

CWT Podcast episode 1

Improving the shopping experience for business travelers

Christine Kashkari (CK): 0:09

Hello and welcome to the very first episode of On the Fly, the monthly podcast that dives into issues affecting those of us who spent a lot of time up in the air, out of the office and away from home on business trips. I'm Christine Kashkari. Whether you're a seasoned road warrior or on your first work trip, you'll hear from experts in the studio who will unpack the biggest issues affecting business travelers and the future of corporate travel. On this and every episode, we'll start off with top tips from travelers to and from their work trips. Then we'll serve up our topic azure with today's special guest, Erik Magnuson, vice president of Air Distribution Capabilities at CWT. Want to know how booking business travel can feel more like a shopping experience than a chore? Erik's our man. And finally, we'll end the show with some insights from behind wheel. As drivers dish about clients on business trips.

Let's start the show on the right foot by sharing with you this month's top tips.

There's no one on the planet who wouldn't want an airline upgrade no matter if you're on a 2 hour flight or flying 18 hours nonstop. Our top tips come from two people who travel on business but infrequently and yet managed to secure upgrades with airlines. Find out how from Denita from California and Chris in Washington, D. C.

Female business traveler: So my top tip is to actually don't wait to save your points for one big flight. Use them as you go. If you have a smaller point accumulation, feel free to use those for an upgrade. I actually feel like that's the most effective way to use points, because often you're not constrained by blackout dates or other kinds of point limitations. So the next time you book a personal or business trip, just use whatever points you have available and upgrade for more leg room, or to make sure that you have extra boarding times, you can make sure that you have bin space. Those are really the things that I care about to make sure that I have a smooth flying experience.

Male business traveler: This is some regular tips, I would say as 1 is being boiled to an airline and cheating status. There are more opportunities that come with upgrade possibilities as being a status member with an airline. Number 2, I would say to look at some of those spares in economy that are higher fares because those will allow you to upgrade within 24 hours of the flight, because of the nature of the price you paid and the fare class. And then third, I would say, if you're purchasing an economy ticket to keep your eyes peeled for offers that come through in the email from your airline of choice because they're trying to sell those tickets in those higher cabins, so they will send you discounted opportunities for fares that you wouldn't have paid for when you initially purchased your ticket. One of the strategies I utilize when I get an upgrade, whether as airline or hotel is, I always tweet back to them. A thank you, and I appreciate you thinking of me and taking care of me tweeting a picture or some type of illustration of my thanks to them. Airlines and hotels love the social pushback from their customers.

Christine Kashkari (CK): While we're on the subject of airlines, today's special guest has a bird's eye view off what airlines are doing to improve the shopping experience for business travelers. We're

talking about how the industry is looking at ways to make booking a business trip similar to how you'd book a vacation and why it's important. Joining us on the podcast, please welcome Erik Magnuson, vice president Air Distribution Capabilities at CWT. Erik works with airlines and tech partners to ensure companies and their employees have access to the best airfare and amenities when booking their trips. Hi, Erik. Welcome to the show.

Erik Magnuson (EM): 4:05

Thanks for having me. I'll have to try that tip. I didn't know, uh, using social media would help in that environment, so I'm gonna try to use that for sure.

CK: 4:13

What have you tried in the past?

EM: 4:14

Yes, I think for me, if I don't have loyalty status on airline, I like to use charm. And so as soon as I get into maybe an airport, I'll go check in. And if I'm not in an upgraded seat or at least an economy comfort, I'll ask for, you know, I'll go ask the front desk agent, is there any room? And if at all possible, would you be able to give me an upgraded seat? And usually, if you ask nicely and you smile while you're asking, I'd say 4 out of 5 times I get it by the end.

CK: 4:46

The charm offensive always works.

EM: 4:47

Yeah. I mean, I think everybody in the industry, you know, it's a customer service industry at the end of the day. So I think everybody is really out there to try to ensure that they you provide the best customer experience for their travelers. And I think this is an easy way that they're empowered to do that.

CK: 5:02

Tell me, how long have you been in the travel industry?

EM: 5:06

So I've been in the travel industry for about 15 years. You know the first half of that really around the hotel space and really mergers and acquisitions. Towards the end of that, really buying and selling portfolios of hotels. I'd say the last half of that, it's really about, you know, focusing on travel management and in working with our different suppliers in the airline ground and hotel space. And then, lastly, focusing on how do we improve the customer experience for our travelers?

CK: 5:32

Do people in the travel industry have to like to travel? Do you?

EM: 5:36

I don't think you have to like to travel, but I think like anything in any you know, industry, if you're really passionate about what you do, and you like what you do, it just turns out so much better in, you know, the work product that's produced in the environment that you have with your co workers. And so I think it's always good to really like what you do

CK: 5:57

Your title VP of air distribution capabilities. I have not seen that before. What does that mean?

EM: 6:04

Yeah, well, I think just like everything, you know, technology disruption is creating a situation where you're going to see a lot of new things. And so I like to look at the television industry as an analogy for this. Today we're seeing constant, you know, changes in how they're distributing their media content, right? So it used to be over the air open airwaves that it went a cable and satellite, and now it's going to streaming services. And I think this is all valuable in some sense, in the fact that we're innovating and creating new things. But I think it's taking a step backwards because it's defragmenting that content and actually making it more difficult for consumers to find what they want. At least from my perspective, you know, I've got access to satellites and seven or eight different streaming services, and my wife and I will sit down, to watch TV and we'll scan the guide on the satellite. We'll go through Hulu, Netflix, Amazon, everything. And next thing I know, it's 45 minutes later and I haven't chosen what thing to watch. And so...

CK: 7:09

Yep [laughing] I thought it was just me! I guess it happens to everybody.

