

Learning on a Jet Plane

Distributed Problem Solving and Knowledge Sharing in a Virtual Community of Frequent Fliers



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Structure of Talk

1. Introduction to FlyerTalk
2. Discussion of the culture and practice of Mileage Runs
 - An example of information sharing and collective problem solving in an online community
3. Conclusions

1: Introduction to FlyerTalk

About FlyerTalk.com

- “The World’s most popular frequent flyer community”
 - Founded 1999
 - Ranked around 4,000th most popular site on the Internet (by Alexa.com)
- Threaded discussion forums
 - More than 6 million posts
 - The most popular are for specific airline & hotel programs
- Advertising supported
 - Uses standard, open source software
 - Part of for-profit frequent flier business
 - Moderated (heavily)

Methodology

- Online ethnography
 - Observer over two year period
 - Low-volume contributor
- Quantitative analysis of posting patterns underway
 - Taxonomy of user posting patterns
 - Overlaps between forums





Flyertalk Demographics

- Hard to measure
 - Personal information guarded
 - Prevalence of lurkers
- The associated Inside Flyer newsletter claims its 29,000 subscribers have
 - average annual household income of \$138,500
 - average age of 43
 - average mileage balance of 473,496.



Elite Status

- Awarded on paid miles flown in last year
 - Typical: 25,000 = Silver, 50,000 = Gold, etc
- Increasing perks with each level
 - Free first class upgrades
 - Express check in, security and boarding lines
 - Bonus miles awarded
 - Free or reduced cost lounge access
 - Baggage tags
- Benefits specific to certain airlines

Intended to Boost Loyalty

- One poster reports that to keep NWA Gold status
 - Makes at least one annual weekend trip to London
 - Pays more to take indirect flights at inconvenient times
 - Gives away all his air miles to family
- “My girlfriend, though she accepts it, thinks I'm slightly nuts.... Am I nuts? I can't help but ask myself sometimes. Maybe I should just give in and fly AA or whoever gets me there cheapest. It'd actually simplify my life in many ways. But then I'd just be a peon - only a peon who spends an awful lot of time in an airport. I hate that feeling.”

2: Culture and Practice of Mileage Runs

Mileage Runs Defined

- “A series of flights taken in a very short amount of time, solely for the purpose of accumulating frequent flyer miles, with a blatant disregard for the destinations.”
 - Flyertalk Glossary
- Never leave airport at the destination
- Reasonably common practice

Thread / Thread Starter	Rating	Last Post	Replies	Views
Sticky: Mileage Run Topic updates (0 : 1)		Oct 26, 08 10:44 am by jaredm	18	3,869
Sticky: Mileage Run Topic, Part 2 (0 : 1 : 2 : 3 : 4 ... Last Page)		Oct 26, 08 10:44 am by jaredm	154	137,969
Sticky: Welcome to the Mileage Run Forum		Nov 2, 08 10:24 am by jaredm	1	13,099
Sticky: Need Help w/ End of Year M007? Click here!		Oct 26, 08 10:44 am by jaredm	1	8,366
Message: DEN - ADK AS fare up to \$1293		Message: DEN - ADK AS fare up to \$1293	-	-
[FARE GONE] Wickedly Low Biz Class Fare from YYZ to LGA (Eggnog) on AA (Atlanta) (0 : 1 : 2 : 3 : 4 ... Last Page)		Tuesday 7:06 am by hrmhilly	6,372	466,595
[AA mile run] (0 : 1)		Tuesday 9:52 am by hrmhilly	21	5,360
[SW-SEA/TOR DL 990+ No Mile - B FARE] (0 : 1 : 2 : 3 : 4 ... Last Page)		Tuesday 2:57 am by hrmhilly	415	26,772
[UA] - Cheap EQMs from Tokyo? (0 : 1)		Tuesday 1:25 am by hrmhilly	16	305
[LAX-FRA \$433 all in UA/UM] (0 : 1)		Tuesday 1:03 am by hrmhilly	10	419
Questions about LAX-FIN \$147.70 all in M7Traveler		Tuesday 12:09 am by hrmhilly	1	68
Responsibilities for adding miles to this meeting?		Tuesday 12:09 am by hrmhilly	3	60
[FARE GONE] \$28 on CX Y BIZ on Vancouver (0 : 1 : 2 : 3 : 4 ... Last Page)		Tuesday 12:09 am by hrmhilly	237	11,824
[FA 3 hour int'l term around possible? (0 : 1)		Tuesday 12:05 am by hrmhilly	17	904
[FARE GONE] Y class MSP-LGW on CO \$239 one way +* (0 : 1 : 2 : 3 : 4 ... Last Page)		Wednesday 11:49 am by hrmhilly	1,033	43,598
[FARE GONE] NW: YVR-BOI (Transceiver-Bochamert) \$250CAD all in (0 : 1 : 2 : 3 : 4 ... Last Page)		Wednesday 11:28 am by hrmhilly	2,326	67,825
[end of year help] - IAL from PDX		Wednesday 11:23 am by hrmhilly	2	65

Mileage Run Subculture

- Special forum devoted to the topic, more than 160,000 posts
- Typical post heading
 - “7900 EQM on NW, \$197++ (SFO-LAX-PDX-SEA-IAD-SEA-LAX-SFO)”
 - Translation: two day trip from San Francisco to Washington D.C and back via Los Angeles, Portland and Seattle in each direction.
- Posters calculate cents per Elite Qualifying Mile

How??? Why???

- Economics can sometimes be justified
 - Low promotional fares (or data entry errors)
 - Money off coupons
 - Indirect routings with lots of changes
 - Exploit unintended codeshare possibilities
 - Take red-eye flights rather than hotels
 - Elite mileage bonus of up to 125%
 - Special promotions giving bonus miles
- If no value placed on own time....
- Renewing status is usually a driving force

Peer-to-Peer Education

- Dual character – conversation and searchable database
- Dissemination of Mileage Run expertise
 - Specialized software to explore fare availability and routing rules
 - Face-to-face seminars and online FAQs
 - Construction of most convoluted itineraries
- Sharing of best practices
 - Issues faced with airline staff
 - What to tell customs authorities

Discovery of Loopholes

- “Mistake fares” create huge interest
- Hundreds of people may book overnight
 - E.g. Hilton Japan mix-up, \$3 nights in Tokyo
 - E.g. \$250 business fare from Canada to Cyprus yields 8,373 posts
- Become part of folklore of community

Emergent Complexity...

- Unanticipated results of the interaction of complex rules
 - “CMB-SIN-ICN-LAX-SFO and back in First Class on SQ, OZ, and UA yielded 86910 Miles and More status miles.... Note that many of these fares are extremely hard to ticket....”
 - Exploit special pricing, \$1,740
 - More than 300 posts followed

Case Study: Phantom Stays

- Mattress Run = hotel equivalent of Mileage Run
- Hyatt has an annual “Faster Free Nights Promo”
 - 2 stays = one free night
 - 2 stays at \$70 each can equal a \$500 night in Tokyo
 - But \$70 Hyatts are thin on the ground
- Brainstorming, collaboration, and experimentation yield the Phantom Stay
- It works! Hotel fills up with phantom guests...
 - Fall 2006: Hyatt outlaws the practice

Socialization – Cultural Leaning

- “When I first heard about “mileage runs” from my former boss, who was in the habit of doing them frequently, I thought he was absolutely nuts. A year or two later, I found FlyerTalk and became intrigued, though I thought a lot of the folks here were -- well, a wee bit eccentric. Within weeks I had accrued literally thousands of FREE and almost free frequent flyer miles.... It wasn't long before I purchased something like 400 boxes of Kellogg's cereal...”

Normalizing Mileage Runs

- “I can either try to do some work at home or the office with lots of interruptions, or I can sit in a nice leather seat with someone bringing me drinks as I type away at something....”
- “an extended date... we get dinner, a movie, drinks, and sometimes desert.”

Socialization and peer group norms

- “I will not discuss my addiction with anyone else than FlyerTalk (other guys like me) and my wife (she is of the understanding type). Therefore I don't really feel silly.”
- “I have only told a couple of people about this because it seems it would be exhausting to field all the additional questions.”

Convincing the Wife

- Standard narrative... before :
 - “since joining FT a few months ago, my wife thinks that I've become psychotic and obsessed with elite status and miles.”
- and after
 - “Yeah, same here, SO doesn't like flying so the idea of a MR is hell... But after we both got opopped to C last time on AMS-ORD because I was a "special customer" (GA's words) she all of a sudden started asking questions.”

On and Off Line Interaction

- Flyertalk tradition of “Dos”
 - Common in online communities
- Mileage runs work naturally as shared experience
 - Even set up blocks of assigned seating

3: Conclusions & Further Work

Issues in Broader Project

- Interaction of technology and community
- Role of “Elite” status hierarchy
 - Interaction between program status and social status within FT
 - Internalization of brand identities
- Relations with business
 - The “Starwood Lurker”
- Social codes and rituals
 - Aggressive moderation practices
 - Dual role as business and community
 - Emergence of distinct sub-communities

Internet Makes Mileage Runs Possible

- Brings together self-reinforcing community with shared values, practices
- Provides the tools needed to explore fare rules and availability
 - Previously available only to travel agents
- Creates complexities and vulnerabilities
- Provides mechanism for information exchange
 - Supports collaborative work

Empowering Users?

- Familiar story: Big corporations destroy privacy through data mining
- This story: Loosely coupled network of individuals use IT to share information and collaborative solve problems arising from interaction of rules within a complex system
 - The big companies are losing their privacy...
- Users: empowered or enslaved?

Methodological Questions

- Degree of interactivity
- Research ethics
 - Quotation of material from public forum
 - Disclosure of identity as researcher

Relevant Concepts

- Advice welcome on how to frame...
 - Virtual Community
 - Distributed Problem Solving
 - Information Grounds
 - Social Capital
 - Status Hierarchies
 - Serious Leisure
 - Social Network Analysis