

Frequent flier points: Use them or lose them

By Emily Ross

In the United States this week, another major airline, US Airways, announced that frequent-flier club members with no points activity for 18 months would have their points erased. This news follows on from similar edicts from United Airlines and Delta.



Locally, with the Australian Airline Partners bid for Qantas on the table, Qantas Frequent Flyer (QFF) members are also feeling nervous about their stockpiles of points. Both Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon and Australian Airline Partners have stated that there are no plans to change the current points system, but it is hard to believe that the points will not be devalued in the future, particularly if the QFF program is sold to a third party.

Regardless of the current dramas, the fact remains; there is no point in hanging on to points. The value of a frequent-flier point continues to decrease (like a bad investment) so you might as well spend the points.

SmartCompany.com.au asked a panel of travel experts for advice on how to spend frequent-flier points wisely.

The experts:

- Max Najar, director, Axis Travel
- Clifford Reichlin, editor, FrequentFlyer.com.au

Here are their top tips for members of such as programs as Altitude Platinum and Gold cards, Qantas Frequent Flyer, Star Alliance, American Express Centurion, Platinum and Gold cards and Oneworld.

Choose “out-of-the-way” destinations

Forget the highly competitive routes such as Melbourne to Sydney (that’s often where the bargains are, so points are worth less in dollar terms). Redeem points on flights such as Sydney to Alice Springs as these routes are rarely discounted. Similarly, redeem on longer domestic flights such as Sydney to Perth (36,000 points) rather than Sydney to Melbourne (16,000).

Book ahead as far as possible

Plan at least six months ahead of departure if possible. On more popular routes, for example flights to Bali during school holidays, book 12 months ahead.

Don’t waste points on hotels or car hire

“They just eat too many points,” says Najar.

Use your status

Platinum Qantas Frequent Flyer members should speak to the call centre direct rather than booking online. Platinum members may be offered options that are not accessible on the website. “Also members with platinum status are able to make seat requests,” he says.

For those who aren't so high up the frequent-flier food chain, Reichlin suggests asking someone you know who has higher status to make the call. "They can use a priority number and get access to more helpful and better trained staff," he says.

Pass points on to family members

Think of how popular you will be. A maximum of 100,000 points can be transferred each year in one transaction.

Try for an upgrade

It is actually very hard to get the opportunity to spend points on an international upgrade. "The chances in 2006 were low," says Najar, "and in 2007 we expect the same." Yield managers want as much as they can for these business/first class. Nonetheless, always register for an upgrade using points at the time the ticket is booked. If there is a seat free, the higher your status in the frequent-flier program, the greater your chances of success. Some tickets, especially discount tickets, will immediately see you out of the running for an upgrade.

In Najar's experience, passengers can have some luck if they ask their travel agent to keep checking daily on whether an upgrade has become available. And it is always worth trying to spend points on an upgrade when you check in or at the gate just before take off.

Call in the experts

FrequentFlyerClub.com.au (membership \$79 a year) offers a service where it manages your points for you. It will book domestic and international flights using frequent-flier points. A fee of \$55 for domestic and \$220 for international applies.

Consider the low-cost carrier

The launch and subsequent expansion of Jetstar has given QFF members access to an estimated 20% more opportunities to redeem their points through Jetstar services. The points-per-flight cost remains the same as QFF for economy class travel. While there is no business class on Jetstar, there is what's known as "StarClass". QFF members can redeem StarClass tickets at 20% less than the Qantas business class equivalent flight. It is advisable to book well ahead, as Jetstar has very full aeroplanes and is set to report another bumper half year of sales.

Tally ho, first class return fare to London on through QFF. Luvverly.

And finally...

Bear in mind, frequent-flier programs are tough nuts to crack. "The conditions of the program (s) are set in stone with little or no scope for compromise or flexibility or influence by third parties."

No one said it would be easy to redeem those points.