

Guess what ! Airlines are trying to stop you from comparison-shopping for tickets

By KURT E

The mere presence of competition does not, by itself, always make an industry competitive. In most cases, there also has to be a simple, fast and inexpensive way for the buyer or consumer to compare competitors on price, product and service.

A decent travel agent is neutral, has more options and delivers the best variables whereas a solo Arline cannot and will not ever, ever do that !

The advent of the internet has enabled quick and easy comparison-shopping, empowering businesses and consumers alike. Whether they want office supplies or personal and business loans, buyers have more tools than ever to compare options and make the best choice. Side-by-side comparisons put downward pressure on prices and upward pressure on service.

Comparison-shopping in air travel helps businesses and consumers reduce the cost of plane tickets. Today many companies use "managed travel" because when employees are able to see the prices of different airlines, most are inclined (and some are required) to choose the lowest-priced option.

But in consumer travel—and in what could be a precursor of what's ahead in business travel—**airlines are attempting to go back to a time before comparison-shopping on the internet became possible. During the past decade, airlines have engaged in a variety of tactics to block consumers from being fully served by the independent providers of neutral travel information, which travelers depend on to buy half of all plane tickets.**

The airlines' latest tactic will be considered by the U.S. Senate, and probably by House and Senate negotiators, in the coming weeks as part of the reauthorization of funding for the Federal Aviation Administration. In their latest ploy, under the subterfuge of "consumer protection," U.S. airlines are seeking to impose requirements on large, independent travel companies that are impossible for them to fulfill without information only the carriers possess—information the airlines are unwilling and, in some cases, unable to share. The provision being considered does not require them to do so, either.

The airlines will continue to use their considerable lobbying muscle and influence to achieve their long-held goal of avoiding competition by blocking easy, side-by-side comparison-shopping.

Without independent providers of travel information, how are travelers supposed to figure out which of the 50 airlines fly to their specific destinations? Imagine if the only way to compare your options comprehensively was to visit 50 websites and perform 50 searches. It could take hours.

The airlines know that. They are counting on travelers to not invest that much time, to not compare options and, as a result, to pay more. If the legislation proposed by Lipinski and Klobuchar isn't fixed, that's what we'll all be doing, regardless of how many airlines we have to choose from.