



## Working with Airlines

Fewer rollover rates and a heavy contract negotiation season lies ahead.

**AFTER THE COVID-19 OMICRON VARIANT PUT THE TRAVEL RECOVERY ON PAUSE** beginning in late 2021, business travel has rebounded solidly since mid-February and through the spring. Airlines have reported business travel recovery in March—whether measured by demand or revenue—anywhere from 50 percent to 80 percent compared with 2019.

Gross revenues for some carriers even are exceeding 2019 levels, thanks to continued strong leisure demand and increased fares. In April, the average U.S. airfare was up 156 percent year over year, to its highest level in seven years, according to Airlines Reporting Corp.

Fares also are up because carriers still lag in terms of capacity and network recovery, while demand continues to climb and outstrip supply. As a result, fewer airlines will want to roll over rates this year, so corporate travel buyers should come to the negotiation table prepared with as much data as possible to back up their demand for discounts.

Buyers also will want to look carefully at carrier routes and schedules as they ramp up their business travel, since many options have changed significantly the past two years, especially when it comes to secondary and tertiary markets. Some routes on certain carriers are gone, while other destinations now are serviced with stopovers as opposed to direct flights. As a result, some buyers might need to expand the number of airlines in their programs.

While scoring the best deals still will be important to corporations' bottom lines, some companies have become more focused on their travelers' well-being than pre-pandemic, and they've loosened their policies to allow for more employees to book higher classes of service. A word of caution, however: Leisure demand for premium seats has filled the gap while business travelers remained off the road, and carriers do not see that abating.

This trend could make it harder for business travelers to secure desired seats, particularly as corporates tend to book closer to departure. Some carriers are "managing" the expected increased business demand by holding back some premium inventory a little longer for corporate clients, but that is by no means a sure thing. Buyers could address premium access during contract negotiations. — *Donna M. Airoidi*

### I. BEFORE YOU COMMIT

Most corporate discount deals are measured on market share, but buyers can gain leverage if they have high-yield spend like first or business class or full-fare coach available to shift to new suppliers. Airlines also desire discounted economy or lowest-logical-fare business, providing it's business the carrier would not receive without offering discounts. Considering that suppliers are consolidating, commit only to the share you can manage. Many companies overcommit, and then underperformance puts their airline programs at risk. Discount programs are structured based on opportunities.

Consider a few hundred thousand dollars as a minimum for the U.S. point of sale, though your agency can provide more exact benchmarks. If your volume does not meet the minimum, look into revenue- or sector-based incentive programs for back-end rebates, club passes, waivers and favors, upgrades and/or frequent-flyer status. Also look into the small-business programs some carriers offer. Some travel management companies also provide their negotiated discounts to their customers, particularly with international carriers. Determine whether HR, frequent-flyer loyalties and other costs of implementing preferred airline agreements are worth the benefits.

- A.** Estimate your domestic and international air volume for the next year based on last year's numbers and the company's business plan, such as M&A, new product lines and new locations. Consider air volume for meetings and internal trips like training. Remember that volume ultimately is determined by business dynamics and the economy, not the travel manager. Airline usage also is determined by origin lift, especially for travelers based on airlines' hub cities.
- B.** Ask frequent travelers which airlines they use and why, assess frequent-flyer memberships, understand which air and ground amenities matter to travelers and determine travelers' willingness to support a preferred airline program. Use loyalty to improve production on your preferred airline or airlines.
- C.** Determine the value drivers of your company and search for the most suitable program. Make sure the deal will satisfy your company's safety and security requirements, as well. In considering requirements, be sure that your travel policy can support the deal you are considering or can be changed to support any discounts you will need to promote in order to satisfy the commercial terms of the agreement.

### II. GATHER INFORMATION

Proper data can help you win discounts for city pairs, multiple destinations from one city, regionally or across your travel program.

