Alaska Airlines Passengers Toting Starbucks Holiday Cups Will Get Priority Boarding

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PALM SPRINGS, Calif.—Alaska Airlines is in the holiday spirit. Travelers waiting to board any of its flights between Nov. 7 and Nov. 10 who happen to be holding Starbucks' signature holiday cups will get priority boarding, though they'll still have to wait behind Alaska's first-class passengers.

The offer is an extension of Alaska's marketing approach to partner with brands like Starbucks on promotions for increased exposure.

"Early boarding is something people aspire to have," said Natalie Bowman, Alaska's managing director of brand and marketing communications. "The idea of having a row of people holding that holiday cup and getting that visual was really intriguing."

At airports where Starbucks doesn't have the new compostable cups, like San Francisco International Airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport and Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport, passengers can use the coffee chain's holiday sleeves for the promotion instead.

Alaska and Starbucks, which are both headquartered in Seattle, have a long relationship. Horizon Air, Alaska's regional subsidiary, was the first airline to serve what Bowman called the "hometown coffee" in the sky in 1990. Alaska began serving the brew in 2012.

In 2018, Alaska offered priority boarding to guests wearing ugly holiday sweaters. Bowman said the airline will repeat that promotion this year.

Holiday promotions give airlines like Alaska the chance to impress travelers going home for the holidays or visiting family who wouldn't typically fly with the carrier.

"The holidays are a time when new flyers are coming through," Bowman said.

Alaska recently announced a partnership with Surfline, a wave tracking company that matched surf swells with a discount on flights from Hawaii. It was one of what Alaska calls its "smart sales" promotions in which it matches data with a travelers' passions.

It's all part of the airline's three- to five-year plan, which started this year, to establish itself as a national brand.

"I can't afford to spend what Delta and Southwest spend in traditional advertising," Bowman said, adding, "The fact that we don't have huge budgets is forcing us to be more creative and challenge the way things are done and be more hypercritical with how we spend money. That means digging in with partners that do well for us."

Even though Super Bowl commercials aren't on the table for Alaska just yet, Bowman expects the brand to continue its smart sales approach in 2020 as well as its partnerships with national brands.

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