

# FLYING THE GAY-FRIENDLY SKIES?

Major U.S. carriers fly a fine line between courting queer consumers and alienating queer employees by Gip Plaster

Many gay and lesbian consumers believe that American Airlines and United Airlines, two of the nation's top three carriers, are gay-friendly. While both offer something for gay and lesbian employees and consumers, the companies could do a better job of being more inclusive.

And what about Delta Air Lines? The company seems to be lagging even further behind, but shifts are beginning to occur at Delta, too.

Delta is the nation's third largest airline, flying to about 150 cities in the United States and about 40 cities in other countries.

While the company does include sexual orientation protection in its employment nondiscrimination policy—which is displayed in bold type on the employment application—it does not offer domestic partner benefits, says spokeswoman Kay Horner.

"Our benefits plans base eligibility on family member status that can be documented legally," she says.

Both United and American have some form of flight benefits that apply to domestic partners, but Delta does not. Employees do, however, receive four "buddy passes" per year that can be used by anyone the employee chooses, Horner points out.

While Delta does contribute to AIDS walks and to the Design Industry Foundation Fighting AIDS, Horner says she does not know of any contributions the company has made to explicitly lesbian and gay organizations.

She maintains, however, that none of this amounts to discrimination against gay and lesbian employees or consumers.

"We do not discriminate. We offer great service," she says.

Several months ago, a gay and lesbian employees group called Pride of Delta formed in part to help make the airline's policies more gay-friendly. Several weeks ago, the group presented a proposal to Delta officials outlining some suggested changes. As of press time, the company had not yet responded.

Delta's top competitors, meanwhile, have been more inclusive of gay men and lesbians, but they could be doing more.

Fort Worth, Texas-based American is the nation's second largest air carrier, behind United. American serves about 160 destinations. As with the other major airlines, it does not offer domestic partner benefits.

American did, however, recently change its policy regarding free flight benefits for the partners of unmarried employees. It now allows employees to designate a travel companion each year who can fly free at the same priority level as the employee.

Although this designated companion does not get the myriad benefits spouses of married employees receive, the policy is a step forward.

"We're much closer to parity," says Henri Simonetti, co-chair of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Employees of AMR, an officially recognized employee group at AMR Corp., American's parent company.

In 1996, the employees group made an official request to airline officials for domestic partner benefits, but Simonetti says thus far the request has neither been granted nor denied.

"It's something that we are still hoping to achieve," he says. "It is my belief that [domestic partner benefits] are going to be the wave of the future in America."

Simonetti says that by offering the benefits, the company would be "recognizing and validating the fact that gay and lesbian employees exist."

American Airlines spokeswoman Andrea Rader says, "It's an idea we've had under study for sometime."

She also says American Airlines has contributed to many gay and lesbian causes and groups, including the Human Rights Campaign and various AIDS organizations, as well as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. It provides donated tickets and other services in addition to money. The company does not release specific dollar amounts of contributions, Rader says.

American was also the first airline to launch a marketing campaign aimed at gay and lesbian consumers.

United Airlines, meanwhile, is the top air carrier in the world, flying to about 140 destinations around the globe. UAL Corporation, the holding company for the airline, also operates United Express and Shuttle by United.

In 1992, United adopted a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation. The policy was adopted a few months before American's. United also offers flight benefits to employees' chosen companions.

Its failure to offer other domestic partner benefits is not discrimination, says United spokesman Andy Plews.

"We don't offer them to anyone," he says, referring to the fact that the partners of

brought the suit, but it was United and Federal Express that raised the dispute.

Plews says United, which has a 25-year, multimillion dollar contract with the city of San Francisco, is resisting the local ordinance because the city has no authority over the airline.

"We have been resisting that really on a point of principle. We cannot have policies dictated by local authorities. We have always contended that airlines should be federally governed," Plews says. "We are fighting this battle in San Francisco over a jurisdictional issue."

