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EDITORIAL

Last month we talked about "negative advertising". Here is another worldwide example how to antagonise your best customers. It is the scheme devised by many airlines to provide their frequent (and also not so frequent) travellers with a free points system or free miles which these travellers are supposed to be able to redeem for some future free travel.

Basically, from a public relations point of view, the idea is a good one. Once in the scheme, the traveller tends to travel on the same airlines all the time so as to quickly accumulate sufficient points or miles to be able to take that promised free trip.

Unfortunately, what was supposed to have been a top class promotion campaign is rapidly turning into a real nightmare for the airlines as they have unleashed a huge monster of a scheme which they can no longer control. The main reason lies within the airlines themselves due to a lack of coordination between two major departments.

On one side you have the sales promotion department who's job is to attract more and more customers to the airline. The frequent travellers scheme is of course a fantastic tool to achieve this.

On the other hand you have the airline's revenue department who's job is to make sure that the airline earns the maximum of revenue per seat offered. As far as that department is concerned,

any scheme requiring seats to be set aside for free travellers is detrimental to its aim to boosting the earning capacity per seat.

And there you have the clash between two departments of the same company who both pull in opposite directions, with the poor customer being the pig in the middle. Whilst the sales promotion department is busily selling its frequent travellers scheme to every Tom, Dick and Harry, the revenue department tries to limit to the maximum the number of free seats per flight. The result is obvious: whilst the number of "frequent travellers" increases every day, the number of seats available for their free points or miles stays the same. With more and more passengers with redeemable air points or miles fighting for fewer and fewer seats, the original successful public relations idea is slowly but surely turning into a first class sales promotion disaster.

Originally the scheme had been designed for the internal USA market where the airline network is very dense with many daily flights between cities. If you could not redeem your free miles on one flight, there was always a flight an hour or two later, so no great problem. But when the scheme was expanded to the world market and into areas where there are only one flight a week or, at the best, one flight a day, to be denied travel on a given day may totally ruin your trip. In many cases, unable to use their points or miles due to lack of free seats, clients are eventually forced to buy tickets any-

way if they want to travel at all as planned. To add insult to injury, airlines impose total restrictions on certain flights and close off whole periods, particularly over holidays, to the use of your free points or miles. And to top it all off, they also set a time limit after which your points or miles become void.

So, whilst joining one of these scheme is made as easy and simple as possible, it seems that everything is put into your way to try to prevent you from getting any benefit out of it. Many are the travellers who have thrown their vouchers into the wastepaper basket in total disgust, swearing that they would never fly on that particular airline again. The situation is so bad now that frustrated frequent travellers in the USA are asking their airlines to scrap their useless schemes and replace them with cheaper air fares. Needless to say that the airlines' revenue departments will resist that move as well. They obviously want the cake and eat it too.

Trying to organise a trip for a family where one member travels on a free ticket, with the rest of the family paying the normal fares has become an almost impossibility, particularly if the trip entails 3, 4 or more flights. You can bet your bottom dollar that your family will have to split up and travel on separate flights.

If you think of saving up all your points or miles to be able to travel Business class, forget it. There are even fewer seats available in Business class. In many cases you can wait weeks on end before the airline will find you a free seat.

So there you are, another fine example on how to pick loyal and devoted customers, who are quite happy with your services, and turn them against you to the point where they will never use your services again. Indeed, why not scrap the scheme and return to cheaper fares? At least the customers get their benefits up front and so they know where they stand.

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