EM: 7:13

Yeah, we find more time just scrolling than anything else. And I think when you talk about travel, especially corporate travel, that's absolutely what we don't want to happen here. So really, what we're focused on is how do we take all this new and great and rich content but provide it to you in a way that's very seamless and very efficient for you to access and book that content? We don't want to take this from being a few minute exercise to being, you know, a full day exercise.

CK: 7:39

All right, that can be really frustrating really fast. So one of the big things among airlines now is improving the retail experience for business travelers. Can you tell us what that looks like?

EM: 7:51

Yes, I mean, as we keep enriching, you know, the different offers that are available, it's important that a traveler at the end of the day can understand what they're consuming. So whether that's and knowing that they purchase an upgraded seat that has three inches more of leg room or that they now have a TV in the back of their their head rest. You know, all these things are important to make sure that you're making an informed decision and that you have that experience. It's much like we have in the leisure space today, and if we do it correctly, even better.

CK: 8:24

And why does it matter for legions of traveling employees, why would they think this is important?

EM: 8:30

So, I think for them, you want to make an informed decision in a timely manner, and that really means that we have to be very clear about all the different amenities that are available and what bundles there are out there so they can actually do so and make these purchases in a very informed fashion.

CK: 8:46

And companies, are they on board with this?

EM: 8:49

Yeah, I mean, I think for most companies that we speak to, it's all about, you know, how do they make this easy and efficient for their travelers? Because this is not what they do as a day job. So they want to make sure that they spend as little time as possible on booking their travel. And then I think at the end of the day, we're also trying to control costs. So if we can make it very clear to them that traveler A was booking a normal flight and why five for two different prices. And now they can buy, purchase, this bundle combined for a cheaper price. You know, I think it satisfies both. That makes it more efficient, and it makes it cheaper for the end user.

CK: 9:25

That all sounds great, but how close are we to seeing that happen?

EM: 9:29

As an industry, we're all behind this concept. And so I think what you're seeing now is a lot of small technical pilots that are really starting to explore how we make this a reality in the future. And when I speak of the future, you know, I think in 2020 you're going to see very concrete pilots with good results and good progress in evolving how we're actually gonna do this moving forward. And then I think you probably won't see pilots to the sophistication level that would be ready for a client until end of 2020, early 2021.

CK: 10:03

So that's definitely something to look forward to it. So good luck with that, Erik.

EM: 10:07

Thank you. Appreciate it.

CK: 10:08

So before we let you go, I would like to pivot a little bit and see if you'd care to share some of your experiences as a passenger in a taxi. Specifically, what are you like? Do you like to talk, not talk? How do you start a conversation?

EM: 10:24

Yeah, I mean, I think it all depends. Obviously, when I enter any taxi or ride sharing service, you're always talking to the driver when you enter. And you know, you can probably tell in that first few seconds whether or not you want to engage in a conversation with that person. So I'd say, for the

most part, I'm pretty enthusiastic when I'm on the beginning of my trip and entering a new city. Usually, I want to understand any tips and tricks they have for the city itself. Ah, and on the way back, it's a little more hit and mess, it's probably, you know, how long was my flight and am I still tired? In that case, I'll probably signal gently that I'm gonna put my headphones in and relax.

CS: 11:01

Any memorable stories?

EM: 11:04

Yeah, a couple of them, you know, my wife was about eight months pregnant and we were just about to have our first kid. And I must have mentioned that on one of the rides home. It was a short ride, and we might not have been more than three or four blocks from my house. And he mentioned that he was on his 14th or 15th kid. I was gonna ask him for some for some tips and I thought, maybe not. I only want...

CS: 11:28

[laughing]Same woman, Right?

EM: Same woman, yes

CK: Okay, that would have stunned me into silence. But it's amazing.

EM: It's definitely amazing

CS: How about for conversation stoppers, as I call them?

EM: 11:42

Yeah. I mean, I think anything that touches politics: absolutely. I try to avoid that at all costs. I'll do so in a nice manner. But it doesn't matter where you're in the world or where you're coming from or who you are. I mean, politics, I really don't have any interest in talking with anybody about it.

CS: 11:56

Well, thank you so much, Erik. That's actually a really nice segway into our last segment of the show. When we ask folks working in the travel industry different questions about the business travelers they serve. And we call the taxi talk as it brings to mind casual off the cuff conversations between random strangers brought together by their journey. Just like you and your cabbie. Actually, we have uh, our guest here has a similar experience as you so, well, listen in.

EM: 12:24

Awesome. Thank you. I appreciate being on the show today.

CS: 12:27

Of course. Thanks for being here.

[honking car sound]

Male traveler voice: My name is [...]

CK: How can you tell that your passenger is a business traveler as opposed to someone who's going on vacation?

Male traveler voice: They're wearing a suit and tie, then I figure out they are on business travel. If you start early in the morning, people usually yeah, they don't talk. But if it's a mid day, then they talk a lot. Usually we talk about where they live? Usually they talk a lot when we talk about the sports. Yeah, usually they don't like when we talk about, uh, political or religion. Sometimes one day they start talking about the politics. And uh, I give them my idea, and they upset and then always stop talking until I dropped off.

[honking car sound]

CK: And that is probably going to be the top tip of the day. No politics. And with that we wrap up our pilot episode. Tune in again next month, when we head to Tel Aviv to talk to an artificial intelligence specialist on how he's teaching computers the human language so they, in turn, can chat with business travelers. We hope you enjoyed the first episode of On the Fly. If you did, subscribe to on the Fly on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts and help us spread the word by visiting myCWT on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Remember, we're all in this journey together. Until next time when we talk to business travelers on the fly.