Delta Keeps Middle Seat Ban in Hopes of Spring Recovery

The middle seat—undeniably the worst one, pandemic or not—will remain empty on Delta Air Lines, as the carrier has done since the pandemic took hold last year.

Even as competitors have started filling middle seats again, Delta has held firm on its ban and will continue to do so until at least through March. On an earnings call, Delta CEO Ed Bastian told investors that the ban has "generated a meaningful premium" for travelers, becoming a differentiator for the brand throughout the Covid-19 health crisis.

"We know it's been one of the important reasons why Delta continued to earn an even higher revenue premium than we historically have," said Delta president Glen Hauenstein.

As the pandemic continues to pummel the entire airline industry, blocking the middle seat was one of the first steps carriers took to reassure flyers that they were taking meaningful steps toward onboard safety. And unlike other innovations, such as electrostatic sprayers and heightened disinfectant use, empty middle seats are easy for travelers to see.

However, Delta remains the only airline standing firm on its ban (United never stopped filling middle seats). The industry maintains that flying is safe, and messaging has evolved to focus on Covid-19 tests available through airlines and at airports (and advertised, in some cases, with lighthearted marketing featuring '80s hits).

"Blocking the middle seat is one of the most tangible

differentiators—perhaps the most tangible differentiator—that Delta has going for it," said Henry Harteveldt, president of the aviation consulting firm Atmosphere Research Group. "Airline accounting people aren't generous individuals. If Delta wasn't pleased with the premium it was getting, it would have announced today it was ending [the ban]. We have to assume it's working for Delta."

And when the ban *is* lifted, it'll provide a quick boost to Delta's bottom line. "Our middle seats will be a very powerful tool for us, allowing us to add capacity with minimal cost," Hauenstein said.

The road to recovery

The pandemic cost Delta $12.38 billion in 2020. Instead of 2019's $1.1 billion in profits in Q4, Delta lost $755 million in the fourth quarter of 2020. Bastian called it the "toughest year in Delta's history."

Recovery is still expected to begin this spring, but so far the vaccine's rollout hasn't resulted in new bookings or any broader changes in traveler behavior, according to the airline.

An internal survey of Delta's corporate travelers showed that many of its business partners hope to return to their offices between June and September, and that by the end of 2021, half expect to travel domestically in ranges between 50% and 100% of pre-Covid times; international travel is expected to resume at 50% of its pre-Covid levels. Only 7% said they never expect to return to 2019 levels of travel.

"There'll be different types of travelers, different reasons for people traveling, but I think business travel has got a very, very strong opportunity to return over the next two years," Bastian said.

Consumer demand is not the only obstacle Delta and other

carriers are facing this spring. Earlier this week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidelines that require all inbound international travelers to the United States to show a negative Covid-19 test starting Jan. 26.

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