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Frequent flier smiles: It's easier to redeem miles

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Here's something those trying to cash in on frequent flier miles or points seldom hear: It's now easier to book the flight you want to the destination you want.

The annual Switchfly Reward Seat Availability Survey, which gauges the frequent flier programs at 25 of the world's largest airlines, found seats were available for frequent flier redemption on 72.4 percent of the flights checked. That's a very slight increase compared with the prior year.

"I was surprised by this year's results," said Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorksCompany consulting firm, which surveyed 7,640 flights in March. "Typically, when you see the industry recovering from financial duress, one of the things they cut back on is giving away free seats."

Instead, many airlines have actually made frequent flier seats available on more of their flights.

Sorensen credits the boost to the independent credit cards many fliers now use to rack up award miles that they can redeem without restrictions. Those credit cards, like the one offered by Capitol One, have become popular with consumers, and have forced airlines to make it easier for members of their own frequent flier programs to cash in miles or points in order to compete.

Airlines with the most flights with seats open for redemption

Rank †	Airline †	% of flights with seats open †
1	Air Berlin	100
1	Southwest	100
2	Virgin Australia	99.3
3	JetBlue	92.9
4	AirAsia	92.1
5	GOL	90.7

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"[The airlines] want to compete against the bank-issued credit cards, so this is one way for them to do that," Sorensen said.

Another factor is an accounting rule that says airlines can book revenue from the sale of frequent flier miles only after the passenger has traveled.

Low-cost carriers offer the most options

As has been the case in past years, low-cost carriers have the most flights offering seats for frequent flier redemption, according to the study.

On average, 95.8 percent of the low-cost airline flights surveyed had seats available. By comparison, traditional airlines had frequent flier award seats on 65 percent of their flights. That's almost a 4-point increase from last year, but still well below the availability offered by low-cost airlines.

"The low-cost carriers tend to have a lot of frequency into the markets they serve, so they do have an inherent advantage," Sorensen said.

The frequent flier programs offered by airlines such as Southwest and JetBlue are also younger than the programs at older, legacy carriers. As those airlines have merged and become bigger over the years, so have the number of members in their loyalty programs. That means there are more miles in those programs than in the programs offered by competitors.

Among the largest airlines in the world, Delta and United flew in different directions in the latest report.

Delta, which finished dead last in the 2013 survey, moved up to 16th place. IdeaWorksCompany found frequent flier seats available on 55 percent of the Delta flights it surveyed, an increase of 18.6 points compared with last year.

"I think Delta finally got around to looking at the health of their frequent flier product and said, 'You know, we need to make some changes here,'" Sorensen said.

By comparison, United Airlines slipped to 14th place in the survey. IdeaWorksCompany found frequent flier seats available on 71.4 percent of flights, down 8.6 points.