- A.** Obtain information about your travel program from your TMC databases, online booking systems and third-party data consolidators:
1. At least the top 20 city pairs by segment and passenger count, including carrier and origin and destination data.
  2. Carrier spend per airline per route for the most recent 12 months.
  3. Tickets and value per class of service, including full-fare economy, discounted economy, business class and first class. Know the tradeoffs in using booked, ticketed or flown data. While bookings data is available more readily and with less of a lag, it does not have the same precision as ticketed or flown data.
  4. Analyze corporate card data to find trips booked outside your TMC. Airlines do not count those trips toward the volume you agreed to provide, but the volume does add to your negotiating power, particularly if you can articulate actions you're taking to minimize leakage.
- B.** Investigate government and independent information on airlines. Perhaps an airline has low load factors on a key route or another carrier has launched competing service, allowing you to negotiate aggressively. Be aware of airline customer service metrics. Some airline or third-party providers offer reports on on-time performance, delayed flights and mishandled baggage. The U.S. Department of Transportation provides such data for domestic airlines through the Bureau of Transportation Statistics at [bts.gov](http://bts.gov). Also investigate each airline's maintenance issues and the average age of its aircraft.
1. Obtain marketshare information by city pair from the DOT, recognizing that such data is free but dated by at least a few months. Data from other sources, including ARC, travel agencies, consultants and other third parties, can be costly.
  2. Look closely at data for more than one year to ensure you are referencing an established trend. Look at different quarters of the year to determine the seasonal impact, acquisition or divestiture activity and one-time impacts.
3. Focus on the capacity each airline has in given cities and on certain routes. The difference between one carrier's 60 percent market share on a route and another carrier's 20 percent share is significant to the buyer's opportunity to move share.
  4. Useful information can be obtained from several third-party firms and from consultants performing data analyses with optimization modeling. This will take into account both client traffic and airline capacity and determine the optimal airline or airlines to serve your travelers.
- C.** Document your plan to shift marketshare and to influence travelers' airline choices. Note past successes.
- D.** Have your travel agency run quality-control checks to document the difference in available fare for those instances when travelers did not use the preferred carrier in order to show carriers where their fares stand against what was actually purchased.
- E.** Determine how and to what degree you can leverage your employees' meetings and incentive travel.
- F.** Airlines increasingly charge for a la carte offerings above the base fare. Ancillaries include seat selection, checked bags, early boarding, Wi-Fi, onboard meals and upgrades. Though many of these fees are not negotiable, travel buyers should attempt to capture spending through expense reporting and corporate card data to show airlines the total amount spent.
- G.** Compile benchmarks. Data from peers and TMCs lend perspective.
- H.** Seek independent advice from an expert with no financial interest in the process if you do not have internal subject matter expertise.
- ### III. GET STARTED
- A.** Not all business is equally attractive to airlines. Understand your travel patterns and find a compatible supplier.
1. Recognize airline network strengths: Short haul versus long haul, hub and spoke versus point to point, international reach versus domestic focus.
2. Recognize product and value differences. Some airlines are no-frills, low-cost operators, and others provide comprehensive services.
  3. Recognize the total cost. Some carriers offer low fares but charge for seat assignments, carry-on baggage and other ancillaries that exceed the cost of a traditional ticket. However, many airlines also contract services funds to offset many of those fees.
  4. Analysis of your organization's travel patterns may present opportunities for citypair-specific deals rather than systemwide deals, but don't sacrifice overall savings for sizable citypair-specific discounts. For more than one systemwide deal, carefully analyze which airlines will maximize citypair coverage without compromising your obligations to provide market share to other airlines.
  5. Determine whether the carrier participates in an airline alliance. Some airline partners offer joint alliance deals, while others even have developed antitrust-immune joint ventures, through which partners manage capacity, fares and corporate deals as one entity. Determine the magnitude of alliance relationships and how it impacts the carrier's negotiating leverage. Consider whether the airline requires an agreement through the JV as opposed to either an alliance or individual carrier agreement.
  6. Note your negotiating leverage.
    - a. Purchasing premium class fares on long-haul routes on which multiple carriers compete works in your favor. Airlines know they don't have to work hard to sell economy fares on a short-haul route on which one carrier has a monopoly.
    - b. A demonstrated ability to shift travelers to or away from an airline makes your company a desirable customer. Failure to deliver on marketshare commitments to carriers or inability to demonstrate that your policy can shift travelers

causes airlines to question your ability to deliver on commitments. Noncontracted airlines will take note when they are receiving far below their fair share of a market, as it indicates your ability to support preferred carriers. Monitoring daily production can help you boost a carrier's share to assure compliance to contract terms.

