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Fees for checking baggage appear to be here to stay

In fact, they will likely increase this year, one airline consultant says.

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IdeaWorks contributed information to this article - - see italics.

It's come to this: Your bags are a drag. Checking them can cost more than your airline ticket.

United Airlines, for instance, recently offered a \$119.40 round-trip fare, taxes included, from Los Angeles to San Francisco. If you were to check two bags both ways, your luggage charges would total \$120.

It's no cheaper on the rest of the so-called Big Five airlines -- American, Continental, Delta and US Airways -- which, like United, last month increased checked-luggage charges in the U.S. to \$25 each way for the first bag and \$35 for the second.

Brace for more increases this year, said Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorksCompany.com, an airline consultant based in Shorewood, Wis.

"We will see these fees tied to length of flight," he predicted. "If you travel across the country, why should the fees be the same as for a one-hour flight?"

As you might imagine, it's all about the money. With declining traffic, airlines are looking to make up for losses.

"Most airlines now clearly consider baggage fees the holy grail of revenue treasure," said a Jan. 20 report by Sorensen's company.

This treasure is worth more than \$1.7 billion -- the total the Big Five will haul in from first- and second-bag fees this year, the report estimated. Pretty remarkable for a service that as recently as May 2008 was mostly rendered free of charge, except for excess and overweight penalties.

What makes baggage fees even more appealing to the industry is that, unlike fares, they fly under the radar of casual customers. Until, of course, the customers get to the airport.

"The design of online shopping sites makes these increases invisible to consumers; the price matrix is limited to airfares," the report said, citing Expedia.com as an example.

Whether you go to a third-party website or the airline's own, it takes extra clicks to find the fees and extra time to make sense out of them.

Continental's online chart, for instance, paired eight domestic and international destinations with one another and displayed their checked-bag fees, split between rates paid online (a bit cheaper) and at the airport. It contained 256 cells, plus footnotes.

Despite the hassle, no flier can afford to book a ticket without asking: What are the bag fees, and what can I do about them?

Some options:

Choose another airline: At press time, Southwest Airlines still didn't charge for the first two checked bags, and some airlines charged less than the going rate.

Among them were AirTran (\$15 first bag, \$25 second bag), Alaska (\$15 first bag, \$25 second bag), Frontier (\$20 first bag, \$30 second bag) and JetBlue (first bag free, \$30 for the second).

Pay in advance: You'll typically save \$2 to \$5 if you pay bag fees online instead of at the airport. United customers who fly frequently with lots of luggage may benefit by paying a flat annual fee of \$249 to cover these charges under the Premier Baggage program.