



A research collaboration between Experience Investigators and Thematic

Experience Is The Promise

WHAT AIRLINE REVIEWS REVEAL ABOUT THE GAP BETWEEN BRAND AND REALITY



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Meet the Authors



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Dr. Alyona Medelyan is the CEO and co-founder of Thematic, an AI-powered customer feedback analytics platform. With a PhD in AI, she has spent over 20 years developing and commercializing algorithms that make sense of unstructured text at scale. Her work at Thematic has helped hundreds of organizations transform customer feedback into actionable intelligence.



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Jeannie Walters is the founder and CEO of Experience Investigators, a CX consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations close the gap between brand promise and customer reality. A globally recognized speaker and educator, she has spent 25 years helping CX leaders create intentional, sustainable customer experiences. She is the best-selling author of [Experience is Everything](#) and one of the most sought-after voices on customer experience leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

The CX Leadership Challenge

Why Brand Promises and Customer Reality Often Don't Match

Customer experience has never been more measurable or more misunderstood.

Organizations today have access to more customer feedback than ever before. Platforms like Thematic make it possible to analyze thousands of customer voices at scale, revealing patterns that were previously invisible.

And yet, many organizations still struggle to turn those insights into consistent, meaningful experiences.

This report combines Thematic's analysis with the practical frameworks and research from Jeannie Walters' book, [Experience Is Everything](#), to answer a critical question: Why do so many organizations understand their customers but still fail to deliver on their promises?

Why Brand Promises and Customer Reality Often Don't Match

Many organizations make bold brand promises about the experience they deliver. But customers don't experience promises. They experience systems, policies, and everyday decisions.

When those things aren't aligned, organizations create a gap between what they say and what customers feel. One of the biggest reasons this gap exists is that most organizations have never clearly defined what they are actually promising customers in operational terms.

This is where a CX Mission Statement becomes critical. It translates brand promise into a shared, actionable definition of the experience you intend to deliver, not just what you say, but how decisions should be made across the organization.

Customer experience is fundamentally misdiagnosed as messaging instead of what it really is: a management discipline.

“Customer experience isn't a slogan or initiative. It's the cumulative outcome of thousands of decisions made across the organization.”

To understand how this gap shows up in the real world, we looked at an industry where expectations are explicit and stakes are high: airlines.

BACKGROUND

Why Airlines Are the Perfect CX Test Case

An Industry Built on Explicit Experience Promises

Airlines are an ideal environment for studying brand promises versus real experiences:

- They operate in a highly competitive industry
- They communicate clear brand positioning
- Travel is emotionally charged and high stakes
- Customers frequently share public feedback

What we've seen in the feedback is that airline travellers are often less forgiving when promises break and are more vocal when they do.

Research Question

Do airlines that perform best actually deliver on the promises they promote?

DATA SOURCES

- AirHelp airline rankings (global, 2025 edition)
- AppStore reviews with both ratings and comments (Jan–Dec 2025)
- Thematic AI analysis of themes and sentiment

TOP RANKED

 American Airlines

AirHelp Score: 7.64
Global Rank: #11

 UNITED

AirHelp Score: 7.54
Global Rank: #13

 DELTA

AirHelp Score: 7.46
Global Rank: #15

LOWER RANKED

 jetBlue

AirHelp Score: 5.3
Global Rank: #89

 Breeze

AirHelp Score: 5.06
Global Rank: #101

 spirit

AirHelp Score: 4.70
Global Rank: #115

FRAMEWORK

The Five Promises Airlines Make

How Airline Brands Position Their Customer Experience

Each airline communicates a clear experience promise through its brand messaging. Across these brands, five core CX attributes emerge. Customers may not use those exact words in reviews, but their experiences consistently reflect these attributes.

Customers don't evaluate brands on slogans, of course. They evaluate them on how consistently these five attributes show up in real moments.

ATTRIBUTE	AIRLINE(S)	BRAND PROMISE
EASE	Breeze Airways	"The newer, nicer way to fly" — Seriously Nice. [5]
RELIABILITY	Delta Air Lines	"Keep Climbing" — the world's most reliable airline. [3]
VALUE	Spirit · JetBlue	"Less Money. More Go." [6] / "You Above All" [4]
FAIRNESS	JetBlue · United Airlines	"Good Leads the Way" — doing the right thing. [2] "To inspire humanity / You Above All" — people first [4]
EMPATHY	American Airlines	"Care for people on life's journey." [1]

These five attributes — Ease, Reliability, Value, Fairness, and Empathy — form the lens through which we measured customer experience across all six airlines. Our research tests whether that promise holds up in real customer feedback.

