

A different kind of connection

With airline amenities dwindling, access to in-flight Wi-Fi or TV can dictate who gets your travel budget

I've flown 1.5 million miles on United Airlines in my working life. (Before you start tweeting congratulations, understand that it's the equivalent of spending six months, day and night, belted into creased leatherette.) For my devotion, and the annoyance of having United's "Rhapsody in Blue" theme permanently stuck in my head, I've been rewarded with annual Premier Executive status in the Mileage Plus program. So I'd have had a decent chance for a first-class upgrade when I flew from Seattle to Denver recently. Yet I didn't even consider booking the trip on United.

The reason? This was during the recent NCAA tournament, and I wanted to catch a game. United doesn't have live television on board. Same for Alaska, which also flies nonstop between the cities. But Frontier, which

doesn't even offer a first-class cabin to be upgraded into, features 24 channels on its \$6 DirecTV package. The two hours of my flight sped by as I watched Virginia Commonwealth upset Kansas.

Air travel has been a commodity for years. Gone are the days when one carrier would boast about the quality of its meals, another about the plushness of its cabin. Responding to research that showed most consumers make ticket-buying decisions solely by price, airlines pared amenities until the experience of flying became indistinguishable from one brand to the next.

Now the advances of technology have provided momentary separation. Some carriers have on-board entertainment systems that include TV. Others offer pay-per-use Wi-Fi. Some, like United, still don't have either. And occasionally, such as when I take a Delta

flight on a recommissioned Northwest aircraft, I hit the jackpot and get both. These days, I choose my airline by how I want to spend my time on a particular flight. Answer e-mails? Have a shot at free drinks and a meal with an upgrade? Kick back and watch a game?

Let's cherish the moment, and hope that this state of affairs is more than temporary. Maximizing quarterly profits—as opposed to building long-term customer loyalty—has been the industry's goal for so long that it seems to have become integrated into its DNA. As you read this, computers are figuring out which in-flight services generate the highest return on investment; those will likely become standard across the brands. Make sure the airlines know that you appreciate the options, or the rest will just fade away. —BRUCE SCHOENFELD

Name	Wi-Fi*	TV	Entertainment	Extras
Delta	Yes*	Live TV—18 free Dish Network channels (time to get caught up on <i>The Millionaire Matchmaker</i>)	Delta on Demand: 250 movies, a 4,100-song music library—even video games and in-flight trivia	Standard outlets and USB ports
United Airlines	No	No live TV; programming and movies on flights two hours or longer	20 music channels	In-seat power outlets in most seats
American Airlines	Yes*, on 767-200s and some MD80s and 737s	No live TV; some programming available on flights seven hours or longer	Free movies on the main screen or in-seat screens, plus audio programming	Power outlets on most aircraft
US Airways	Yes*, on A321s	No live TV; programming on some international and Hawaii flights	Music and video on demand on some international and Hawaii flights	Power outlets and USB ports on some aircraft
Frontier	No	Live TV—\$6 for access to 24 channels of DirecTV on Airbus flights	Movies available for \$8	Er ... in-flight magazine
JetBlue	No	Live TV—36 free channels of DirecTV (never miss the latest <i>Pit Boss</i>)	Movies for \$6 on flights longer than two hours; free SiriusXM Radio	Free unlimited snacks (score!)
Southwest Airlines	Yes, on most flights (\$5 flat fee)	Nope	Nope	Free pretzels and peanuts, suckers
Alaska Airlines	Yes*, on 70 percent of aircraft	No live TV; rental of the Wi-Fi-enabled digEplayer L7 available on some flights	The digEplayer offers TV shows, movies, and exclusive NFL Network shows	Again with the digEplayer

*Offered through Gogo Inflight Internet. Pricing varies based on type of device and length of service, from \$4.95 for 1.5 hours to \$12.95 for more than 3 hours (on a laptop).