



PODCAST | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 5

How traveler demand impacts airline network planning

What to listen for:

Ever wonder how airlines approach network planning and decide where to launch new routes? In this episode your hosts go straight to the source: Director of Atlantic and Hawai'i network planning at United Airlines, Darren Scott.

Listen to this week's episode to hear Darren share his expertise on:

- The virtuous cycle created by airline routes and lodging availability
- What factors impact airline network planning
- How shifts in traveler demand inspire new nonstop routes

Section title:

Introduction

Transcript text:

[00:00:04] **Sally** The travel experience is powered by all of you. Welcome to Powering Travel, brought to you by Expedia Group. I'm Sally Smith.

[00:00:12] **Brandon** And I'm Brandon Ehrhardt. Together, we'll explore how experts are evolving the industry and discover the latest trends in hospitality. It's a full flight. We've saved you seat 1A. Now boarding all rows, all passengers. Powering Travel is next.

[00:00:27] **Sally** Today, we're going to touch on a very interesting topic that I'm sure many of us have always wondered about. What really goes into determining flight paths and route selections for airlines? Air travel is one of the many important aspects of the full trip funnel that we have been talking about in previous episodes, as it impacts the travel industry at large, including the way hospitality partners adapt to the changing landscape of travel and transport. We're joined by Darren Scott from United Airlines to give a behind the scenes look on air travel and more specifically, all of the details around flight paths and route selections for airlines, including an exciting new route for United.

[00:01:05] **Brandon** We're excited to share with you the conversation we have with Darren as he offers such a unique vantage point with his experience in network planning. Oh, I thought I knew everything there was to know about United because I work there, but I spent most of this episode learning. We're excited to share that with you and all the various aspects that he covers. First, let's tell you more about him. Darren is a director for Atlantic and Hawai'i Network Planning at United Airlines and manages the team responsible for evaluating deployment of capacity to Europe, Middle East, Africa and Hawai'i. He also coordinates network initiatives with stakeholders, including revenue management sales and with Atlantic Joint Venture Partners of Lufthansa Group and Air Canada. Since 2017, United has announced over 30 new transatlantic routes, including the addition of service to four cities in Africa, and has grown service to cover more destinations in Europe than all other U.S. carriers combined. Darren has worked for United for 13 years and was previously responsible for network planning in the Latin America region. Way back when, Darren was also an Expedia Group employee. Let's jump into the conversation. Let's jump in on some of the topics that I think you are the subject matter expert on. We're going to talk a lot of things air today. We're going to talk about network planning, how United goes about selecting their new destinations.

Section title:

How airlines respond to the changing needs of travelers

Transcript text:

Brandon Let's start here. Airlines help promote tourism and demand across the world. And so they influence not only travelers, but other lines of business across the industry from car rental companies, cruise lines and lodging. How do travel leaders keep updated on all of the changes and adapt their strategies, in your opinion?

[00:02:37] **Darren** Absolutely. So it's really critical that we have a good understanding of customer needs and what demand is out there and how it's changing over time. Focusing on understanding airlift is important because it's sustainable based on having robust demand. So, for example, if an airline adds new nonstop service to a destination, it makes that destination easier to reach and could create opportunities for hotels to focus their marketing efforts on these customers. And what this does is it creates a virtuous cycle of demand that preserves and grows the airlift to the market.

[00:03:12] **Sally** I wanted to play off that because I think it's really interesting for some of our listeners to understand what type of considerations you look at when contemplating adding either brand new routes or adding additional routes. What do you use to help make those decisions?

[00:03:32] **Darren** So we really start with a customer and wherever a customer demand is now. But everything we do is we would look at destinations that we can grow the pie with new service. So, for example, our new service to the Canary Islands that launched yesterday is an example of a market that's been very hard for Americans to reach historically, but with a nonstop service, we see potential to grow the pie. So it's really a combination of making things easier for customers.

[00:03:55] **Sally** Do you look at the total picture of going into a destination meeting, looking at traveler demand, like you say, that makes perfect sense, but looking at hotel ADR is compressing other factors about travel into that market. I mean, people travel for many reasons, but those going on leisure travel, looking at the total price of what that might cost for an individual, or you focused mostly just on what that air component is?