METHODOLOGY

Listening to the Voice of the Customer

Turning Customer Reviews Into CX Insights

Instead of relying solely on surveys, this research analyzed real customer feedback from AppStore reviews — unfiltered, spontaneous, and written when the experience was fresh. We combined two analytical approaches from Thematic's AI platform:

The five attributes scored for every review:

Ease

How effortless it is to plan, book, change, check in, board, and get help. Signals: booking and check-in flow, self-serve rebooking, live status, chat/callback.

Reliability

How consistently the airline does what it said it would do. Signals: delays, cancellations, missed connections, baggage delivery, reaccommodation speed.

Value

Whether customers feel the total trip outcome is worth the total cost. Signals: total price vs experience, add-on pricing, credits, loyalty, disruption compensation.

Fairness

Whether policies feel consistent, transparent, and reasonable, especially under stress. Signals: fee disclosure, refund vs credits, complaint resolution.

Empathy

Whether the airline behaves like it cares about the human situation. Signals: tone of communications, agent helpfulness, proactive outreach, making things right.

Thematic's Scoring Agent

Predicts how a reviewer would rate the airline on each of the five CX attributes, as if they had answered a structured survey. Accuracy is high because the agent is calibrated with airline-specific signals for each attribute.

Sample review

Love the airline but the app has been a problem. I love the airline and the flights / aircraft and the fares are generally awesome... but whatever communication needs to be done is via text and it takes a long time to get something done. But all of the team members have been very helpful...

✦ PREDICTED SCORES

EASE	EMPATHY
2.0	4.0

The combination of scores and themes gives us a detailed picture: not just whether customers feel the brand promise was delivered, but which specific operational moments made or broke the experience.

The pattern of broken promises

As we analyzed the data, a clear pattern emerged.

When customer experience breaks down, it is almost always due to misalignment in three areas:

- Mindset
- Strategy
- Discipline

These show up repeatedly in the findings that follow.

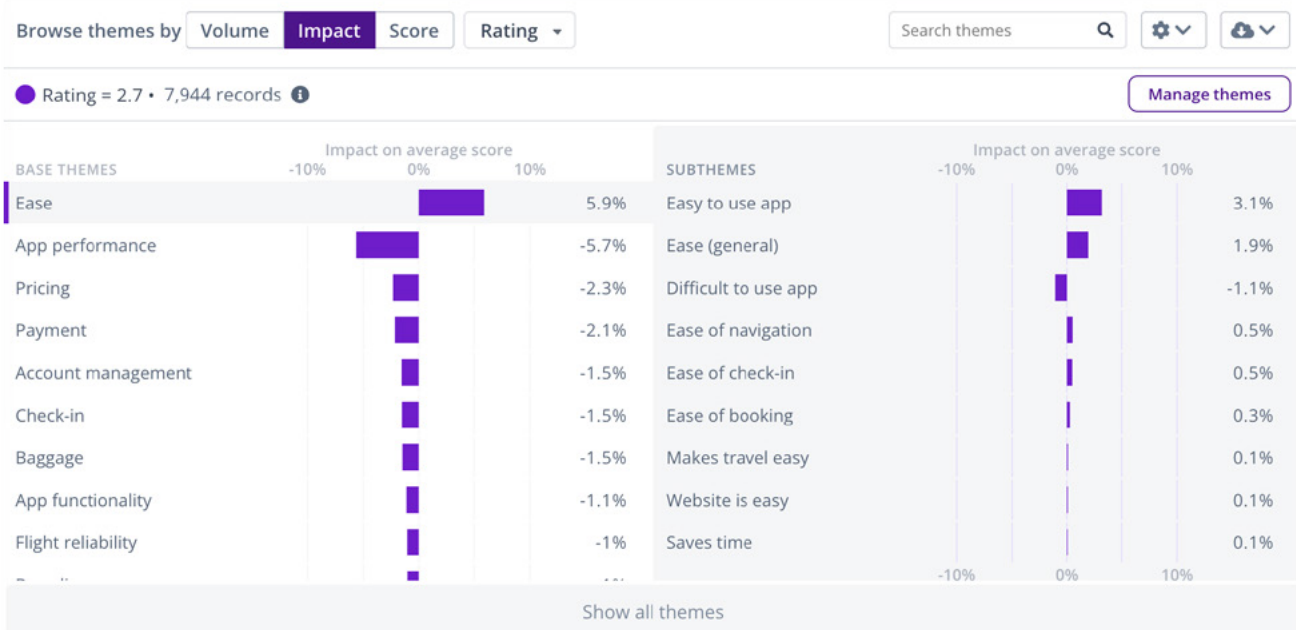
Thematic's Scoring Agent

Detects specific themes in what customers are saying — going beyond scores to identify the exact drivers of positive and negative experiences. By combining themes with scores, we can pinpoint precisely what pushes each attribute up or down.