#### **B. Communication.**

1. Determine the degree of authority that the airline delegates to local corporate account executives, regional sales managers and the corporate sales or business development director at headquarters. Such relationships ensure that changes in regional staff do not eradicate contacts. Headquarters-level relationships may be limited, especially for smaller travel programs. Many airlines conduct monthly or quarterly progress reviews while others will meet only once or twice per year. Generally, more interaction is better, as strong airline reps have a current understanding of market developments and can share best practices regarding contract management and policy.
  2. TMC contacts.
    - a. The TMC might have an established relationship with the airline. If so, ensure your company's goals are compatible with this relationship.
    - b. TMCs are the primary source for your company's spending history and can be partners in negotiations.
  3. Peers and consultants can provide benchmarking data. Get involved with local boards, industry groups for buyers and sellers and networking groups to share best practices and industry trends.
- C.** Some companies, especially larger ones, take a formal approach by distributing RFPs to headquarters and local sales offices. Include essential information only. Agencies and consultants can help formulate and streamline the process.

## **IV. NEGOTIATE THE DEAL**

- A.** Outline the benefits of your business to the airline. Typically, airline agreements are written by and for the airlines, though your legal department may seek modifications.
1. Even before you issue an RFP, provide data on your company's traffic patterns and spend to prospective air partners. Highlight areas of interest to the airline, including such high-yield purchases as international business class. Many airlines will require your data to be processed through a third-party data aggregator before they submit a proposal. Allow four to six weeks to facilitate the data-release authorization required for this process, as it involves coordination between the airline and any TMCs servicing your company.
  2. Airlines are reluctant to offer trial periods for contracts, but absent the appropriate data, you may be able to implement stair-step agreements in which the level of discount increases with the volume delivered. Such deals are never as good as a formal bid based on historical data. Alternatively, a back-end rebate agreement may be possible for newer travel programs with little or no track record. Back-end rebates are increasingly rare though. Refer to someone who knows airline contracts well if you think you're getting a no too quickly.
- B.** Be persistent. Airlines are selective regarding the accounts on which they bid. Offering more volume on international routes can revive rejected requests for domestic discounts. Try to tie the two together for maximum purchasing power. Recognize that airlines place higher value on high-yield purchases—such as business class, international service and full-fare economy—and discount accordingly. Historically, many companies have avoided putting all their eggs in one basket, as market conditions and travel demographics can change. However, as the dynamic between buyer and supplier becomes more strategic and buyers gain stronger voices in the industry

through advisory forums, this is no longer necessary. Willingness to offer exclusivity to an alliance should result in a better economic offer.

#### **C. Show a strong front.**

1. Have your controller or senior financial manager attend negotiating sessions to help crunch numbers and describe the company's fiscal direction. Summarize your company's value to the airline. Share your policy and any proof that it works or has been enforced regarding supplier selection.
2. Depending on the company's culture, include procurement and other departmental representatives at each step of the negotiating cycle.

#### **D. Negotiate the types and levels of domestic discounts.**

1. Most airlines base discounts on the market share or incremental share and/or revenue a company can provide, on specific routes, on multiple routes from one origin or on a systemwide basis. Discount structures differ by airline, so understand which fare classes are included in any agreement. Keep the contract and the number of discounts manageable. Cluster markets with similar discounts or share requirements where possible. Pull out important markets the carrier does not serve well or at all.
2. Consider:
  - a. Agreements that include carrier spend or segment goals might not be beneficial. They can be useful for growing companies, though. Consider revenue-based targets in lieu of segment-based targets, as high-revenue segments carry higher discounts.
  - b. Most airlines offer only nominal discounts on lower-bucket fares. Assess the impact of such practices.
  - c. Obtain assurances that the carrier will reduce your traffic obligation when it lowers its frequency or aircraft size in a given market. Once the contract is implemented, monitor events that could impact the agreement like strikes, severe weather, excessive cancellations

or work slowdowns. To facilitate this, have the travel agency implement a reason code that helps track irregular operations due to strikes, weather, etc., so you can show how much that affected your ability to reach contract goals. If your business is particularly dynamic, you may even ask the airline to consider a share gap target, which targets marketshare gap rather than seat share; this kind of contract will adjust targets automatically as your city pairs change or as the airline changes service levels.

