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Study: US Airways, Delta stingiest with frequent-flier tickets

By Ben Mutzabaugh, USA TODAY

This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorks.

US Airways and Delta are the most difficult U.S. airlines for customers trying to book standard frequent-flier award tickets. At least that's according to a study out this month from the consulting firm IdeaWorks, which sampled the availability of "standard" frequent-flier award tickets on 22 airline websites. US Airways had availability matching IdeaWorks' requests just 10.7% of the time. Delta's success rate was 12.9%.

The U.S. airlines with the best results? Southwest's availability matched IdeaWork's frequent-flier requests 99.3% of the time. Alaska Airlines was No. 2 among U.S. carriers with a 75% success rate.

The Wall Street Journal is one of several media outlets that have picked up on the study. The Journals' Middle Seat columnist Scott McCartney explains the study's methodology, writing "IdeaWorks made 6,160 queries at 22 airline websites — 280 seat requests at each airline. The firm tested long routes and shorter trips under 2,500 miles in big markets. At most airlines, it had greater success with shorter routes. The requests were made in February and March for travel in June through October. Among carriers outside the U.S., Air Canada, Deutsche Lufthansa AG and Singapore Airlines were among the most generous."

In fact, Air Canada ranked third among the 22 airlines surveyed by IdeaWorks, trailing only Southwest and Air Berlin (98.6%).

MORE: See the study's list of airline results (PDF file) | Check out the full Journal column for more background

However, Kiplinger magazine points out "IdeaWorks' analysis was not exhaustive" and adds that the consultancy's "examination of frequent-flier seat availability is just a proxy for different programs' value. But its findings could be a useful jumping-off point for the frequent traveler."

Still, the study comes as complaints regarding the availability of award tickets have become a hot topic among frequent-fliers. With airlines now awarding miles for everything from credit cards to real estate transactions, many travelers' frequent-flier accounts have ballooned with miles. At the same time, U.S. carriers responded to rising fuel costs and the recession by cutting capacity – meaning there are fewer seats available for any type of ticket.

"They're killing these programs by not allowing more reward availability," IdeaWorks President Jay Sorensen tells McCartney, who notes that Sorensen "specializes in loyalty program, marketing and revenue-boosting strategies for airlines."

Sorensen continues: "When you look in February for travel in October and see major markets shut out, that's disturbing. That's wrong."