Never Flying United Again. Horrible check-in experience. App kept glitching and would not permit me to check-in. Called customer service to check in and was emailed a link to my boarding pass. Accessed the link and it told me I still wasn't checked in. To their credit their customer service representative was polite and helpful but offered no upgrade or accommodations for the trouble. The poor performance of the app combined with the inconvenience of many flights delays has made me decide to add United Airlines to the list of "never fly again".

- 😊 Airline staff: Courteous
- 😡 App performance: App errors
- 😞 Boarding: Boarding pass access
- 😞 Check-in: Check-in process
- 😞 Customer service: Help desk / call center
- 😡 Flight reliability: Flight delays
- 😡 Seats: Seat upgrades
- [+ Add theme](#)

Example of a review with themes and topic detection — how Thematic identifies what customers are talking about. (Screenshot from Thematic)



Theme impact calculations — each theme's contribution to driving scores up or down. (Screenshot from Thematic)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

What the Data Reveals

Do Airlines Actually Deliver on Their Promises?

Our hypothesis: airlines that perform best are more likely to hold their brand promises, while lower-ranked airlines are more likely to break them. After analyzing thousands of real customer reviews through Thematic's AI platform, here is what we found.

The best-performing airlines by AirHelp score are United, Delta, and American Airlines. United and Delta combine strong AirHelp rankings with strong financial performance. American Airlines received the best AirHelp score but carries a higher risk profile. Among the lower-ranked airlines, JetBlue, Breeze, and Spirit each struggle with different dimensions of their promise.

FINDING 1

Top airlines generally deliver on their promise

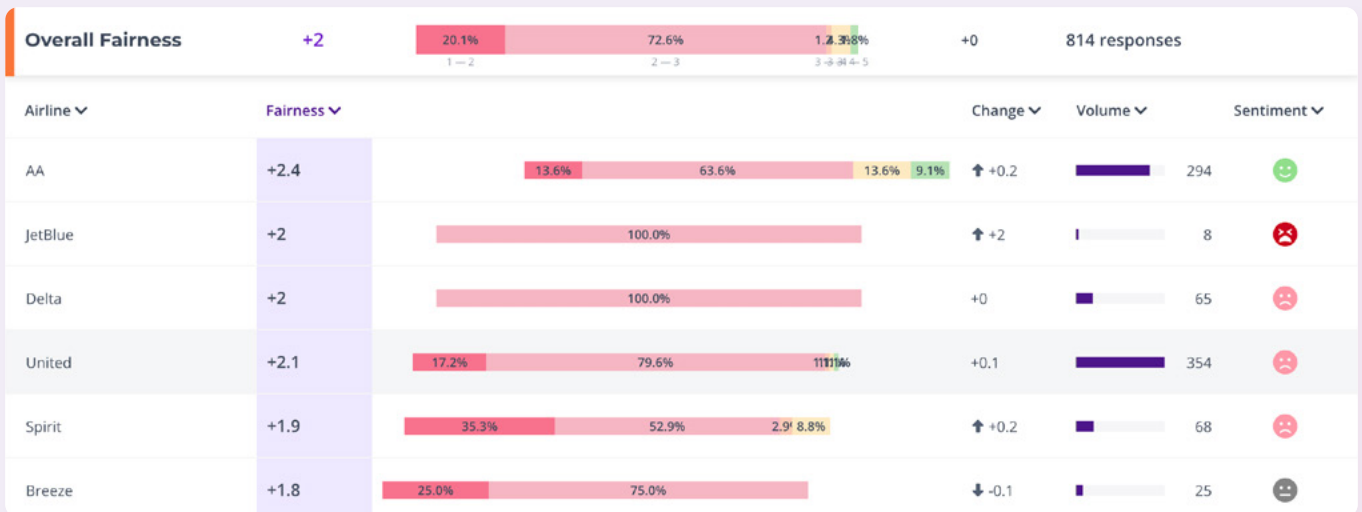
UNITED AIRLINES

Promise: Fairness — “Good Leads the Way”

High-performing airlines don't just promise better experiences. They operationalize those promises more consistently.

United promised Fairness — and it was delivered. Last year, its Fairness score was slightly above the overall average for the top-three airlines (2.1 vs. 2.0), and it also had the smallest proportion of negative fairness ratings.

Themes in feedback that drive Fairness are centered on flight reliability, pricing, customer service, and refund policies. For United, feedback in these areas is more positive overall — either not pulling the score down or actively lifting it.



