

Ancillaries continue to complicate booking on airline sites

Booking a ticket on an airline website these days is a little like finding your way through an ever-changing online thicket in which new obstacles pop up a la the maze in "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire."

The major reasons for this are that airline strategies for ancillaries continue to evolve, as do the ways they display -- and sometimes price -- those fees on their websites.

We decided to compare Airline websites with services of many professional Travel Agents.

Ancillary fees started out as a Hail Mary pass that American Airlines threw five years ago in the face of soaring fuel costs. American announced baggage fees, which had been tried before but had never stuck, but it did so before it had systems for processing and collecting those fees.

That lack of technology didn't deter other airlines from not only following American but also unbundling other ancillary services from the ticket price: seats with extra legroom, priority boarding, in-flight meals, etc. The problem was that technology had to play a game of catch-up when it came to displaying, booking and fulfilling these new services and their accompanying fees.

The players have caught up on the technology front, although a furious debate continues between airlines and GDSs over who does it better when it comes to displaying and booking these ancillaries.

GDSs, many online travel agencies (OTAs) and retail agency groups say the GDSs provide the comparison shopping consumers deserve. The airlines say that each of their products is so different that ancillaries don't lend themselves to comparison shopping, and they insist that when it comes to telling consumers about ancillaries, airline websites do it best. **So they say!**

Travel Weekly did an informal study of airline websites to see how well they inform customers about the most common ancillaries: checked bags, seats with extra legroom or advanced seating on carriers that have made picking a seat or securing adjoining seats an ancillary service.

Learning the price of a preferred seat generally requires going to the point of purchase, entering your name, home address, email address (plus an email address confirmation), phone number, gender, etc. before the airline will reveal the price.

Moreover, the price for that seat often varies. United Airlines introduced dynamic pricing for its Economy Plus seats in the first quarter of this year. As a result, prices for those seats can vary depending on the time of purchase.

While pricing for Delta Air Lines' Economy Plus seats is fairly static, the airline does offer short-term sales on these seats and will continue to review "opportunities for discount sales in the future," according to a Delta spokesman.

To add to consumer confusion, American two weeks ago introduced "fare families," becoming the first U.S. network carrier to adopt this kind of pricing. Air Canada, Frontier Airlines and Qantas are just some of the other carriers who also use this model, which packages seats with certain ancillary services into bundles with preset prices. American's Choice Essential seats cost an extra \$68 roundtrip, Choice Plus an extra \$88 roundtrip. Customers can still buy a bare-bones seat and buy whatever ancillaries they want a la carte.

The result is an inconsistent shopping experience from airline site to airline site. And within sites, things change as airlines roll out upgrades and flirt with dynamic pricing for preferred seats.

On most airlines, paying to check a bag remains a separate online transaction. Once consumers find out what the baggage fee is, they generally cannot pay that fee until they check in for the flight online 24 hours

in advance or until they physically arrive at the airport to board their plane.

One improvement, at least, is that the price of a seat with more legroom or priority boarding is now in the booking path, although not until the booking is almost completed.

One exception to this rule is Virgin America, which gives the cost of its seats and priority boarding (Main Cabin Express) before customers enter all of their information.

Delta, which recently revamped its website, does tell consumers that Economy Comfort seats are available when they first view the fare, but it doesn't show the price until the very end of the booking.

With the revamp, Delta also introduced a "My Delta" dashboard, which is a frequent flyer site with dream planning tools in addition to recording passengers' travels and preferences. It is just one example of how airlines are trying to capture more information about passengers without giving passengers additional information about ancillary fees.

One drawback of American's online transaction process is that passengers can only pay for their checked bag at the airport when they arrive for the flight.

United Airlines, which has been selling its Economy Plus seats online since 2005, is an exception in that it offers a link in the booking path that tells consumers, "Additional bag charges may apply." Clicking on that link takes the customer to a baggage fee calculator into which the customer must once again type origin city and destination as well as travel dates to learn the price of checked bags. Customers can also type in their confirmation number (if they've already booked the flight) or Mileage Plus number. Sometimes (though not always) it will display a notice above a fare that Economy Plus seating is available relatively early in the booking process.

US Airways publishes seat availability, including its Choice seats (not to be confused with American's Choice fare families) early in the booking process, but like the other airlines, it does not give the price until the end of the booking.

JetBlue also requires consumers to type in all their personal information before displaying pricing for its extra-legroom seats. Baggage fees are less important with JetBlue, since it does not charge flyers who check just one bag. Charges \$6 for advance seat assignments and more for priority or exit row seating, has a link for baggage fees and other fees on its home page. However, if users do not click on that link, they won't know about the seat fee until they've selected their seat, after they've entered their personal information.

When booking airline tickets with a travel agent, who are qualified and trained to use their own dedicated computer Reservations systems that consumers cannot access or understand the qualified special software languages for , there tends to be more consistency and more detail earlier on in the booking process compared with using an airline website.

The professional Travel Agents use privy computer Reservations systems which display ancillary fees dynamically with fares, combining ancillary fees with the airfares at the beginning of a fare search, using baggage information of hundreds of airlines .

Agents using their systems can also book and pay for baggage fees in many circumstances, many at no extra cost for the consumers and at lightning fast speed and accuracy alongside verifying what fares and flights will accept and accrue Frequent flyer points or not, explain fare conditions easily to travellers, compare what is best value flights and fares and track any changes or provide assistance that no consumer website, singular or plural, can do.

If you want clarity, more ancillary services, fast responses and better comparisons- not on price alone, but on what is on offer or not on offer with critically important conditions explained, then using a Travel Agent is not only common sense but also wise and effective.

Then you have the benefit's also of having one contact point to coordinate it all, bounce Q + A via and legally obliged to assist you.