Recently, the company filed an injunction against the city attempting to keep it from enforcing its domestic partner ordinance.

On Oct. 7, Judge Claudia Wilkens issued a ruling in favor of the airline. The ruling allows the company to continue to operate in San Francisco even though it does not comply with the law.

Plews says United is heavily involved in the suit in San Francisco because the company has a strong presence there.

He also defends the company, saying it has sponsored 90 gay and lesbian groups and events. (He declined to put a dollar figure on the support.)

United has an affinity group for gay and lesbian employees called United with Pride, which submitted a proposal to the company's leadership a few months ago requesting the airline begin offering domestic partner benefits.

As this issue went to press, the group had still not received a response.

"My opinion is that they aren't quite sure what to answer. They probably realize they are walking a tightrope with this situation—both with their employees and with their customers—and they don't want to foul up," says Nick Morse, United with Pride's executive director.

Asked to rate United on a gay-friendliness scale from "not at all" to "very accepting," Morse places United at "slightly" accepting.

Both American and United have been criticized by right-wing religious groups who say the companies are too gay-friendly.

Earlier this year, a three-page letter mailed to the chairman of United's parent company criticized the airline for lending "legitimacy to homosexual behavior, which is immoral, unhealthy and destructive to individuals, families and communities."

It was signed by representatives of several groups including Focus on the Family, Family Research Council, Southern Baptist Convention and the Christian Coalition.

The letter also expressed support for United with respect to the airline's active opposition to the city of San Francisco's ordinance.

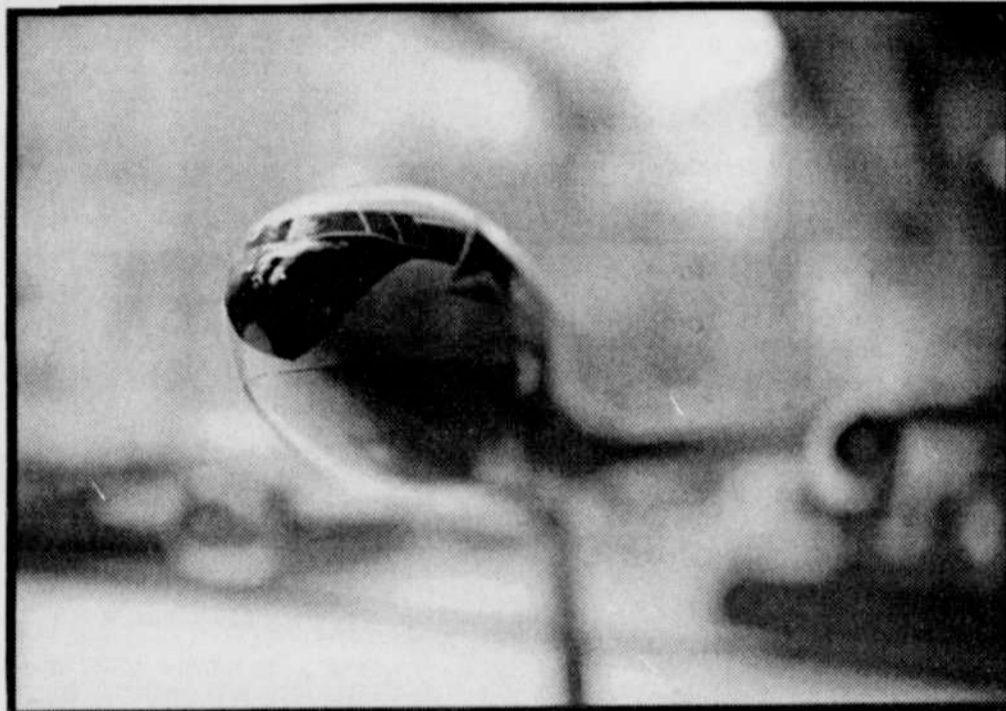


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