[00:04:21] **Darren** Yeah. So, I mean, it's the whole destination picture that drives demand. So some destinations are going to be more focused on VFR demand, which is really a function of potentially different ethnic populations and just the size of the market, whereas leisure destinations really need to have the right product and available product in the market to meet customer needs. So for example, somewhere like the Canary Islands, we were very comfortable going in because we knew the lodging product there was up to the standards that Americans are looking for leisure vacations and also provides so much unique, so many unique experiences that will make the trip worthwhile for Americans. And the key thing holding people back was the fact it was so hard to get to. So we really having appealing destinations and attractive lodging product is key to growing these leisure markets in our network.

[00:05:10] **Brandon** Sounds like we need an offsite in the Canary Islands, Sally. Makes sense, we can get there easily now.

[00:05:15] **Sally** Hundred percent.

[00:05:15] **Brandon** Quick question for you on, like, as you think about business versus leisure destinations, how does the network planning aspect of that change? Can you just dive a little deeper if it's a leisure destination and just thinking about things like local traffic versus flow traffic, based on a business leisure split, are you looking for more local traffic on one over the other or how do you approach that?

[00:05:38] **Darren** Yeah, absolutely. So the nice thing about being a network carrier is we have hubs that provide really strong connectivity. So our hub in Newark provides connectivity to too many destinations across the country that supplements for large local demand in the New York area. So when we add a new flight, say, to the Canary Islands or the Azores, we can combine demand from different origins and destinations. The nice thing about leisure markets is because

leisure travelers are taking longer, more meaningful trips, they're more flexible to fly in a market that might be operated less than daily. So we can go into a market like Tenerife three times a week. And then over time we can grow it as the demand materializes. Whereas a business market like London, where up to seven daily New York-London flights this summer. And that's critically important for a business market like this to have a shuttle-like schedule so that people can arrange for travel around their business commitments and make a really short trip to get in and out if they need to.

[00:06:37] **Brandon** That's awesome. And actually, like makes so much sense in the way that you describe it. And I totally agree leisure trips are more meaningful than business trips. One other quick question I have for you, coming out of COVID, you know, I think during COVID, we saw the type of travel shift. There was more of a propensity to fly leisure destinations. So I saw like United started operating in Indianapolis to Hilton Head Island nonstop. Not something I ever thought I would see in my life. And I think it was super cool because you get to expose new people to new destinations. How has United and how have you taken what you've learned during COVID about the leisure traveler and applied that to the post-COVID world? Is there anything that you learned or took forward or any kind of tactics that you that United deployed during COVID specific to like, you know, these point-to-point flights that you'll continue or any other color that you'd like to give us there?

[00:07:32] **Darren** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and COVID demand changed dramatically. And we had to be very nimble to shape our network around demand. And demand was driven not only by the mix of leisure and business travel, but also by travel restrictions that varied by country. So basically, the COVID recovery period has given us a lot of opportunities to experiment with new content in the network, and then it has shaped our network coming out of COVID to look different to what it looked like prior to COVID. So we went into COVID serving one destination in Africa seasonally, and now we serve four destinations in Africa on a year-round basis, as one example of how we've shaped the network over time.

[00:08:10] **Sally** Now, in the past few weeks, we've heard that exciting news that testing requirements to come back into the U.S. have been lifted, which is just fantastic news for so many travelers wanting to go abroad, internationally, as well as those travelers wanting to come into the U.S. How do you see that impacting your business and air travel in general?

[00:08:31] **Darren** Yeah, so that's a point of friction. The testing to come into the U.S. was friction and risk in the travel experience, and having that lifted now makes it so much easier to leave the U.S. So there's going to be a segment of pent-up demand that's now ready to travel. And we expect it will really help not only bringing down visitors into the U.S., but also make Americans more confident going overseas. We've seen in Europe as countries started reopening last summer, but as restrictions got lifted, demand immediately grew. So really excited about being able to make the travel experience easier for our customers.