United has the highest Fairness score and the least highly negative sentiment comments compared to other airlines. JetBlue is below others on their promise of Fairness. (Screenshot from Thematic)

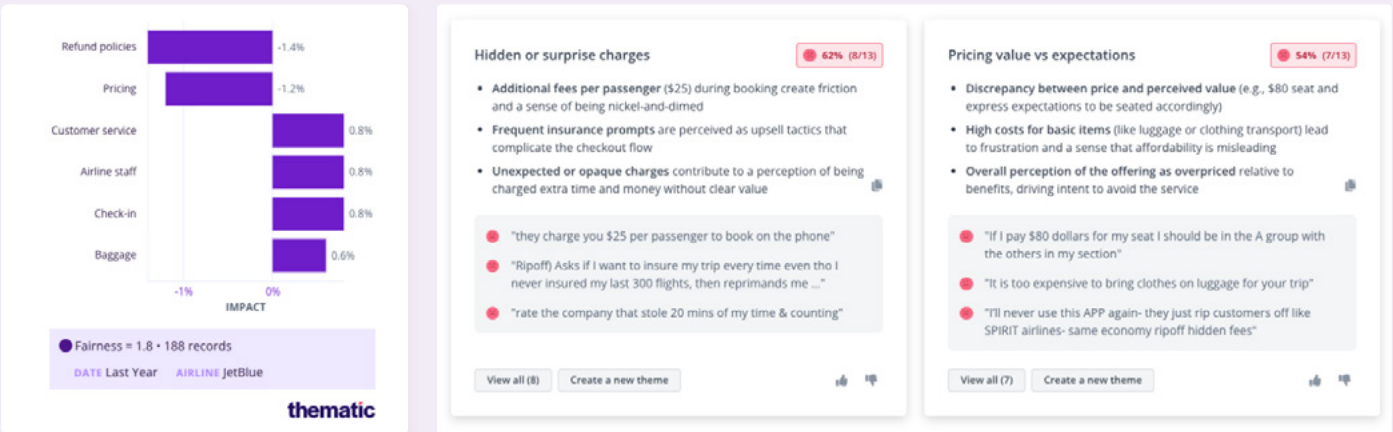
FINDING 2

When the promise breaks, customers notice quickly

JETBLUE

Promise: Fairness — “You above all”

Customers don't judge brands on average performance. They judge them at moments of friction. JetBlue promises to put people first — “You Above All.” But with an overall Fairness rating of 1.8, significantly below the group, customers are unhappy about the airline's pricing practices, particularly refund policies and unexpected costs. Customers interpret these as violations of the fairness they were promise.



What impacts JetBlue's Fairness score is not Customer service, or their staff, it's the policies around refund and pricing. (Chart export from Thematic)

FINDING 3

Operational moments strongly shape emotional perception

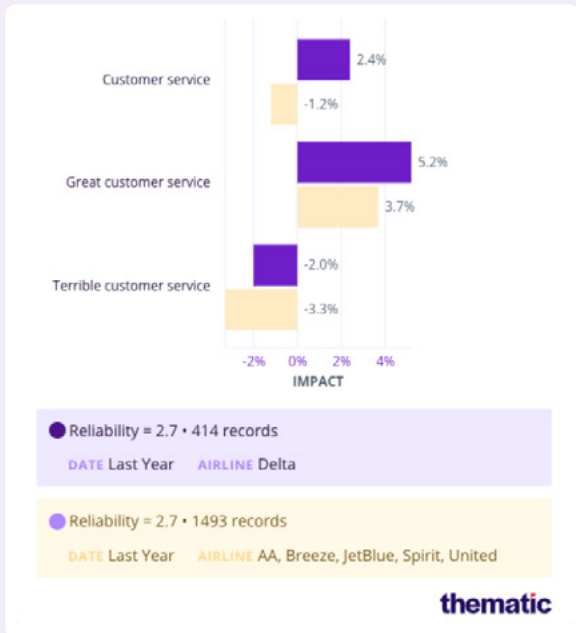
DELTA AIR LINES

Promise: Reliability — “Keep Climbing”

Delta promised Reliability matches the overall group average. Delta is not dramatically better or worse than other airlines when it comes to key areas that drive Reliability. But in one critical area — operational recovery — Delta has fewer complaints about how Customer Service and Airline Staff handled disruptions.

When things go wrong, how an airline responds determines whether customers feel the brand promise still holds. Delta’s advantage is not in never failing — it is in recovering in ways that preserve trust.

Delta also has a significantly higher Empathy ranking than other airlines (2.8 vs. the average 2.5).

