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Dear Client:

The Austin City Council is going to spend \$2 million over the next year or so “educating” you on why Austin will become the first big city in Texas to ban plastic bags. So, does this mean your newspaper will get soaking wet when it rains, or you will no longer have a plastic bag protecting your newly-cleaned laundry and dry cleaning?

Much has been made of banning plastic bags at the grocery check-out counters. **The passing of an era will be upon us when you will no longer hear “paper or plastic” as the clerk rings up your groceries.** But what about other plastic bags that are also harmful to the environment – such as the previously mentioned newspaper wrapper and dry cleaning bags?

What about a **plastic bag to carry out your doggy bag food** after you have finished dining out and still have food on your plate? Or **take-out, to-go food items** from your favorite Chinese restaurant? Or when you buy **packages of multiple plastic bags intended for use as garbage, or yard waste, or pet waste?**

What about those **plastic bags you get from pharmacists and veterinarians** to contain prescription drugs or other medical necessities? What about the local **charitable food pantries that provide food for the neediest** in the Austin area? All these provide problems for the environment? Are they part of the ban?

Well, no. In their wisdom – even though these examples listed above are prevalent and harmful, just as grocery bags – the **Austin City Council exempted these items.** So, what is likely to happen when you make other purchases from a retailer or grocer?

The Austin City Council suggests you **bring your own bags** (reusable, of course) from home. Or the retailer/grocer can provide you with a **plastic bag, 4 mil in thickness, with handles.** Or **paper bags made of recycled content, with handles.** Or any other type of reusable bag. No word on what you will be charged for these items when the clerk rings up your purchases.

This ban is now law and goes into effect March 2013. Oh, almost forgot. It was suggested a simple solution would be for the **City to re-cycle the plastic bags, rather than ban them.** No, no, they said. Can’t do that. **The city said it can’t accept plastic bags through its curbside collection/recycling program because they can damage recycling machinery.**

The warning went out this week: Spring Breakers, avoid traveling to Mexico. The Texas Department of Public Safety cited continued violence and other criminal activity.

However, an Austin-based global security firm says these travel warnings “often go unread by their intended recipients.” And that is a problem. “These travelers tend to think the (drug) cartels want to **avoid interfering with the profitable tourism industry, or that they only target Mexican citizens; this is not an accurate assessment,**” warns Austin-based Stratfor. “Nothing in the behavior of Mexican cartels indicates that they would consciously keep tourists out of the line of fire.

“Violence related to the cartels is spreading, and while tourists may not be directly targeted, **they can be caught in the crossfire or otherwise find themselves in situations where their security is compromised,**” notes Stratfor. Calling the cartels more than “just drug traffickers – they participate in extortion, robbery, rape and carjackings. And where cartels are fighting each other violently, local gangs are able to take advantage of law enforcement’s resulting distraction to commit crimes of their own.”

“**No part of the country has been immune to the effects of organized crime,**” Stratfor points out. So what is Stratfor’s assessment of some of Mexico’s most popular tourist spots?

Acapulco. This glamorous seaside resort remains **one of the most violent** of Mexico’s popular resort towns. According to Mexican government figures, Acapulco saw 1,199 murders in 2011.

Cancun and Cozumel. While there has been little violence related to organized crime, Cancun’s port remains an **important entry point for South American drugs** – transiting Mexico on their way to the United States.

Puerto Vallarta. Again with relatively low murders (64 in 2011), Puerto Vallarta’s location on the Pacific coast makes it strategically important to trafficking groups that send and receive maritime shipments of South American drugs and **Chinese chemical precursors used in the production of methamphetamine, much of which is produced in the areas surrounding the nearby city of Guadalajara.**

Matamoros. It has long been the practice of adventurous vacationers on the south end of South Padre Island to **take advantage of the inexpensive alcohol and lower drinking age south of the border,** mainly in Matamoros and the towns clustered along the Rio Grande that marks the Texas border. Drug and human smuggling activities in this region of Mexico are constant and ruthless.

