

inquires from the media between February 14 and February 19.<sup>30</sup>

JetBlue's reputation as a successful and off-beat upstart airline only seemed to invite sensational newspaper headlines during the crisis. The *New York Post* published an article under the banner "Air Refugees in New JFKaos; Hordes Camp Overnight Before JetBlue Says: 'Tough Luck, No Flights.'" A *New York Times* story entitled "Long Delays Hurt Image of JetBlue" similarly predicted reputational damage for the carrier as a result of the crisis. The headline of a *Newsday* article asked the question virtually every industry observer wanted to know: "Can JetBlue Recover?" For their part, angry JetBlue customers provided plenty of material to reporters in search of a sound bite.

## CONGRESS COMES CALLING

Just days after JetBlue's operational meltdown at JFK, members of Congress began calling for legislation designed to prevent air travelers from being held captive inside grounded airplanes for excessive amounts of time. Many suggested that the implementation of an industry-wide passenger bill of rights would be necessary to spur major airlines to action. Legislators argued that a bill of rights would entitle passengers to receive standardized compensation from carriers that fail to meet certain service levels, such as a flight that remains on the runway for hours after pushing back for departure.

With all eyes on the embattled company, JetBlue leaders knew they had to choose their public relations battles carefully. Leaders recognized that the company was at a crossroads. One option was to place a greater emphasis on the winter storm's role in the operational problems at JFK and across the country. The strategy of redirecting blame had certainly

worked for other airlines in the past; after all, the public generally accepted that weather was a frequent cause of air travel disruptions. The corporate communications team at JetBlue's Queens-based headquarters also debated whether to put David Neeleman on the television news and talk show circuit, in addition to the YouTube mea culpa he had already issued.

But the biggest decision facing JetBlue's leadership team was a proposal set forth by Neeleman himself just days earlier. For JetBlue to regain its former prestige, Neeleman said that the airline had to do something novel, something impressive, something no competitor had ever done before to make amends to its customers. "I can flap my lips all I want," Neeleman said.<sup>31</sup> "Talk is cheap. Watch us."

Neeleman suggested a gambit that was likely to garner much needed positive attention for the beleaguered airline but would also commit the company indefinitely to millions of dollars in potential losses. Neeleman's idea was a JetBlue Airways Customer Bill of Rights that would specify in no uncertain terms how passengers would be compensated if the company failed to meet certain performance standards.

For example, customers would receive vouchers good toward future travel if their flight sat on the tarmac after landing for more than a certain number of minutes. The value of these credits would escalate the longer the passengers were forced to wait on board the plane. In essence, JetBlue would be putting its money in place of its mouth.

Members of Neeleman's executive team met the idea with skepticism. The ongoing costs associated with such a groundbreaking program would be unpredictable at best and staggering at worst. As the weekend progressed, Neeleman faced countless questions and staunch objections from the heads of Jet Blue's legal, finance, flight operations, government affairs, and

<sup>30</sup> J. Elsasser, "True Blue: After a Customer Relations Crisis, Lessons Learned at JetBlue," *Public Relations Strategist* 13, no. 3 (2007), pp. 14–19.

<sup>31</sup> J. Bailey, "Chief 'Mortified' by JetBlue Crisis," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2007, p. A11.