[00:09:07] **Sally** That's great. I will say your app has great information in it about getting ready for your trip. So even during COVID, when I was traveling, I could go into the United App and feel pretty confident about what I would need. So that's helpful because I think we've had some other guests where just knowledge of what to do over the past two years has been so difficult. So the easier you can make it, the better.

[00:09:26] **Darren** Yeah, it's been incredibly confusing, but the travel ready center of it with built into the app allows you to get the specific requirements for your trip, upload your documentation for verification before you even get to the airport so you can skip lines and just make it easier for customers in this environment where rules have been changing day to day. And I think that's a good point that coming out of COVID, entry requirements like visas, etc., we're now going to be much better equipped to help customers understand what they need to travel.

[00:09:54] **Sally** That's fantastic. And as challenging as the last two years have been, to your point, being nimble, changing different things, learning quickly, are there any other positive changes that you implemented coming out of COVID that you're just excited about for the future of travel?

Section title:

Making travel less uncertain

Transcript text:

[00:10:10] **Darren** Yeah, absolutely. So the ConnectionsSaver system that United's rolled out is a fantastic tool that uses real-time operational and customer data to determine if we can hold a flight for late connections and still arrive at its destination on time. This has saved countless connections for our customers and made it easier for our airport teams to make the right decisions to let our customers travel easier. We've also rolled out Agent on Demand, which is real-time virtual assistance at the airport, but from agents across the system. So if we have a canceled flight or disruption in a given destination, we now have a larger pool of customer service reps across the country to help take care of our customers. And this all started from the desire for contactless interaction during COVID, but it's really going to be part of making it easier for customers going forward.

[00:11:01] **Sally** I love the connection piece. I've been sitting on a plane sweating that connection so many times. That's a great improvement.

[00:11:09] **Darren** Yeah, we'll use the app to communicate to you if we're holding your connection and how long that walk would be to your next gate, etc., just to make it easier for you.

[00:11:18] **Brandon** I'm going to give you guys some kudos here because I've benefited from this. The way that you word it and the app is like, what if you're checking your flight? It is like we're holding the plane for a couple extra minutes so that some people can make their trip. And when you're going to a single flight destination, whether that be a leisure or beach destination that operates, you know, infrequently or once daily, or like a ski destination where it's once a day and the weather can be hectic, I think it's just a great tool for a consumer to feel confident and the experience. Is United going to hold the plane for 3 hours for you? They're not. But are they going to make every effort to make sure that you can get to your trip? They are. And I think that that is the difference as a traveler. Like it's just not about just the schedule or being on time. You hold the plane for 10 minutes and you figure out ways that, you know, you can get the plane to the destination faster, whether that's cutting the route or there is a little bit of bank time put into it. I just think it's a great experience for travelers. So that is awesome that United has doubled down on improving the traveler experience. The guest experience is something that we are constantly focused on here at Expedia Group, so it's awesome that you guys have done that.

[00:12:24] **Darren** That's good. Yeah, I'm glad.

[00:12:28] **Brandon** There really are so many factors that go into network planning and I love hearing that we are going to make it easier for travelers to be exposed to new destinations like nonstops. Nonstop flights specifically. Game changer. So many reasons, but it's all about that efficiency, right? If it's one flight to get somewhere instead of two, we're opening the world to the possibilities of new travelers. That's really exciting.

[00:12:50] **Sally** Completely agree, Brandon, especially as it pertains to the destinations and knowing the complexities the entire industry has faced over the past few years with the pandemic, it's eye-opening to see how United has taken steps to ease the travel experience with the constant change. Another factor Darren touched on was the changes in travel restrictions, which we all know can be frustrating and sometimes impossible to follow. In fact, something that I think everyone has experienced over the past few years in travel is taking a trip and feeling confused about the requirements and what might be needed in various destinations. We've seen that travelers are looking for the easiest experience they can find, and reducing friction in the experience is key.

Section title:

Sustainable travel to far-flung destinations

Transcript text:

[00:13:40] **Brandon** We just talked about the Canary Islands and new destinations, you know, serving for different places in Africa that United is doing today compared with their schedules of years past, where that was much reduced. How is a more fuel-efficient plane creating opportunities for United to go to destinations that they haven't gone to in the past?

