



FAQ for the 2019 IdeaWorksCompany Reward Seat Availability Survey

What does this survey measure?

This survey measures only reward seat availability for low-priced everyday rewards; the most popular basic reward type. It answers the member question “How easy is it to get flights with this program?” The results also indicate how a single airline changes availability over time. The results most accurately compare similar programs such as American, Delta, and United. Comparing a mileage-based program, such as Turkish Airlines, to a point-based program such as JetBlue, does not represent the best application of the survey results. The survey is not intended to indicate which frequent flyer program is "best," which would be a very subjective assessment.

What are low-priced everyday rewards?

The seats we looked for represent comparable reward types across the programs in the survey. Low-priced everyday rewards require the minimum number of miles (or points) and are limited in supply. Higher priced rewards are more available, and sometimes can be booked as the last seat on a flight; these are not included in the survey. Some programs offer ultra-low priced reward levels, which may represent special offer prices, very few available seats, or seasonal variations. These also are not included. The survey attempts to measure similar rewards for all airlines in the survey.

Why was a different query method used for JetBlue and Southwest?

These airlines use dynamic pricing (pay-with-points) for rewards which is not the same as the low, medium and high price method used by competitors American, Delta, and United. An alternate method was created to allow comparison with traditional reward programs.

Credit cards are a universal means to earn significant quantities of points. For many members, cards represent the largest source of point accrual. Credit card earning rates for these LCCs were compared to more traditional programs such as American and United for JetBlue and Southwest. For example, one United MileagePlus mile was found to equate to one Southwest Rapid Rewards point because of identical card accrual rates. Low-priced everyday reward prices posted by American and United were then converted to each LCC’s pay-with-points currency to determine the maximum reward levels permitted for reward queries.

For JetBlue and Southwest, the low-priced everyday reward for American and United of 25,000 miles was determined to represent 25,000 points in the JetBlue and Southwest programs. This method creates a bridge by which very distinct reward methods can be compared.

Why were booking queries made for two travelers?

Research has shown the average travel party size for air travel is 1.5 to 2.0 passengers. The number is lower for business travel and higher for leisure travel. Reward travel mostly represents leisure travelers, so the query size was set at 2 persons.

When were the queries made?

The survey has been conducted for ten years, always during March. This is intended to reflect a mid-winter planning cycle for summer vacation travel (yes, this largely applies to Northern Hemisphere travel).

What dates were queried?

With queries performed in March, travel dates range from June through October. This three to seven month advance booking window provides a good range of comparison. It allows the survey to determine whether booking in advance provides more reward seat availability. Departure dates are followed by return dates 6 days later. The very same dates were chosen for all airlines.

What types of routes were selected?

The top routes for each airline were chosen. As this is a global survey, it would be impossible to apply a single set of routes to the entire list of 20 airlines. In addition, we create a distinction between long haul and shorter routes. Long haul routes exceed 2,500 miles, while medium haul routes are 250 to 2,500 miles. Some airlines, such as Southwest, operate networks dominated by shorter routes. For these carriers, only the shorter routes were queried. Traditionally, reward availability is lower for long haul routes, and the survey method could be seen as favoring shorter haul airlines. However, in reality, the survey simply favors airlines which offer the best overall reward availability.

How many queries were made?

100 to 200 one-way queries were made for each airline. For airlines with long haul networks, the 200 queries were divided between long haul and shorter routes. For airlines without long haul networks (such as Southwest and JetBlue) 100 queries were made for shorter routes.

Were all reward flights accepted?

Yes, except that itineraries which required a change of airports during a connection were not included — for example, a trip through London which required the traveler to connect between Gatwick and Heathrow. But any other itinerary posted by the airline was accepted. This includes itineraries with long layovers and multi-city routings. Any departure time on the day queried was also accepted.