Stratfor underscores that **visitors should not venture south into Mexico from South Padre Island,** which is overflowing with Spring Breakers this time of year. Forewarned is forearmed.

Speaking of Spring Break and security (of a different kind), you need to plan ahead if you will be using Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA) over the next few weeks.

March is among the most traveled months at ABIA. And it's not just Spring Break. Events such as the very crowded SXSW activities, state basketball tournaments and the rodeo also add to the normal travel. **Airport officials say, depending upon the time of day you are flying, it could take more than 45-minutes just to go through security.** They suggest arriving two hours prior to your scheduled departure. If you have an early morning flight, the screening checkpoints at ABIA open at 4 a.m.

After a record breaking 9.1 million passengers were served in 2011, 2012 is starting off slightly ahead of that pace. **The latest ABIA numbers show the total passenger traffic in January was up 2% over January a year ago.** And as usual, the dominant airlines carried the bulk (almost 78%) of those passengers – Southwest Airlines (36.6%), American Airlines (20.2%), Delta Air Lines (11.4%) and Continental Airlines (9.7%).

It won't be long before the 4th place brand, Continental, will disappear from the list of ABIA's dominant carriers. Continental's brand is almost phased out, following the Continental/United Airlines merger last year. You'll soon see the surviving brand, "United", on the list of top carriers at ABIA.

For instance, in January, United Airlines was credited with carrying only 2.6% of ABIA's passenger traffic. But, combine this ABIA market share with that of Continental and **United's market share in January would have jumped to 12.3%, moving it ahead of Delta Air Lines.**

Coming back full circle with the previous story about travel to Mexico, **United Airlines has announced it will resume seasonal nonstop service between Austin and Cancun** starting June 9th. The service will be limited to once-a-week, on Saturdays only, to August 11th.

The rains that are predicted for the next few days – no matter how heavy – are coming too late for the rice farmers who depend on water released from the Highland Lakes to flow to them down the Colorado River to counties near the Gulf Coast.

For the first time in the Lower Colorado River Authority's history, the farmer's water rights were cut off just one week ago. **There was not enough combined water stored in lakes Buchanan and Travis to trigger the release.**

The recent drought kept the water levels **just short of the 850,000 acre-feet needed to continue releasing the water.** This cut-off action covers only this year.

As we've been reporting, one of the best things you can do to make your online files more secure is to create a great password. Hang on for some of the worst passwords you can select.

There are some really dumb passwords out there and they are very easy for a hacker to crack. You may have a dozen passwords for a variety of your accounts and sources. It's hard to keep track of them, especially if you keep a log of your passwords apart from your computer for safety's sake. **So, selecting easy-to-remember passwords are really important.**

Trustwave is an IT security company and it has some tips for you after analyzing passwords and their weaknesses in a recent report. Let's get right to it. Trustwave says **the dumbest password of all is – ta-dahhh! — Password. And right behind it is Password1, Password2.** And if forced to use an unusual character they use something like **P@ssword** or **Pa\$\$word**. These are pretty easy for hackers to figure out. Others easy to crack: **Welcome** and **123456**.

Trustwave spent less than \$1,500 on its custom password cracking system built with off-the-shelf parts. And in 10 hours they had cracked 200,000 of the 2.5 million passwords they tested. Some of their findings: 27,191 passwords were **names of months**, like January ... 72,368 were **names of states** ... 74,368 were **seasons of the year** ... and 170,013 were **baby names** on the Top 100 list of male and female names. Obviously, you should steer clear of these.

What can you do to create a tough-to-crack password that is easy to remember? **Length matters!** A password with three characters is, by far, much easier to crack than one with seven characters. **A really long password like “ThisIsMyPasswordNoReallyItIs” is even better.** And, as we reported last week, if you create a password, using punctuation marks, numbers, capital letters, etc., such as **“ThisIsMy9thPassword,#\$&*It”**, you've improved your chances of surviving a hack attack.

Returning from California, **Dr. Louis Overholster** said residents in LA were furious over \$6 gas prices: “You can't tell, of course, because of the Botox and face lifts. But they are furious!”

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher