

Are airlines withholding seats so you'll pay a premium?

By Bill McGee, special for USA TODAY

A few months ago I booked a flight for two and then went to select seats on the airline's site. Based on the destination and time of year, I was surprised to find only two adjacent seats were available without paying a premium. But I was even more surprised a few weeks later, when we boarded the aircraft and a flight attendant announced that only 30% of seats were occupied, so we should all feel free to stretch out.

So how could a flight that looked nearly full a month earlier wind up with seven out of ten seats empty? That's a question only the airlines can answer, and they're not eager to provide many details.

Are some carriers intentionally holding back seat assignments, in the hope we'll all pay for "premium" seats? It's a fair question, and the evidence is intriguing.

Behind the screen indeed

An awful lot goes on behind airline and travel booking screens, and much of it is strictly off-limits to consumers. What we do know is that for decades now airlines have become masters of what the industry calls yield management, offering millions of combinations of fares based on advance purchase patterns and other booking trends, so nearly everyone pays a different price based on when they buy. But now that paying extra for your seat selection has become common practice, securing your reservation is just half the battle.

Some industry experts have connected the dots. "They're trying to get people to buy premium seats," says George Hobica, [USATODAY.com's Fly Guy columnist](#) and the founder of [Airfarewatchdog.com](#). "They want to increase revenue. And we're getting more complaints about it." He notes that it "really annoys" passengers who want to sit together, particularly when traveling with small children.

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He's echoed by [Kevin Mitchell](#), chairman of the Business Travel Coalition: "With yield management, consumers are aware and they know that airlines are constantly changing prices on seats. But if this is true, it is unethical—they're grossly misleading us. The thing that I find so offensive is conveying to me that I have no options, but if I wait a week or two then I do have options."

According to the airlines, the raison d'être for ancillary revenue is unbundling ticket prices, so passengers who desire a given service—say checking a bag or ordering a soft drink—pay for it, while those who don't are spared the cost. But as Mitchell notes, "There's another twist to this. The airlines are saying fees are for 'optional services.' Well, seats aren't optional!"

Of course, securing a good seat isn't an issue if you're in first class or you're an elite member of a frequent flyer program. But what about the rest of us? As I've pointed out repeatedly in recent columns, we're faced with record-high load factors, the highest for the [U.S.](#) airline industry since World War II. But even with the [average percentage of occupied seats for domestic flights](#) at 82.7%, it's still an average—some flights will be fuller but others will not, particularly weeks in advance. Yet searching for seats keeps getting harder.

Seats for sale

Hobica cites the major airlines as the prime culprits, but also notes even low-cost carriers can make securing seats difficult. On the flip side, he credits JetBlue and [Virgin America](#) for providing customers with clear policies. And then there is [British Airways](#), which allows passengers in economy and business classes to select seats only 24 hours in advance. I asked an airline representative if seeing fewer free seats is a trend, and the response was: "That's going to vary because there are so many variables."

I decided to check on seat availability at Delta.com. I inquired about economy-class availability for two seats on a busy route—Atlanta to Chicago—and conducted an apples-to-apples search for the same morning departure seven days in advance, and again 14 days in advance. For the flight one week out, a total of only eight seats were available, one preferred and seven standard, but only one set of two seats together. For the flight two weeks out, a total of 29 seats were available, consisting of 20 preferred and only nine standard, and still with only one set together. Remarkable how even twice the booking time still produced so few "free" seats, separately or together, yet there were plenty of seats that could be bought for the right price.

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I contacted Delta and a spokesman said the price for preferred economy varies "depending on a number of different factors," so customers need to compare the costs on a flight-by-flight basis. The preferred seats are reserved primarily for Medallion members, and become available without additional charge 24 hours prior to departure. When asked if Delta has received complaints about a dearth of free seats, he stated, "Overall, our seat program has been received very well."

- When [my husband] tried to get a seat assignment on the first flight there was just one "complimentary seat" (near the back in the middle) available...the other available seats had to be purchased for \$69. On the connecting flight there were no "complimentary seats" at all!...Is this legal? He bought and paid for a ticket on these flights and now he is supposed to "buy" a seat!

- [After] paying for the flight, a message popped up and said that I could only get a seat assignment when I checked in. In order to get a confirmed seat, I had to pay \$129 extra! Unless I pay, without a confirmed seat, I am the first one to be bumped from the flight if they are overbooked. How do they get away with this?

- Does checking in online at the 24-hour mark before the flight give me a number in line or let me select seats then? Or do we all rush the gate with our boarding passes (and no seat assignment) in order to get the seat assignment?

How to respond? So what can you do? It's a tough proposition. Usually I would offer strategies for countering such airline initiatives, but in this case the options are limited. That's why some believe the [U.S. Department of Transportation](#) should investigate these practices. As Mitchell says, "The airlines are holding all the cards with this one. There is a sore need for transparency on this."

That said, consider the following:

- **Leave Flight bookings, baggage charges, seat allocations, frequent flyer data (as some fares do not allocate miles and points), the mechanics and the followup concerns with an experienced Travel Agent who does this for their living and know things that we travellers do not know about and have contacts and avenues that we do not know exist !**

- When budgeting your airfares, make sure you consider not just baggage fees but the added cost of seat selection—for ALL travelers and in BOTH directions.**

- If possible, book early, when there should be more seats available, and check in early too. Why the qualifier "should"? Because if availability is artificially manipulated, it's hard to be certain.**

- Book airlines that offer more transparent seat-selection policies. Of course, this is not an issue with Southwest and other carriers that offer "open seating" policies.**

- Finally, the last resort is what Hobica calls "horse trading": negotiating seat swaps with other passengers. But this has become a dicey and undesirable option with flights so full, overhead bins so crammed and fellow passengers who may have paid for premium seats in advance.**