

Bye Bye Clear!

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Wow: Clear, operator of registered traveler lines in many airports around the country, has ceased operations. For more (what little there is) visit <http://www.flyclear.com>.

I liked Clear and I'm disappointed it has shut down. There are **numerous new stories about the shut down** and most of them indicate that the Clear lines were idle much of the time. When you're using them, they are, by virtue of your usage, not idle--but still, thinking back on it now, there were times when I was the only person going through.

So why were the Clear lanes idle so much of the time? Because their value proposition wasn't clear (pun intended; ha ha!) for enough people. As mentioned in **an Atlanta Business Chronicle article** the wait time at the "regular" lanes here in Atlanta is rarely more than 10 minutes; I didn't note any other statistics for other airports in any of the other articles I read, but many of them did mention in general terms that security wait times are generally modest these days. And, as numerous of the news articles indicate, the Clear security screening process itself is no easier or quicker than the regular security screening process--rather it is the same process as in all other security lines. So if you aren't saving hassle with the actual security screening and you aren't saving significant waiting time, what are you really getting from Clear? It seems most people answered that question with one word: "nothing." Hence, even a clear (I can't help myself!) path through the Clear lines wasn't good enough to attract new customers. And I'm sure that as they looked to prospects for the future, what they saw is that the worst part was that if they had somehow been able to grow, the reality is that they would have only been able to handle a certain amount of growth (at least without expanded capacity) before they'd actually have found themselves in a situation where their wait times frequently exceeded those of the regular lanes!

So with this all being the case, why was I a Clear member? Well, when I joined last year, regular security lines were generally longer than they are now. Why has this changed? Since that time, the economy has weakened and less people are flying, and at some airports like Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, additional regular security lanes have been added, plus it seems that people are moving through security faster than they did last year (I'm not entirely sure if this is true or if it is, why it is, but kudos to TSA for any role they've had in the matter). But regardless of the reasons for the reduced wait times in the regular lines, I was contemplating not renewing at the end of my current membership period as a result of those reduced wait times. And you may find it surprising to find that I was actually leaning towards renewing. Why? Because even if Clear didn't provide actual speed advantages over the regular lanes, it did provide certainty of speed. That is to say, it provided a certainty that you'd get through security fast. So now the position I'm in is that when I go to the airport on Wednesday morning, I'm probably going to get through security quickly--but since I no longer can rely on that, I'm going to have to arrive earlier than I would have if I were able to use Clear--and the worst part is that I'll still be at greater risk of missing my flight! And that, my friends, is why I will miss Clear.

P.S. Although Clear ceasing operations rips off any existing Clear member, the good news for me is that although I had a bit more than 5 months of membership left on my term, I did still get much of the expected value out of my Clear membership: I purchased a 1-year membership in March of 2008 and had gotten additional bonus time from a pre-Atlanta-Clear-lanes opening special and from others using my Clear referral code. But surely there are some people who only recently had paid for Clear memberships; such people were supremely ripped off. But it pales in comparison to the investors who lost millions, right? Well, if Clear intentionally deceived those investors then yes--but otherwise, those investors simply invested in a company which just didn't pan out, they weren't ripped off like we Clear members were.

P.P.S. On a slightly related note: once, during the course of normal use of the Clear website (that is to say, not during a web application security penetration test), I stumbled upon a web application security vulnerability through which an attacker could have harvested Clear customer email addresses (to be clear, the attacker would only have been able to do this harvesting of email addresses one by one, not en masse; as for other details, well, as Forrest says, that's all I have to say about that). I always was amused by the irony of a company which went to great lengths to keep personal data safe having such a hole on their website! And I always wondered when Clear would discover the hole and patch it (but that certainly appears to be a moot point now!). I believe a good web application security assessment would have revealed this vulnerability and so I therefore find it doubtful that Clear authorized such an assessment. But regardless, this vulnerability just goes to show that even companies like Clear are not sufficiently adept at precluding unauthorized access to customer data. Feel free to shudder.