- d.** Don't overestimate volume or your company's ability to deliver it in order to extract a higher discount percentage. Airlines often respond to an inability to meet these obligations by reducing cooperation, which will impact the value of discounts earned in future negotiations. This will impact your organization's and ability to negotiate favorable rates.
- 3.** Other discount options:
  - a.** Most airlines have fixed-percentage meeting fare discounts for a group flying to the same destination, whether starting at the same place or not. Group and/or zone fares also may be available for groups of travelers. Buyers should assess group and meeting products and the potential benefits of combining transient and meetings spending for negotiating leverage. A possibility is to add meetings travel agencies to your list of approved agencies to apply your discounts and guard against having that volume benefit the meetings agency instead of your travel program.
  - b.** Some airlines may offer back-end discounts or incentive payments to eliminate the risk of providing an upfront discount with no increase in share. Ensure all back-end rebates and discounts are guaranteed and communicate the benefits of any back-end deals to business travelers.

- c.** Airlines typically discount the base fare only, meaning all taxes, fees, surcharges and ancillaries are added after the discount.
- d.** Determining the details of how the airline will provide access to their promotional fares is very important.
- 4.** Your discount might depend on your TMC's override agreement, through which it receives compensation to drive volume to a particular airline. The TMC might pass on to you the production-based revenue it earns from the airline on business booked for your account. Be aware that these agreements may not align with your preferred airline mix. Though such agreements are confidential to airlines and TMCs, it's possible to learn the targets and the value of your company's contribution to the override.
- 5.** Most airline deals are net fare agreements. However, some airlines provide back-end discount programs only in certain international markets.
- E.** Agree on the types and levels of international discounts.
  - 1.** Beware the pitfalls of carrier-spend goals. Buyers have no control over currency-conversion fluctuations or fare wars that negatively impact such goals on international routes.
  - 2.** Guaranteed upgrades can be obtained in lieu of a special fare or productivity-based free tickets. Capacity-controlled, one-class upgrades now are prevalent in specific markets. However, it can be difficult to measure their value, and assessing how carriers report their value is critical. Make certain this does not conflict with your travel policy, as upgrades with one airline may set a precedent. Understand the terms of the upgrades, as some can be very difficult to use. More liberal terms may be easier to use. Airline sales representatives typically have access to upgrades with different terms for usage.
  - 3.** Some multinational agreements may include different discounts in different regions but also may provide a bonus for overall

multinational performance and other umbrella incentives. Strive for point-of-origin pricing rather than point-of-sale pricing so discounts are available regardless of the country in which an airfare is booked.

- 4.** If you strike a deal with an airline that distributes your traffic to codesharing foreign partners, ensure systems are in place to guarantee the business is credited to the contracted airline.
- 5.** If dealing with a JV or alliance, push for full coverage from all airlines from all points of sale.
- F.** Some airlines may have a preferred payment or lower-cost payment vehicle that could impact airline flexibility.
- G.** Other considerations.
  - 1.** Keep traveler productivity in mind. Keeping travelers on connecting flights when nonstop flights are available or putting them on options that arrive the day before or depart the day after meetings come with a very real economic cost. While the ticket cash savings may look attractive, in reality, the hidden costs often can overwhelm the easier-to-measure savings.
  - 2.** Make sure airlines' proposed discounts align with your historical usage by booking class. Eye-popping discounts on seat classes your travelers never use or can't access at the time of booking have no value.
  - 3.** Home carriers do not need to work for business originating from their hubs or countries. Competitors often offer aggressive commercial proposals, provided you can shift travelers from airlines to which they have loyalty attachments. Carriers competing in markets that are not their hubs or home countries often offer aggressive commercial proposals to win business, provided you can shift travelers to use them. Many will offer mileage or status matching as an added enticement to switch.
  - 4.** Airlines aren't motivated to discount the routes where they dominate, so try linking discounts on these monopoly routes to



marketshare commitments on routes where they have to compete more for passengers.