[00:14:01] **Darren** I mean, the 787 Dreamliner is an efficient airplane and also has the range to make longer flights. So, for example, we have more service to South Africa than any other U.S. carrier. And we're serving Cape Town and

Johannesburg. And Johannesburg is a challenging market to operate out of, given the altitude that the 787 and its efficiency and its performance allow us to have a nonstop link into South Africa for the first time.

[00:14:31] **Brandon** Cool. I think the other thing, and I know this is a little out of your wheelhouse because I believe that you do Atlantic and Hawai'i, but domestically, some of the newer regional jets specifically, and I'm the certified plane nerd here, I like the Embraer 175, which has a lower capacity than a 737 but has that range where they can, you know, take a three, three-and-a-half-hour flight. That's really opened up the world to travel. Is United looking into how they can make or increase their number of nonstop flights based on the fuel economy of these aircraft? Or how does United approach network planning with an evolving fleet that can fly further, more efficiently?

[00:15:11] **Darren** As we have more efficient aircraft join the fleet, we take into consideration as we look at new opportunities. Things like operating a nonstop flight out of Johannesburg would have been out of the question in the past before we had the Dreamliner in our fleet. But we also leverage the growth and getting new planes in our fleet to improve the customer experience. So talking about four regional jets, for example, in Newark, we've gone to an all two-cabin regional jet fleet. So all of their flights out of Newark offer a first-class cabin and an elevated customer experience, given the amount of demand in the New York area and our desire to make the customer experience the best possible.

[00:15:52] **Brandon** You know what I love that United does? They do a great job of knowing who I am as a customer. And like, am I willing to buy the first-class ticket when I'm initially booking my flight? I'm not always, actually, I'm never, never really doing that. However, after a long work trip and it's like, hey, do you want to upgrade to first class for 199 bucks for your red-eye from Seattle to Chicago? I am the first person to say yes, please. So I think it's a great way like through dynamic pricing, customers like myself can experience both cabins. Because at the end of the day, like what would have happened with that seat? It's unknown. Could have been upgraded, could have been sold. But I was able to experience the product, and I think it was, you know, something that will continue to keep me looking for elevated products like premium economy and business. So I think it's a really cool way to use dynamic pricing. You've introduced travelers who typically fly in the back to experience the comforts of upfront.

[00:16:47] **Darren** Absolutely. And on the wide-body fleet, the Premium Plus product, which is a premium economy product, offers an elevated experience but really at a more accessible level, by going all the way up to a lie-flat, all-access business class seats. So it's all about offering customers more choices. And to your point, the customer's preferences will vary from trip to trip. But we've seen a lot of interest from leisure customers in trading up to a premium cabin. So that's been great to see.

[00:17:15] **Sally** I wanted to chat a little bit about efficiencies and flying, leads me to a question around sustainability. So it's no surprise we're seeing a very large trend of travelers wanting to purchase and make more sustainable choices when they're traveling across the industry. And Brandon even educated us on the IndyCar race drivers becoming more sustainable. So it's everywhere. Now, United has a really robust goal of being carbon neutral by 2050. So congratulations on making that goal. How do you see this impacting? How you are designing and managing flight schedules, but also marketing and helping the consumer to know how to make a choice that's more sustainable or creating awareness? So you made a sustainable choice and that's great for you.

[00:18:00] **Darren** Yeah. Sustainability is a very real issue and a key focus for United and for our CEO, Scott Kirby. It's something he's personally very passionate about. And it's illustrated by not only our commitment to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 100 percent by 2050, but also our investments in sustainable aviation fuel and carbon sequestration, which are more durable, tangible and scalable solutions than carbon offsets, which traditionally have been used to illustrate a commitment to sustainability. But the exciting thing is, given our route network is focused on meeting customer needs, it's going to adapt as customers think about taking more meaningful, longer trips to more sustainable destinations. So a good example of some places that are resonating with our customers are our new service to Bergen in Norway. This is a country that is recognized as a world leader in sustainable transportation. It was interesting to learn when I was aware of it. Over 70 percent of cars in Norway are electric and even some of the featured sightseeing boats are powered by electricity. The Azores is the first archipelago in the world to be certified as a sustainable tourism region.

