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Airlines roll out amenities to lure elite fliers back

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Many business travelers spent the last year on the ground or consigned to coach as the economic downturn eroded corporate bottom lines.

Now, industry analysts predict an uptick in corporate travel. And the battle for those premium-paying passengers is heating up as airlines roll out an array of new perks, from bedlike seats to first-class service on regional carriers.

"The business traveler is the most profitable part of the traveler segment," says Bob Harrell, an airline consultant, who notes that even in economy class, the lowest domestic refundable fare typically paid by a business traveler is five times the lowest price paid by a leisure flier who bought a non-refundable ticket far in advance.

Perks, from a luxury airport lounge to an in-flight gourmet meal, can persuade a corporate traveler to pick a particular carrier over the competition.

While airline officials say many of the amenities being rolled out this year have long been planned, more business passengers may be able to take advantage of them now that analysts predict a reversal of a travel downturn that led the airline industry to lose an estimated \$9.4 billion globally last year.

Delta spokesman Paul Skrbec says his airline is investing \$1 billion through 2013 to enhance services and amenities, particularly for premium-paying and frequently flying passengers. The improved services, he says, "will really help bring Delta to the front of the pack."

Continental and Delta are making a good night's sleep a little easier to get on international flights. Delta is installing flat-bed seats for BusinessElite passengers on 90 aircraft. Continental is putting in seats that recline 180 degrees in BusinessFirst cabins flying between such cities as Newark-Paris and Houston-Amsterdam.

New menu items

Continental announced new menus for BusinessFirst passengers flying overseas in December. Traveling to Frankfurt from Houston? How about the broiled tenderloin with asiago cheese broth? Passengers can nibble on seafood-filled pastry blossoms for starters.

While premium passengers account for less than 10% of all international travel, the higher fares they pay bring in about 30% of the passenger revenue reaped from international trips by most carriers, according to the International Air Transport Association.

From 2007 through 2009, revenue from premium traffic internationally plummeted 20%, IATA says. But the tide is turning. The number of passengers who flew in business or first class internationally in December increased 1.7% vs. December 2008, the group says. It was the first rise, when compared with the previous year, since May 2008.

A survey released this month by Ascend, an aviation industry consulting firm with offices in London, New York and Hong Kong, found that 35% of those polled expected to fly more on business this year as compared with 10% last year. And 28% predicted a rise in budgets for air travel this year vs. 9% who expected the same in 2009.

It will be a "weak uptick," but "in comparison, things are more optimistic," says Peter Morris, chief economist at Ascend.

"There are more people talking about increasing budgets than reducing budgets, so it's definitely going in the right direction."

First class on regional jets

Regional carriers, known in the past for shorter flights, are increasingly making longer trips. So American Eagle will for the first time add first-class service to some flights starting in July. Passengers can get the premium service on flights from Chicago and Dallas/Fort Worth to such cities as Atlanta, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City and Washington.

"Offering first-class service on American Eagle will make a difference in attracting and retaining the company's most frequent business travelers," [American Airlines](#) spokesman Tim Smith says.

American Airlines is also adding seats this year to first-class cabins on 106 domestic jets, enabling two more passengers to sit in the premium section.

Delta plans to outfit 66 more regional planes with first-class seats, Skrbec says. By midsummer, 219 of the aircraft operated by the airline's regional carriers will have first-class cabins.

Comfort is key to making sure business fliers arrive at their meetings in top form, travelers and industry experts say.

But on the heels of the worst economic crisis in decades, some say companies will continue to cinch their purse strings and carefully evaluate what is worth paying for.

It's a budget question

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"If someone cannot get from one destination to another comfortably, they're certainly not going to perform their duties very well, but again at what cost?" says Carol Ann Salcito, who consults with corporations on travel management. "That's really what's being looked at. When you're looking at flat beds or improved menus. ... Can your budget sustain the impact?"

Ken Stead, who takes more than 20 business trips a year, says that about a year ago, his company stopped allowing employees to fly business class overseas.

"We had typically been allowed on any flight over eight to 10 hours to fly business class and, in efforts to save jobs and to keep the cash flow going, we were all asked to fly the old economy seats," says Stead, who lives in Aurora, Ill., and is a new-product development manager for [Molex](#), an international electronics company.

That can be tough, he says. "Doing a 15-hour flight to Hong Kong, you can use every single inch of space and every creature comfort you can get your hands on," he says.

Stead is hopeful that as the economy rebounds, the travel policy may be reconsidered. But he's not certain. "I'd like to think that they'll give it some thought," he says. But, he says, "There's been no statement one way or another."

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