

## **CHOICE HAS SLAMMED FLIGHT CENTRE FOR ALLEGED “HORRIBLE” CUSTOMER SERVICE IN A FRESH BID TO PUSH FOR A CHANGE IN AUSTRALIAN CONSUMER LAWS.**

The consumer advocacy group said Flight Centre received a “high number” negative feedback in its **travel cancellation survey**, which asked 4,443 Aussie travellers about their experiences trying to access refunds for trips that were cancelled due to the global pandemic.

CHOICE published a range of scathing claims made by consumers about the travel brand, including **multiple complaints that Flight Centre was “purposefully” making it difficult to receive a refund.**

“Flight Centre purposefully made this an extremely difficult process in order to try and force their customers into either giving up, paying fees, or taking a credit when you didn’t want one,” said one respondent.

**Another respondent said the travel agency had been “dishonest and unhelpful”.**

“They told us we would need to cancel, and offered a voucher, and did not explain that by accepting a voucher we were cancelling the flights and then would not be eligible for a refund,” said a respondent named Erin.

“We have to travel by November this year or lose all our money, which equates to about \$7,000 between the group [of travellers].”

CHOICE said these responses were consistent with what it had heard from other customers.

**The advocacy group even went as far as suggesting that complaints about customer service stemmed from Flight Centre’s “bonus-driven” company culture which allegedly paid workers below their award rates.** It also made reference to a 2018 report by *the ABC* about Flight Centre employees coming forward with reports of **bullying, sexual harassment and low pay**. **“COULD IT BE THAT UNHAPPY STAFF MEMBERS DON’T FEEL INSPIRED TO HELP THEIR CUSTOMERS?” CHOICE SAID IN ITS REPORT.**

A spokesman for Flight Centre told *Weekly* the company had provided a response to CHOICE addressing the issues brought up by consumers, but it was largely ignored.

“As the largest travel agency group in Australia and the largest seller of international travel, Flight Centre, its customers and its people have been deeply impacted by these unprecedented and unforeseen restrictions,” the spokesperson said.

“To put this in context, to date Flight Centre’s people in Australia alone have secured more than \$1.4b in refunds for customers from airlines and other suppliers globally, in addition to helping tens of thousands more rearrange their travel plans.

“The company has now repatriated more than 20,000 Australians during the most challenging period in our and our industry’s history.”

Flight Centre said many of its customers recognised the complexity of the situation, but some were frustrated by the options they were given.

“The company and its people understood this frustration, publicly thanked customers for their patience and worked hard to seek positive resolutions,” the company’s spokesperson said.

“THIS FRUSTRATION WAS, OF COURSE, NOT ISOLATED TO FLIGHT CENTRE – IT WAS EXPERIENCED ACROSS THE INDUSTRY, ACROSS OTHER TRAVEL PROVIDERS AND ACROSS THE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL AVIATION SECTORS.”

Addressing the findings in CHOICE’s report, the travel giant said it was “unlikely” that travel vouchers would expire before consumers can use them as the cut-off date would be reviewed in line with travel restrictions.

“In addition, if a customer cannot use a Flight Centre credit within the relevant timeframe he or she is then eligible for a refund,” Flight Centre’s spokesperson said, adding that supplier credit terms are set by suppliers and cannot be changed by the company.

“As CHOICE will know, Flight Centre (as an agent) does not typically hold customer funds. The company is required to transfer funds to the supplier to secure the customer’s booking.

“The supplier then returns the money to Flight Centre (sometimes in the mail via cheque) if a customer requests a refund and if the suppliers’ policy allows that refund to be paid.”

The company said refund delays were also “unlikely” to relate to Flight Centre, as the supplier controls the refund policy, outcome and timeframe.

“OUR AGENTS AND DEDICATED CUSTOMER RELATIONS TEAMS HAVE ADVOCATED AS STRONGLY AS POSSIBLE TO AFFECT BETTER OUTCOMES FOR OUR CUSTOMERS,” IT SAID.

“As we have said publicly and outlined above, Flight Centre can and does return funds to customers within days of receiving them back from suppliers and has consistently done this for many months.”

Earlier this month, CHOICE released a **scathing report** calling on the state and federal governments to implement stricter laws around travel refunds, an industry ombudsman and an ACCC market study, among other things.

In the report, the consumer advocacy group revealed that fewer than one in five survey respondents said they had received a full refund after their trip was cancelled.

Fifty-three per cent said they waited more than three months for a refund, credit or other resolution, 25 per cent said they only received a credit or voucher, and 90 per cent said the laws need to be changed to make it easier to get a refund.