



Fliers wanting food, fun better bring wallets

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By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

Frequent fliers may need a scorecard to keep track of what's served and sold in-flight.

Some airlines have tried to cut costs by eliminating meals, while others have attempted to boost revenue by selling them. Most carriers sell headsets for watching movies, and some rent digital entertainment units, pay-per-view movies or televisions. But others give headsets for free or don't charge for TV or satellite radio.

"It is rather confusing," says Ines Lormand, a frequent business traveler from Houston who works in the publishing industry.

More changes are coming. Next month, ATA Airlines will stop serving free snacks and start selling, for \$2.95, snack boxes filled with a granola bar, cookies, crackers and other items. The carrier is also considering selling individual items — bottled water, cookies, potato chips and candy — for \$2.95, and a pillow/blanket set for \$9.95, spokesman Rick Hightower says.

ATA's move means that half of 18 U.S. airlines surveyed by USA TODAY last week will be selling snacks or meals. Nine are selling headsets, and five are charging for in-flight television or movies.

Many of the meals sold or provided free today are far less substantial than they were years ago. Frequent-flier Dave Simonson, the president of a consulting company, says he doesn't buy them. "It just doesn't seem right," says the Sparks, Nev., resident. "For \$5-\$8, they could be providing a meal and just adding it to the ticket price."

Kenneth Brewer, an engineer in Princeton, N.J., says the in-flight food he's bought has been "decent quality" and less expensive than what he'd pay at an airport.

First-class passengers are still not charged extra for meals and entertainment, but they, too, have felt the food-service changes. Multi-course meals are a distant memory on many U.S. flights, and upper-class fliers often receive a snack instead of a meal.

Among the notable in-flight food and entertainment changes since the start of 2005:

- United and American airlines began selling snack boxes. United says it has sold more than 2 million, and American, which also sells sandwiches, is selling food on 650 daily flights. United and American Eagle recently began selling snack boxes with "healthier" fare. United's box costs \$5 and has crackers and raisins, hummus, baked pita chips, tuna, cheese and chocolate.
- Delta Air Lines stopped selling food. It's now offering free snacks such as granola bars, cheese spread and animal crackers on all flights within the continental USA. Free meals are provided on Alaskan and Hawaiian flights.
- AirTran Airways installed free XM satellite radio at every seat on every flight. It is the only airline offering such a service. Passengers can listen to more than 100 channels of music, news, sports and other entertainment.

Some airlines have also introduced or are evaluating products for sale in-flight. In February, United Airlines completed a three-month test on its Ted flights. Ted flight attendants sold such items as playing cards, sunglasses, BlackBerry chargers and toothbrush sets.

"We were selling stuff that can entertain you during a flight or stuff you forgot," says United spokeswoman Robin Urbanski. She says the airline's reviewing the sales and deciding whether to renew them.

Foreign airlines also have new offerings. Singapore Airlines sells wireless, high-speed Internet service for \$9.95 for one hour or \$26.95 for a day. Cathay Pacific Airways allows passengers to preview their e-mail in-box for free but charges \$9.95 for up to four hours, and \$19.95 for an entire flight, for sending and receiving e-mails.

Lormand finds high-speed Internet service appealing. "I can get more work done on planes and don't have to do it once I get home," she says.

But Simonson says charges for in-flight Internet service are too high, and he doesn't want airlines to sell more products in the cabin.

"I don't need a Wal-Mart in the air," he says.

Airlines' food and in-flight entertainment policies

The following are airline meal policies and prices of food and other items sold to coach passengers on domestic flights. Snacks for sale are often more substantial fare than free snacks. Some items may not be sold on certain flights.

Airline	Meal policy	Meal price	Alcoholic beverage price	Headset price	Price of other in-flight items
AirTran	Free snacks.	Not applicable	\$5	Free (to hear satellite radio)	No other items
Alaska	Free snacks or breakfast pastry on morning and early evening flights 2 1/2 - 3 hours long. Hot sandwiches on flights more than 3 hours long.	Not applicable	\$5	not applicable	Digital entertainment unit \$10; second headset free
Aloha	Free snacks and meals on trans-Pacific flights. No food on flights within Hawaii.	Not applicable	\$5	\$5	No other items
America West	Snacks and meals for sale on flights longer than 3 1/2 hours departing 6 a.m.-7:30 p.m.	Snacks \$5, meals \$7	\$5	\$5	No other items
American	Snacks for sale on flights 3 hours or longer that depart from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and on American Eagle and AmericanConnection flights. Sandwich or wrap for sale on transcontinental, Alaska and Hawaii flights.	Snacks \$3, \$4; sandwiches or wraps \$5	\$5	\$2	No other items
ATA	Free snacks on Hawaii flights, pretzels or cookies on other flights. Next month, will stop free snacks and charge \$2.95 for snack boxes.	Snacks \$2.95 starting next month	\$5	\$3	No other items
Continental	Free snacks on all flights. Free meals during meal times on flights more than 1 1/2 hours and all flights more than 2 hours.	Not applicable	\$5	\$5	No other items
Delta	Free snacks.	Not applicable	\$5	\$2	No other items
Frontier	Free snacks on about half the airline's flights and free wraps on Alaskan flights.	Not applicable	\$5	Free (to hear one video channel)	DirecTV \$5; pay-per-view movie \$8
Hawaiian	Free meals on trans-Pacific flights. No food on flights within Hawaii.	Not applicable	\$5	\$5	Digital entertainment unit \$15
JetBlue	Free snacks.	Not applicable	\$5	Free (for DirecTV)	Pay-per-view movie \$5
Midwest	Free snacks on all flights and meals for sale on flights at least 1 1/2 hours long.	Breakfast \$5, \$7; lunch, dinner \$5, \$10	Beer \$4; wine, liquor \$5	Not applicable	Digital entertainment unit \$10; second headset \$2
Northwest	Snacks for sale on most flights. Sandwiches for sale on long flights, such as those to Hawaii and Alaska.	Snacks \$1, \$3; sandwiches \$5	\$5	\$3	No other items

			Beer, wine \$3; liquor \$4	Unavailable	No other items
Southwest	Free snacks.	Not applicable			
Spirit	Snacks for sale.	Snacks \$2, \$4	\$5	Unavailable	No other items
Ted	Meals for sale on flights that depart before 8 p.m. and are longer than 2 1/2 hours.	Meals \$5	\$5	Free	No other items
United	Meals for sale on flights that depart before 8 p.m. and are longer than 3 1/2 hours.	Meals \$5	\$5	Free	No other items
US Airways	Meals for sale on flights longer than 3 1/2 hours departing 6 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Also on some shorter flights from the East Coast to Denver, Dallas and Bermuda.	Snacks \$5, meals \$7	\$5	\$5	No other items

Source: USA TODAY research

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