[00:19:12] **Sally** I think it's really powerful how you talked about it's important to United to be sustainable and then I'm going to a destination that embraces sustainability as well. Do you partner with any of the destination management organizations or CVBs when planning or marketing or launching to kind of tell that full story of either sustainability, or another message that's important to you?

[00:19:34] **Darren** Absolutely. I mean, as we grow our network to more destinations, we partner with the destination marketing organizations and local governments to jointly build awareness and showcase these curated iconic destinations that we've added to our network. We want our new service to be destinations to grow the pie with easier access. Like when it's your first transatlantic service to Majorca or the Canary Islands, for example. We've also been very focused on the interdependency between what United's offering in terms of a travel experience and the overall experience in the destination. So lodging is a big component of a customer's travel decision. So the broad selection and rich content of launching options on Expedia, for example, can help bring a destination to life and ultimately convert a customer into traveling to a destination that United is serving. So we're really a piece of a puzzle that's very important, but we need a destination and a product and a destination to close the deal for the customer.

[00:20:36] **Sally** And is there anything that either lodging partners, car partners, attraction partners, whatever it might be, should be thinking about or doing in partnership with either new routes, additional routes, just making sure that they're connecting and being a viable or, you know, successful offering to travelers coming into a destination?

[00:20:57] **Darren** Yeah, I mean, travelers have a lot of choice about where to go. And I think the more destinations and the lodging and other providers in the destination can show what makes this destination unique and special. Why should I get on a plane for 7 hours to go and visit the Canary Islands if there are other options that are closer to home? And I think the thing that's happened with COVID is lots of people are interested in visiting major world capitals and key destinations, but there's also interest in taking more meaningful, more unique trips to something different. And I think for better, we can showcase these unique destinations to customers, more success so we can develop these markets.

Section title:

Rapid-fire questions

Transcript text:

[00:21:38] **Brandon** All right. I want you to take off the United hat and put on the "Darren Scott I'm a traveler" hat. And I'm going to do some rapid-fire questions as they pertain to air travel and travel in general. You can always pass or not answer. First question, aisle or a window?

[00:21:54] **Darren** Aisle.

[00:21:55] **Brandon** What is the best beach destination that you have been to?

[00:21:58] **Darren** I've been to so many. I would say that the green sand beach on the big island of Hawai'i, which is one of the most southern points in the United States, just because you have to hike from the parking lot to get there. So there's effort involved and it's incredibly unique.

[00:22:11] **Brandon** Effort usually reduces the crowds. I'm all for it. What is the most annoying part of travel?

[00:22:18] **Darren** The uncertainty.

[00:22:21] **Brandon** You're sitting on the plane. Someone sits next to you. Do you prefer silence, light conversation and then back to what you're doing or do you want to meet someone new on the plane?

[00:22:30] **Darren** I think, light conversation is perfect.

[00:22:32] **Brandon** Last question. As an air traveler, what is one way that you think an air traveler can help themselves out throughout this experience? Whether that be like understanding how the app works, how to figure out where the plane's coming from. But what's one thing a traveler can do?

[00:22:48] **Darren** Be prepared for the unexpected, but also leverage the app so you have as much information as possible to make an informed decision.

[00:22:56] **Sally** We talked a lot about the in-flight experience and, I have two questions, but the first is more fun. What is your favorite in-flight experience that you have had? You talked about going to Glacier National Park. That's amazing. But is there just a time in the air where you just had an incredible time?

[00:23:14] **Darren** Yeah. I mean, I would say that being able to fly on a long-haul flight in a premium cabin and arrive well-rested is always the best possible flight.

Section title:

The right partnerships

Transcript text:

[00:23:26] **Sally** And when you talk about those in-flight experiences and you look at loyalty and guest experience and partnerships, I noticed you recently partnered with Away Luggage, which is a lifestyle luggage brand for some of your amenity kits and your longer-haul flights. How do you look at partnerships that might be important to travelers today, or pick the right partnerships to enhance that in-flight experience?