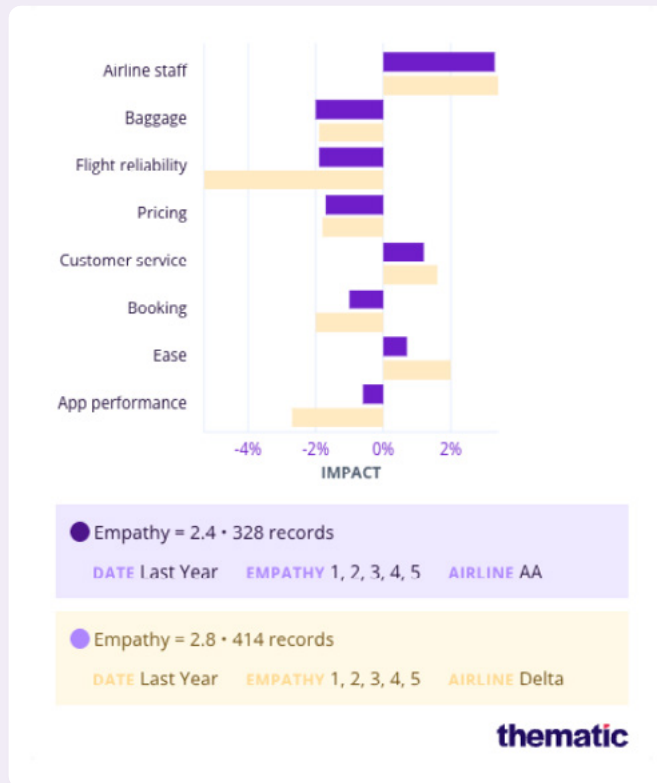


Overall Empathy		1907 responses			Change	Volume
App Name	Empathy	1-2	2-3	3-4		
Delta	+2.8	18.4%	38.2%	33.1%	↑ +0.8	414
Breeze	+2.7	20.5%	36.4%	35.2%	0	307
United	+2.5	64.9%	29.7%		↓ -0.4	292
AA	+2.4	17.3%	54.5%	21.8%	↑ +0.1	328
Spirit	+2.4	24.1%	46.0%	24.1%	↑ +0.6	378
JetBlue	+1.8	30.8%	65.4%		↓ -1	188

Emotional perception is not driven by brand messaging. It's defined by how organizations perform under pressure.

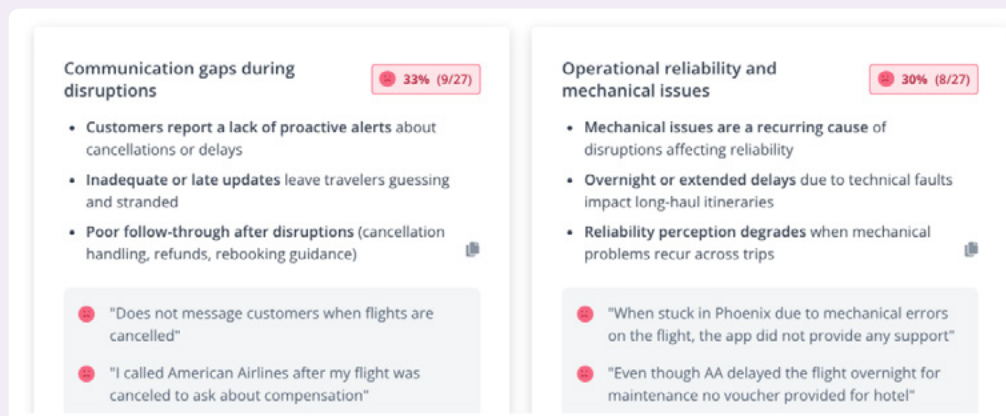
Delta’s Reliability score is overall improved by how the quality of their Customer service. It’s more likely to be positive and less likely to be negative compared to other airlines. (Chart export from Thematic)

American Airlines, by contrast, made empathy its central promise — ‘care for people on life’s journey.’ While its staff and customer service score similarly to Delta, flight reliability and app performance pull the Empathy score significantly below the group average. The promise is tested hardest when the journey goes wrong.



American Airlines scores below the group average on Empathy. Flight reliability is the primary driver of negative Empathy reviews. (Chart export from Thematic)

When flights fail, customers turn to support expecting to be made whole. The data shows a compounding effect: the disruption is already frustrating, and a support experience that falls short of the promise makes it worse. This is the moment where empathy either proves itself — or breaks the brand promise entirely.



Customer service reviews at American Airlines during flight disruptions — the moment where the empathy promise is most tested. (Screenshot from Thematic)