5. If your policy and culture allow, explore connecting flights as cost-savers, especially for long-haul trips in which connection time is a small portion of the total journey. Make clear in policy the maximum journey time a traveler could expect.
  6. Ensure you know which country's jurisdiction governs the contract terms.
  7. Ensure your company's legal department reviews the deal before signatures are applied.
- H.** Ask to review the airline's contractual terms and conditions at the beginning of negotiations. A legal review can extend beyond the negotiation for the commercial discounts. This does not commit an organization to a formal agreement.
1. Set the contract length.
    1. Traditionally, deals negotiated between companies and airlines extend for two or three years, with the latter preferred by many larger organizations given the time necessary to negotiate a deal. Most airline agreements include formal periodic reviews and exit clauses, generally at 30 days' notice.
    2. Some airlines offer evergreen options—wherein the terms, conditions and legalese are retained—allowing buyers and airline sales personnel to focus exclusively on the commercial terms at regular intervals.
- J.** Consider ethics.
1. Airlines often will squelch deals if they've been used to set a target level for negotiations with their competition. Be careful: Word gets around about such double-dealing, and you could be precluded from discounts with carriers in the future.
  2. Keep the terms of your deals confidential. Most airline contracts are bound by nondisclosure agreements that prohibit the sharing of any information without the airline's approval, except for ticketing instructions to your agency or airline-appointed data

processors.

## V. MANAGE THE DEAL

- A.** Inform employees, emphasizing senior management's support for the program.
1. Post your travel policy on a corporate intranet page and use both your online booking tool and agency to steer travelers to book preferred airlines.
  2. Consider sending a memo that reiterates travel policy and encourages the use of your preferred airline or airlines.
  3. Consider holding employee seminars. Include in a presentation:
    - a. Potential savings from their use of preferred airlines.
    - b. Descriptions of any special programs to encourage use of the airline, including monetary prizes, upgrades, advance seat assignments, access to airport lounges, extra frequent-flyer mileage as agreed to by the airline or perhaps free trips not tied to a frequent-flyer program.
- B.** Ensure your TMC and its representatives are aware of the deal and understand their role in implementing it.
1. Make sure you and your suppliers understand which party is responsible for fare filing, and consider regular audits to verify accuracy.
  2. Define procedures both for travelers and for agents so they'll book the preferred airlines. Define the minimum savings required for the acceptable use of nonpreferred carriers.
  3. Agree upon a recourse if a travel agent fails to book the preferred airline or mention its availability. Agents' commonly fail to take the discount on an eligible fare.
  4. Specify what the TMC and online booking tool must do when your corporate traveler rejects a flight on a preferred airline. For instance, a traveler's refusal of a contracted airfare might trigger an exception report that is forwarded to the travel office and the traveler's supervisor.
  5. Consider asking the TMC to list on

travelers' itineraries the savings and losses of accepting the preferred airline.

6. If your spend is sufficient, airlines will allow your TMC to contact a special desk for major corporate accounts. Through this channel, airlines will consider matching prices on specific itineraries, which enables the company to save money while fulfilling marketshare commitments, or they will provide other such waivers and favors to support the program.
  7. Ensure your TMC does not have travel counselors booking incentives that conflict with your company's interests.
- C.** Monitor the deal through management reports from your travel agency and airline, both to assess the effectiveness of the deal and to prepare for future negotiations. Airlines use sophisticated tracking tools to gauge corporate client performance so they can amend or cancel contracts if goals are not met. In many cases, the airline will provide the buyer with reports. Before an airline review, prepare for any performance or opportunity discussions. The airline will prepare data and objectives. Have travel agencies track the published fare for what you buy and the contracted fare to validate their application of the discounts and to tell you how much your contract was worth to you.
1. Monitor traveler compliance to the agreement. Consider deploying incentives. Pass along management reports to department heads to track performance. Internal benchmarking, or measuring compliance among departments or lines of business, can serve as a powerful travel management tool.
  2. Track whether your company is booking flights at a pace that will meet marketshare commitments. Keep seasonal travel patterns in mind. What might look like a shortfall or excess volume at one point might end up being corrected by year-end. Your travel agency may have tools for managing multiple contract goals at the point of sale.



