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The two-class system operated by most scheduled airlines over many years is being questioned. A new fashion has emerged in the form of intermediate classes. Recently, new class concepts have appeared on the market whose variety confuses not only the expert but also in particular the consumer.

Swissair has just made the important decision to maintain its long-established two-class system. And for good reasons.

Why Swissair is sticking to the class system

THE new class experiments are the result of persistent over-capacity and growing losses in the airline industry. In their endeavour to recover the lost profitability many carriers discovered a market potential which had always been there, but had been neglected: the business traveller.

To win over these very desirable customers, new intermediate classes were created, designed to be different from the established economy or tourist class. This innovation may be necessary for other airlines, but decidedly not for Swissair. Why?

Imaginary innovations

Swissair's product has always been firmly oriented towards business traffic. The airline has for long been recognised as catering for demanding and frequent business travellers. These passengers determined the service quality which made Swissair's reputation.

Its economy class provides the kind of service advertised by other carriers for their intermediate classes, and sometimes more. While the competition put tight seating into their long-haul aircraft – nine abreast on DC-10 and 10-abreast on B-747 – Swissair always retained its more comfortable versions with eight and nine seats abreast on these aircraft types.

For the past three years a sophisticated electronic reservations system has enabled passengers travelling at normal fares to select their seat at time of booking.

Swissair is convinced that its service standards in economy class are already on the level aimed at by other carriers in their new intermediate classes. This is why, for instance, on long-haul routes Swissair offers as a matter of course a choice of two menus served on china, with wine glasses and proper cutlery instead of plastics.

Equally as a matter of course, passengers find on Swissair flights the widest range of international newspapers and magazines of any airline, or that credit cards are accepted for purchases on board.

Not only are the earphones for inflight entertainment free but so too are alcoholic drinks – a further step in the airline's constant endeavour to raise service standards.

While passengers travelling at normal fares enjoy certain advantages regarding reservations and full flexibility, Swissair does not intend to differentiate between its customers once they are on board. In economy class it wants to offer all passengers a full in-flight service equally, and at economy class fares.

Economics and transparency

Apart from these considerations regarding customer service, there are economic and practical reasons in favour of the two-class system.

Demand is extremely variable, differing not only according to route and season but also in practice from one flight to the next. Therefore, to divide aircraft cabins into separate and fixed class configurations is highly problematic.

Since the number of passengers travelling at normal and special fares varies greatly, the intermediate class would sometimes have too many seats and sometimes too few. If they are refused, this would leave unutilised seats in the intermediate class and negatively affect the operating economics. If, on the other hand, the excess of economy passengers is seated in the intermediate class, customers are mixed which the new system was intended to avoid.

For these reasons Swissair concluded that if an intermediate class was to be economically viable, it was unlikely to be so unless there was a sharp increase in tariffs.

All these arguments convinced Swissair to maintain the two-class system which not only enables it to treat all passengers on board equally well, but which in practice is efficient, transparent and, for the customer, easily understandable.

The passenger's verdict

During the time that other carriers have tried to offset their shortcomings in service quality with the introduction of intermediate classes, Swissair has consistently and determinedly raised the product quality of its economy class.

This has been regardless of the many elements which already distinguished it from its competitors, and these efforts did not go unnoticed by frequent travellers.

In surveys by specialised publications and consumer polling organisations, Swissair was again selected as one of the world's best airlines.

Comparing five of the most recent independent surveys, Swissair is either in first place or follows as first foreign airline the national carrier of the country in which the survey was conducted. Yet this is despite Swissair being one of the very few airlines to operate without an intermediate class.

Well spaced eight-abreast seating in the DC-10's economy class.