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JetBlue Gives Away Data on Passengers

Airline apologizes for sharing itineraries with a Pentagon contractor for use in security study.

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Violating its own privacy policy, JetBlue Airways gave 5 million passenger itineraries to a Defense Department contractor that used the information as part of a study seeking ways to identify "high risk" airline customers.

The study, produced by Torch Concepts of Huntsville, Ala., was titled "Homeland Security: Airline Passenger Risk Assessment." The apparent goal of the report was to determine whether it was possible to combine travel and personal information to create a system that would make air travel safer.

The New York-based airline apologized to customers and said it has taken steps so the situation will not happen again. "This was a mistake on our part," said JetBlue Chief Executive David Neeleman.

Neeleman insisted the data JetBlue provided was not shared with any government agency and that Torch has since destroyed the passenger records.

Details of the study and JetBlue's involvement were reported Thursday by Wired.com, which credited privacy activist Bill Scannell for bringing attention to the issue on his Web site.

Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, said that by violating its privacy policy, JetBlue could be sued for "deceptive trade practices."

Torch said the intent of the study was to guide the Pentagon on a project for military base security.

But Richard Smith, an Internet privacy consultant, said the study was a prototype for a system being developed by the Transportation Security Administration. The system, ordered by Congress after the Sept. 11 attacks, will check such things as credit reports and compare passenger names with those on government watch lists.

The TSA, the federal agency in charge of airline and airport security, said Friday it was not involved in the study.

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