3. Maintain an open line of communication with your travelers via corporate intranets, email, surveys, social networks and memos to hear their opinions about whether the airline is providing acceptable service. Have copies of all queries and complaints forwarded to your office.
  4. Maintain contacts at multiple levels within airline sales organizations to develop long-term relationships and to ensure the organization and airline share a view of how the agreement is being honored. Establish multiple contract-performance checkpoints throughout the course of a contract.
  5. Many large companies use third parties to analyze contract performance and understand how airline yield management affects preferred corporate deals. Even midsize companies can benefit from a less complex, independent procurement review of results.
  6. Compile data from management reports for use in negotiations at least one month before the contract is set to expire. Such data should include:
    - a. Average fare per negotiated route.
    - b. The amount of business directed to the airline before and currently.
    - c. If applicable, reasons why the traveler did not use the preferred airline, such as travel agent error, schedule, employee refusal, the company's lowest-logical-fare policy or unavailability of seats, perhaps due to a carrier decreasing the service it provides in a particular market.
- D.** Consider hiring a third-party audit firm to monitor your TMC's performance in booking your organization's preferred airlines. This may prove particularly helpful for an organization with multiple agencies.
1. Have the auditor examine available data, including the percentage of times your agency offered the discount fares when such discounts were applicable, how frequently travelers accepted them and why travelers declined to accept them.
  2. Determine whether the airline imposed limits on the availability of discounted fares if those limits aren't in the contract.
- E.** Renegotiate the deal, if warranted. In most cases, a company that has generated even a small increase in market share for the airline probably can get at least a one-year renewal. If an organization consistently exceeds targets or meets them despite obstacles, it should request a larger discount. Regard the contract as a living document. As travel patterns change, amend goals and discount levels. Keep abreast of M&A that could impact your company's travel patterns.
- F.** Monitor the competitive dynamics of key routes. If a new entrant challenges your preferred airline on a monopoly route, try renegotiating a more favorable deal with your preferred airline. Alternatively, if a carrier exits a route and a remaining airline monopolizes it, make sure your discounts cover the correct booking classes in case the airline yield-manages its inventory to take advantage of its stronger market position.
- ## VI. MISCELLANEOUS
- A.** Though airlines largely are unwilling to eliminate baggage fees, they often waive them for frequent flyers. Major airlines are willing to negotiate a limited number of elite status designations or matches, which can help frequent travelers transition to a new carrier and shield them from certain ancillaries.
- B.** "Basic economy" fares are becoming increasingly common on both domestic and international flights as full-service carriers compete with low-cost carriers. Many travel buyers have decided that such fares' onerous restrictions outweigh any savings. Restrictions can include no seat selection, no changes or cancellations and, in some cases, no carry-on baggage. Some buyers have opted to block these fares from their booking tools entirely, but at the very least, they require educating travelers on the restrictions.
- C.** Upgrades.
1. Many airlines award upgrades almost exclusively to elite members of their loyalty programs, but increasingly airlines are making seat upgrades available for sale at the time of check-in.
  2. Make sure travelers know if you have a deal providing upgrades on a space-available basis.
- D.** Airport lounge admissions.
1. Some airlines offer complimentary airport lounge memberships in lieu of discounts or with certain types of tickets, usually in premium classes.
  2. Some provide a limited number of airport lounge admissions on request.
  3. Airlines increasingly offer reciprocal airport lounge access for customers of airline partners or those within an airline alliance.
  4. Some airlines sell their lounge memberships, especially in North America, in addition to free admission when purchasing premium classes. Those carriers sometimes offer discounted memberships to travelers with their contracted corporate clients.
- E.** Often, corporate deals offer executives special services. The number of executives that may be enrolled generally is based on the company's spend. Airlines also may provide separate airport check-in for some accounts and other recognition, the latter on an opt-in basis.
- F.** Some airlines sell bulk-purchase tickets or flight passes, which require an upfront payment but can provide savings when contracted discounts are difficult to secure. These programs can offer value if an organization can manage the internal aspect. Typically, one cost center makes the deposit and other cost centers burn off the credit.
- G.** Some airlines will consider prepayment at fixed rates in certain city pairs and payment on a cost-per-mile basis, perhaps with a pay-at-use concept.
- H.** Investigate an airline's international safety and security procedures and airport facilities.
- I.** Ensure the airline will relieve you of all contract commitments during labor-related stoppages or slowdowns. ■