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Frequent-Flier Threat

By Joe Sharkey

With unions at United Airlines considering a strike over lost benefits, IdeaWorks, the research company, took a detailed look at how a work stoppage might affect United's huge frequent-flier program, Mileage Plus. Drastically curtailed service would immediately "send ripples through the categories most aligned with frequent-flier programs, such as hotel and car rental companies" with promotional tie-ins to Mileage Plus, it said, and would erode the loyalty of the program's 45 million members. IdeaWorks said that the Loyalty Services unit of United, which operates Mileage Plus and has partnerships with 145 national brands that buy United miles for their own promotions, is the only reporting segment within United that has posted earnings since 2001. United is a unit of the UAL Corporation.