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HEADLINE: FAST APOLOGY SHOULD KEEP 'EM SOARING

BYLINE: BY ELIZABETH LAZAROWITZ DAILY NEWS BUSINESS STAFF WRITER With Scott Shifrel

BODY:

JETBLUE'S REPUTATION as a friendly, low-cost carrier is facing severe criticism, but experts predicted it's a storm the airline will be able to weather.

Leaving frustrated passengers stranded on Kennedy Airport's tarmac for up to 11 hours Wednesday was an instant public relations nightmare.

The trapped, would-be travelers told of sweltering cabins, stinky toilets and dwindling food and drinks, and used cell phones to snap photos now prominently displayed on the Internet.

But management experts noted that jetBlue scrambled after the incident, issuing an apology and offering free round-trip tickets to customers who were stuck for more than three hours. While that may have not been soon enough for the stranded passengers, the experts said the quick admission of guilt will help stave off a broader crisis.

"Companies can be forgiven and are forgiven all the time," said Helio Fred Garcia, a professor of crisis management at NYU's business school. "The fact that jetBlue has apologized already is a big step in the right direction."

JetBlue CEO David Neeleman told the Daily News he believes the airline's reputation as an offbeat, luxury-discount carrier will remain intact. "Our image wasn't made overnight," he said. "It was made through millions of customers, and I don't think it will be lost overnight, obviously."

Mike Lawrence, executive vice president of Cone, a Boston-based crisis management firm, said the airline execs "didn't try to make excuses, and that's to their credit."

On Wall Street, jetBlue certainly didn't suffer: The airline's shares rose 4.7% after an analyst raised his expectations for the stock.

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GRAPHIC: CEO David Neeleman

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