FINDING 4

Technology now plays a major role in CX perception

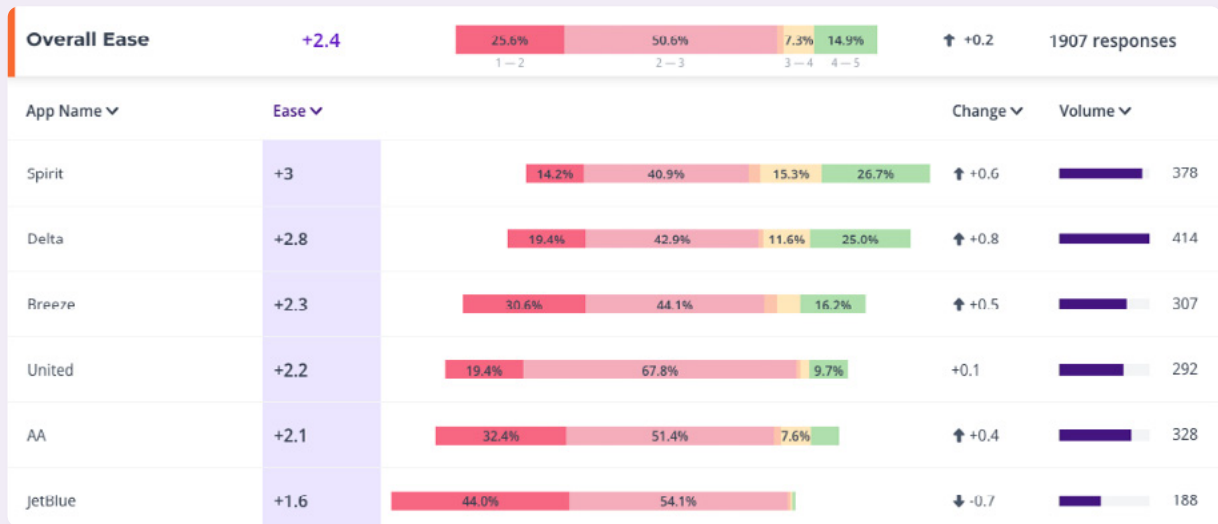
BREEZE AIRWAYS

Promise: Ease — “Seriously Nice. The newer, nicer way to fly”

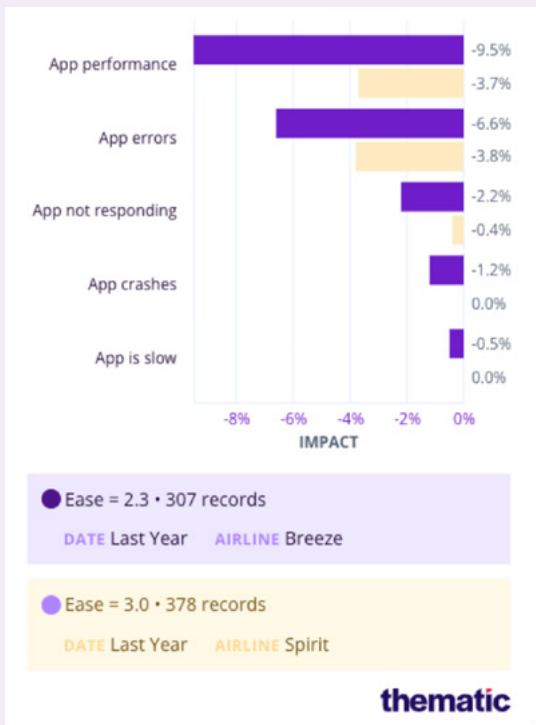
For many customers, the digital experience is the brand. The app is like a frontline employee experience. The glitches and bugs are broken promises.

Breeze promised Ease — but it scores slightly below the average on this attribute. Spirit, despite promising Value rather than Ease, actually performs better than Breeze on this dimension.

The comparison reveals an important lesson about digital experience. According to app reviews, Spirit’s app is easier to use, and it’s easier to book and check in. Where Breeze lost ground is in app performance — app errors, crashes, and unresponsiveness are driving 9.5% of its negative Ease score.



Ease scores by airline: Spirit leads, Breeze falls below the group average. (Screenshot from Thematic)



Ease score theme drivers — app errors and crashes account for 9.5% of Breeze's negative Ease score. (Chart export from Thematic)

App instability and crashes 🚫 44% (28/63)

- **Frequent crashes occur at critical flow points** (e.g., check-in, payment, or launch) causing task abandonment.
- **Intermittent stability issues;** the app crashes or freezes at various stages, leading to repeated relaunches.
- **Persistent reliability problem** with statements like 'never works' and 'crashes constantly,' indicating ongoing instability rather than isolated incidents.

- 🚫 "Kept crashing when trying to check in luggage, had to stop and use the website instead of the app so that my card was..."
- 🚫 "App won't let me check in"
- 🚫 "This app crashes and never loads"

Login and authentication failures 🚫 35% (22/63)

- **Sign-in blocks access** for users, creating a gatekeeping point that prevents basic use of the app.
- **Login-related errors persist across devices** (iPhone, iPad), suggesting cross-platform authentication issues.
- **Access to core features is hindered** when sign-in fails, exacerbating frustration and blocking task completion.

