, and sometimes, fellow passengers who hate sitting next to a fat person** – There's nothing that airlines can do about passengers who detest persons of size. However, flight attendants can attempt to find passengers who will volunteer to trade seats so as to leave a vacant seat next to the larger passenger if necessary, or at least a slender passenger or even a child. But sometimes, flight personnel are not willing to make the effort, and both passengers – fat and thin – end up with an unfortunate flight experience, battling each other for the few inches that two seats have to offer.
- 3) **Payment for extra seat** – One airline in our experience has been notorious in forcing larger passengers to pay for an extra seat, even when there are empty seats on board. A personal friend of ours, who had a transfer flight in a strange city, was "held up" for the price of an extra seat, while sitting on board her new flight, even though the same airline did not insist on an additional payment at her city of origin – only after she was in a place with no recourse but to dispute the charge. When she could not pay the fare, and she refused to leave, since she was in a strange city and had nowhere to go, she was forcibly removed with the help of four policemen.  
Some of our customers ask, why are large people penalized so often with rude treatment and occasionally, forced to pay for an extra seat, when airline industry advertising promotes the price of an adult fare with no reference to size?
- 4) **Armrests should raise** – It should go without saying that all armrests should be capable of being raised – both those at the aisle, and also those between passengers, not just for the comfort of passengers, but also for a faster evacuation in the event of an emergency.
- 5) **The trend toward narrow seats** – Many of our customers are mystified as to why seats have to be so narrow. The trend toward narrower seats and flying more heavily-booked flights seems to have happened in the industry since deregulation took place. The concept of offering cheaper seats with fewer frills has been popular with much of the flying public, and many airlines have been caught in a spiral of increasing competition and rising costs. However, the trend of decreasing seat widths seem to have gone too far in the attempt to squeeze more and more people onto flights – and meanwhile, the average American has been getting broader, as those who design theater seating are fully aware. While airline coach seating can vary between 16" and 18", new theater seating is now tending toward the 19" – 23" range. Those few inches make a huge difference to millions of people. Even average-size people are complaining about the smaller seat widths!
- 6) **The tray table problem** – It is frequently impossible for larger passengers to use a tray table, due to the size of their stomach, and the closeness of the seat in front of them. This problem will continue until there is more space between seats and the one in front of them; or, more economically, the tray table supporting arms are redesigned (as they surely will be someday) to keep the tray horizontal even when the tray table is not in the fully down position.

- 7) **The fire exit problem** – There is always some controversy about the seating adjacent to fire exits. FAA regulations require that the seat not be occupied by persons with mobility problems. Some larger people may fall into that category and some not. We have heard reported a number of instances in which flight attendants have been unable to deal with this issue tactfully – not just with larger passengers, but with other kinds of passengers. Again, some additional training might help.
- 8) **Small rest rooms** – The notoriously small rest rooms in many planes can be a real deterrent to flying for many very large people. The designers of some newer aircraft have attempted to deal with this issue, but all too often, the passenger is unable to use the rest facilities at all.
- 9) **Carts and wheelchairs** – Airports are frequently not under the direct control of the airlines that use them. However, some airlines attempt to provide their paying passengers with help dealing with the airport, including rides on wheelchairs and electric carts to and from the gates. Our customers have often bemoaned the fact that for larger persons who also have mobility problems, an extra-wide wheelchair is frequently not available; some airports have none at all, and have no electric carts, either. Such airports are virtually inaccessible to larger passengers with mobility problems.
- 10) **Seating at airports** – The question of the lack of proper seating in corridors connecting gates at airports, and at the airline's waiting and boarding areas also comes up frequently. Some bench-style seating (as opposed to the usual seats with armrests) would make such seats more usable to millions of potential customers – those who have to rest now and then as they are walking to the gate and back, or waiting for a flight.
- 11) **Standing in lines** – In the reservations and the gate areas, and long lines form to get information, reschedule flights, and get boarding passes (especially when a flight has been canceled), those passengers (of any size) who are unable to stand up for long periods of time get lost in the shuffle. Ticketing and boarding agents should have a way to recognize the place in line of such passengers even if they are seated nearby. Perhaps the “taking a number” system, commonly used in delicatessens or other service-oriented enterprises which may involve a wait while the customer is not standing in an actual line, would solve the problem.
- 12) **Expand the customer base** – The customers I have spoken with express the wish that airlines cared more about them to deal with these problems. Rarely do I speak to anyone who feels that airlines should be compelled to do so by law. Rather, recognizing that fundamentally, the industry is a service-oriented business, it would be far preferable for the airlines to expand the base of customers who want to fly with them. There are millions of people who do not, for fear of encountering struggles based on their size or mobility.

To summarize, some of the solutions to these struggles are as follows:

- Seat belts longer, and/or extenders more plentiful and more tactfully supplied; should not be bright orange
- FAA regulations about wearing of belts more strictly observed
- No charge for extra seat if some seats on plane are empty
- Extra seat, if needed, at additional discount
- Wider coach seats by 2" – 4" or more if possible
- All armrests (between seats and on aisle) capable of being raised
- Flight personnel attempting to place empty seats, if any, next to larger passengers
- Flight attendants making the effort to shift passengers on board to create an empty seat next to a larger passenger; or place a smaller person next to that person
- No holdup of passengers already boarded for payment for extra seats
- Cessation of advertising that promotes an adult fare between cities, without qualifying the statement, when that same airline may require an adult to purchase an extra seat
- Redesign tray tables to remain horizontal even when they are not in the fully down position
- More room between seats, front to back
- Larger restrooms, designed with all passengers in mind

- More tactful dealing with the problem of mobility-impaired persons sitting by the fire exits; not to assume that all larger people are lacking in mobility
- More bench (armless) seating in airports, both in connecting hallways, and in gate waiting areas
- More extra-wide wheelchairs and electric cart service in airports
- Find a way to permit those who cannot stand up for long periods, to keep their place in line when waiting for tickets, boarding passes, or rescheduling canceled flights

Finally, it is worth noting that larger-than-average people are not just customers to the airlines, or to my own company, **Amplestuff**, but fellow human beings as well. Imagine for a moment that your own mother, who is perhaps getting on in years and not as physically robust as she once was, must fly to a distant city, and you could not go with her. You would want the airline that takes her, and the airport through which she must pass, to take good care of her until she reaches her destination. Fortunately, the airlines have already recognized the special needs of the elderly in many cases, but if your mother is also significantly overweight, her travel experience is likely to be not one you would want her to have.

It should be possible for airlines to be profitable, yet treat every passenger like you would like them to treat your own mother. If that isn't possible, then perhaps the airlines should review their ticketing price structures. ■

*Note: This essay may be reproduced, posted, or forwarded for any purpose whatever, provided that its authorship is properly credited. It was created on November 13, 1999.*

*Biographical Notes: Mr. Fabrey is also a director of the **Council on Size & Weight Discrimination** ([www.csud.org](http://www.csud.org)) and is the "Big News" columnist for **Radiance**, the magazine for large women ([www.radiancemagazine.com](http://www.radiancemagazine.com))*

If you would like to order seat belt extenders and/or **Amplestuff's** special 5-page guide to air travel (*Ample Shopper #12*), please contact:

**Amplestuff** (the mail order catalog for big people)

PO Box 116

Bearsville, NY 12409

Phone: 914/679-3316

Fax: 914/679-1206

email: [amplestuff@aol.com](mailto:amplestuff@aol.com)