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Frequent flyer payout - - great to lousy

By: Ed Perkins

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How likely are you to find a "free" seat with your miles when and where you want to go? That depends, says a recent study, on the airline you fly. Among the 22 programs in the study, the range of success rates runs from "almost every time" to "hardly ever."

Researchers from IdeaWorks tried to book frequent flyer award seats on more than 6,000 flights in summer through fall 2010, and they found a wide disparity in success rate among the 22 programs compared: Southwest, 99 percent; Air Berlin, 99 percent; Air Canada, 94 percent; Virgin Blue, 90 percent; Lufthansa, 86 percent; Singapore, 77 percent; Iberia, 76 percent; Alaska, 75 percent; Jet Airways, 73 percent; Qantas, 73 percent; Continental, 71 percent; United, 69 percent; AirTran, 68 percent; Cathay Pacific, 67 percent; British Airways, 65 percent; SAS, 64 percent; American, 58 percent; Air France/KLM, 56 percent; Emirates, 36 percent; Turkish, 35 percent; Delta, 13 percent, and US Airways, 11 percent. Requests covered two coach/economy seats, round-trip, at each line's base lower award level, for itineraries that avoided circuitous routings, on a mix of long- and short-haul routes. IdeaWorks, a research firm, conducted the survey on behalf of ezRez Software, a supplier to the travel industry.

These results jibe with my much more limited experience. The main airline options from my home airport are United or Delta, and I've had good results with United. With Delta, on the other hand, I've been unable to find flights when/where I wanted at the base award levels and I've found that Delta's online planning tool typically came up with a mileage requirement higher than the program's nominal "get any seat" requirement.

Clearly, the study's raw average numbers leave a lot of questions unanswered: How much would the results have differed for routes you want to travel? How much different with plus-or-minus travel windows of two or three days in either direction? How much different in different classes of service? How much different if you're a high-status "elite" frequent flyer? Even without answers to these questions, however, the results provide some useful conclusions and guidance:

-- Success rates for long-haul flights -- the best use of miles -- were lower than for short trips.

-- For travel within North America, you stand a far better chance of finding an award trip on Southwest or Air Canada than on any other line.