- 🚫 "Trying to log in on the app and the app won't let me"
- 🚫 "App Sign-In on iPad Does not work"
- 🚫 "The app won't progress past the first screen that says it's nice to see you"

App performance deep-dive at Breeze — crashes and errors as the primary Ease drag. (Screenshot from Thematic)

FINDING 5

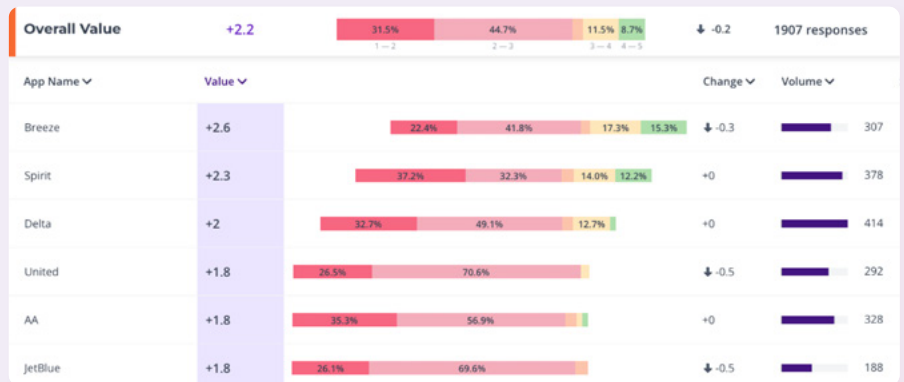
Value is more complex than price

SPIRIT AIRLINES · JETBLUE

Promise: Value — “Less Money. More Go.” / “Why settle for just cheap tickets?”

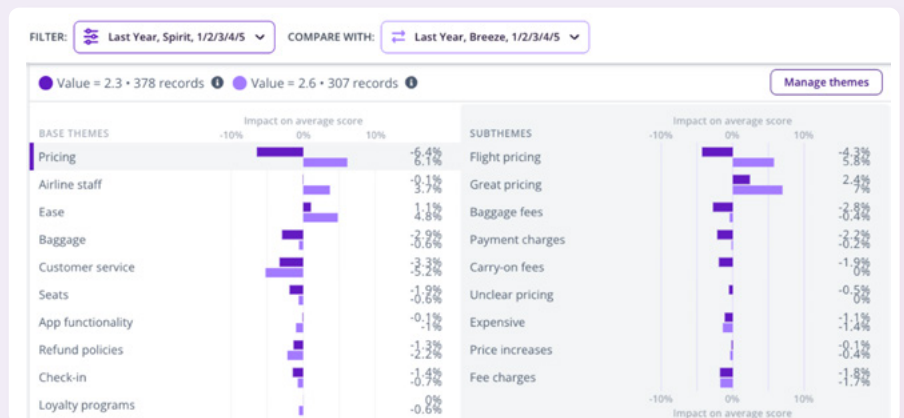
Customers define value holistically, not by price, but by the total cost of effort, confusion, and friction.

Spirit and JetBlue both promise Value. Only Spirit is above the average Value score for the group — yet even Spirit’s performance is nuanced. JetBlue falls significantly below average.



Comparing airlines by their Value score: Breeze performs best, Spirit is above average, whereas JetBlue is significantly below (Screenshot from Thematic)

Despite Spirit’s above-average Value score, 37% of Spirit’s reviews include negative feedback about value — compared to 31% for the overall group. For close to 40% of customers who mention value, Spirit is not delivering. The promise of “Less Money. More Go.” is working for many customers, but far from all.



Comparing drivers of Value for Spirit and Breeze (Screenshot from Thematic)

The most surprising finding in the Value section: Breeze outperforms Spirit on Value. Breeze customers are less likely to talk negatively about flight pricing. Even more interesting, Breeze’s staff is mentioned as having a positive impact on value — customers frequently mention great prices and great staff together, linking quality of service to value perception.

The Best. Breeze Airlines is the BEST, first for the amazing airfares followed by exceptionally clean aircraft, super friendly personnel. Everything that makes flying Breeze Airlines the BEST in the industry!

Zero complaints. Very simple easy no delay flight. I only knew about Allegiant as far as smaller airlines but breeze was amazing. Super easy and clean with a nice staff and amazing prices. I will def fly breeze again

The Best. Breeze Airlines is the BEST, first for the amazing airfares followed by exceptionally clean aircraft, super friendly personnel. Everything that makes flying Breeze Airlines the BEST in the industry!

Great flight. Very happy with breeze. I have flown with them over 10 times now and they're efficient, polite, and the rewards points go along way. They constantly have deals.

Breeze reviews frequently mention great staff and fair pricing together — linking service quality directly to value perception. (Screenshot from Thematic)

Hidden fees and insurance pressure

64% (7/11)

- Unexpected add-ons and frequent prompts to insure or upgrade costs during the booking flow
- Per-passenger charges (e.g., \$25 per passenger) accumulate and feel misleading
- Aggressive upsell tactics that pressure users into extra costs, diminishing perceived value

- "I bought insurance for a reservation and Jet Blue still charged me 100\$ to change the reservation, and within 6 hours..."
- "Ripoff) Asks if I want to insure my trip every time even tho I never insured my last 300 flights, then reprimands me ..."
- "they charge you \$25 per passenger to book on the phone"

Hidden fees during flight disruptions are the primary driver of JetBlue’s below-average Value score. (Screenshot from Thematic)

JetBlue is named the third-worst airline by AirHelp among the US airlines studied, and the airline is struggling economically. Part of their promise is “Why settle for just cheap tickets?” — positioning around value beyond just price. But customer feedback tells a different story: hidden fees, especially costs that appear unexpectedly during flight disruptions, are eroding trust.

