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## **Your frequent flier mileage may vary**

*Not all frequent-flier programs will always get you from point A to point B for the same number of miles, if at all. A recent study suggests passengers getting reward points for credit card purchases might find them tougher to redeem.*

By: Kara McGuire, Star Tribune

***This article is based upon a report issued by IdeaWorks.***

Jane Brodie thought 50,000 Delta SkyMiles would be enough to get her two round-trip tickets to a family reunion in Portland, Ore. But when she started shopping last month for the August event she was told there were no seats at the 25,000-mile level.

"If I wanted to get a ticket using the frequent-flier miles I would need to spend 40,000 miles," she said.

Frustrated, Brodie reluctantly booked the trip anyway. But she no longer uses her SkyMiles American Express card, which earns miles for purchases. "I'm starting to question the value of the mileage," said the 67-year-old West St. Paul resident.

Just how valuable frequent-flier miles are depends on the program, a new study finds.

Travelers on Southwest Airlines could find a seat at the lowest reward level using mileage 99.3 percent of the time, with Air Berlin and Air Canada not far behind. But on Delta, now the dominant airline serving the Twin Cities, travelers found a seat for the least miles just 12.9 percent of the time, placing Delta ahead only of US Airways, according to the study by airline consulting firm IdeaWorks and ezRez Software.

IdeaWorks President Jay Sorensen said he conducted the study ranking 22 of the world's largest airlines to try to quantify the differences among frequent-flier programs. (Sun Country's UFly program was not considered for the study.) Consumers love to gripe and grumble about their perks, or lack thereof, but there's not much data available to back up their claims.

So in February and March, Sorensen's team tried to book 6,160 flights at the lowest reward level at the carriers' websites for select travel dates between June and October. They found it was easier to redeem miles for flights that were for shorter distances. Travelers leaving in October also had a greater chance of finding a flight than travelers who wanted to vacation during the peak summer months.

Sorensen said he can't say for sure why Southwest came out on top, but he believes its policy of issuing miles with an expiration date, unlike most other airlines, makes it easier for the carrier to meet demand for award travel.

Carriers at the rear are harmed by a "tsunami of miles that have flown into these programs courtesy of the credit cards," Sorensen said. "The airlines have created their own problem for themselves in terms of reward availability." Consumers have gotten used to charging everything just to earn airlines miles. More miles means more demand for seats, making it harder for individuals to cash in their miles for travel.

Fuller flights add to the squeeze. The U.S. Travel Association predicts domestic leisure travel will increase by 2 percent in 2010 as the recession fades and consumers regain their confidence.

Sorensen noted in his study that finding tickets at the lowest tier was a challenge, confirming the fear many frequent fliers had: that having three tiers of award flights "would merely provide the carriers with an easy method to force members to spend more miles."

Delta defended its SkyMiles program.

"This survey is not a valid measure of our award redemption program," Delta spokesman Paul Skrbec said via e-mail. "The survey focused on a very limited number of flights over a two-month period," most notably domestic travel at the 25,000-mile level. In response to consumer complaints, Delta is undertaking "improvements that re-engineer the Delta.com award travel booking process and the award calendar to improve the accuracy of award itineraries," Skrbec continued. "Our customers have already expressed their dissatisfaction with online award shopping, and we are taking action on their feedback."

Randy Petersen, founder of the online forum FlyerTalk, said Delta's "had better days," pointing to the hiccups the airline has encountered in recent months as it combines Northwest's WorldPerks program with the SkyMiles program. "Two years ago, Delta would easily have been in the top half."