The airlines that win on value are not simply the cheapest. They are the ones where every dollar feels accounted for — where pricing is honest, service holds up, and disruptions don’t become financial surprises. Spirit, Breeze, and JetBlue each reveal a different face of that same truth.

IMPLICATIONS

The Real Lesson for CX Leaders

Why Experience Breakdowns Are Organizational Problems

The most important takeaway from this research is not about airlines. It is about alignment.

Most organizations already communicate a promise through their brand, mission, and messaging. But far fewer design their operations to consistently deliver that promise.

This isn't about isolated issues like pricing or policies. It's about how decisions are made across the organization. When teams aren't aligned on what the experience should deliver, inconsistency is inevitable.

This research reveals a fundamental truth: customer experience is not a branding problem.

It's an operational discipline.

“Customer experience isn't a project. It's a management discipline.”

Three commitments must work together for customer experience to succeed consistently:

Mindset	Every leader and team member understands and is committed to the customer experience the brand has promised.
Strategy	Operational decisions, policies, and investments are designed to consistently deliver the promised experience.
Discipline	CX is measured, tracked, and improved — not through occasional initiatives, but as an ongoing management practice.

The airline data makes this visible in concrete terms. Delta's advantage in Reliability is not that it never has delays — it is that its culture of recovery preserves trust when things go wrong. United's Fairness lead reflects consistent policies around rebooking, refunds, and transparency. Breeze's improving Ease score shows that operational discipline directly translates into CX gains.

These are management outcomes, not marketing outcomes. They happen because of decisions made across the organization, day after day.

DIAGNOSTIC

The CX Alignment Questions

Questions Every Leader Should Ask

Use these questions to assess whether your organization's mindset, strategy, and discipline are aligned around the experience you are promising customers:

MINDSET

1. Do your leaders talk about customer experience in terms of operations and decisions, or mainly in terms of messaging?
2. When a customer-facing policy is created, who represents the customer's perspective in that conversation?
3. How do frontline employees understand the brand promise? Can they articulate it in their own words?

STRATEGY

1. What specific operational decisions are designed to deliver on your brand promise?
2. Which customer moments are most likely to make or break your promise — and how are those moments designed?
3. How are CX considerations weighted against cost or efficiency decisions?

DISCIPLINE

1. How do you measure whether the experience you are delivering matches the experience you are promising?
2. Are you listening to customer feedback across the full journey, or only at selected survey moments?
3. When data shows a gap between promise and experience, what is the process for closing it?

In [Experience Is Everything](#), you can learn more about how to turn these answers into a clear CX mission, strategy, and operating model.

CONCLUSION

When Experience Is Everything, Promises Are Only the Beginning

Brand promises create expectations. Customer experiences either reinforce those expectations or break them.

What this research makes clear is that customer experience is not defined by what organizations say but by what they repeatedly do.

Across the six airlines we studied, the pattern is consistent: higher-ranked airlines tend to deliver experiences that match or come close to their promises. Lower-ranked airlines tend to fall short — not in their messaging, but in the operational reality customers encounter.

“In today’s connected world, experience isn’t optional. It’s everything.”

The organizations that succeed are not simply those with compelling messaging. They are the ones who design their operations, culture, and decisions to consistently deliver the experience they promise.

“Decide what good looks like before something goes wrong.”

Every policy decision, every technology investment, every staffing choice is either closing or widening the gap between promise and reality. That is what makes customer experience a management discipline — not a marketing initiative.



For your complete guide to operationalizing this alignment, read [Experience Is Everything](#) by Jeannie Walters.

Sources:

[1] American Airlines. Brand mission: "Care for people on life's journey." [aa.com](https://www.aa.com), retrieved 2025.

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[3] Delta Air Lines. "Keep Climbing" brand platform. [delta.com](https://www.delta.com), retrieved 2025.

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[5] Breeze Airways. "Seriously Nice" brand positioning. [flybreeze.com/page/about-us](https://www.flybreeze.com/page/about-us), retrieved 2025.

[6] Spirit Airlines. "Less Money. More Go." and Bare Fare model. [spirit.com](https://www.spirit.com), retrieved 2025.



Want to see how your brand is performing on its promises?

Thematic's AI-powered feedback analysis platform helps you understand what customers are experiencing — in their own words — and which moments are making or breaking your brand promise.

[Talk to one of our experts](#)

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