[00:23:50] **Darren** Yeah, I mean, I really think it's important that partners are aligned with the values of United and the United brand and the United customer and offering an elevated amenity kit that showcases a brand that's relevant to our customers or really helps make the experience different. And a lot of travelers in our premium cabins travel frequently. So giving them something different and providing a new amenity kit that they can keep and it can be useful after their trip. It also ties into sustainability and giving the customer something they value.

[00:24:18] **Sally** And something they can share with their friends. Look what I got. Or maybe they keep it with them when they travel now. It just builds that curiosity and interest for maybe customers that haven't done that or haven't had that experience. I love that.

[00:24:29] **Brandon** Looking ahead, what is United doing to promote travel and places it hasn't been? And how is United going to stay ahead of its competitors going forward?

[00:24:40] **Darren** So it's going to be really important that we continue staying close to the customer and ensure we're delivering on their expectations. And as we learned during COVID, being nimble and be ready as their needs evolve. We want to continue curating new choices for our customers to provide easier destinations, easier access to new and different destinations, and also work with our partners in the trade to showcase this growth.

[00:25:04] **Sally** So you kind of answered it there. But the last question, what do you see as the next big trend powering travel?

[00:25:13] **Darren** So I would say customers being able to sort through all of the choices that they have in a clearer way. Because I think the challenge we have now of all of these tools and all of this information is just content overload for potential travelers. That's why United can bring destinations into the network that researching the holistic trip and thinking about travel holistically is something that I think over time there will be better and better tools to help customers do that.

[00:25:48] **Sally** If there are a lot of options out there and some people, it's about the time they leave, some people might be sustainability, some people price. I mean, it's there's a lot of information.

[00:25:58] **Brandon** There is so much information, like if you know what you're looking at, you can actually look at the inventory fair buckets and like see or try and predict how close you are to letting one of your upgrade certificates clear. And I think that's something to me, United has almost gamified it in a way, because obviously I have a background in revenue management. We talked about my woes as a management analyst at United in episode one. But one of the things I always do is I'll look at the fare class and it will help me determine like, am I getting a good deal? Am I getting a great deal? Like, do I want to wait? Do I want to try and apply an upgrade certificate? And I think just that abundance of information for the traveler, whether it's the fare class, whether it's letting me know where my plane that's coming to pick me up is, that is so helpful and just feeling like you're more in control. Because based on my interactions with people in

the airport, a lot of people are not in control. And I think United has done a great job of saying, if you want to be in control and you want to understand what's happening, we're going to make it easier for you. And I just wanted to give you guys a kudos. It's a fantastic app. It makes travel easier.

[00:27:07] **Darren** Yeah, that's fantastic. And I'm glad to have talked about what we're doing. And we'll just continue to be focused on making travel easier for the customer and giving them more relevant and exciting content.

Section title:

Building loyalty

Transcript text:

[00:27:19] **Sally** We know there's a lot of folks that might travel for business and acquire quite a bit of status over time and they're unlocking upgrades and enhanced experience. But then there's also travelers that might take 2 to 3 trips a year, and that experience seems out of reach. So how do you build loyalty in all those facets of the traveler to make sure people feel the value?

[00:27:42] **Darren** Yeah, our loyalty team is very focused on making the MileagePlus program as flexible and transparent as possible and giving customers options to elevate their travel experience in different ways. For example, our Plus Points certificates our elite members get can be used on different types of travel, meaning upgrades to different types of cabins, and then you get the certificates back if you're not cleared. It's really a lot of flexibility. And it's all about removing friction from the experience and allowing customers to pick their own, customize how they want their experience to be.

[00:28:20] **Brandon** I think one of the nice things about Plus Points in this concept is also that you can gift them. You know, if you have a friend who's traveling to see you or a friend's traveling in the United States, they're going to be on a long haul from Sydney, like, you can actually apply your Plus Points to their ticket itinerary. And it's a great surprise and a great way to make sure those are used. If you're a frequent traveler, sometimes you don't have a trip booked and you're not going to have a use for those. And being able to apply it to someone else's itinerary is just a great way to again, continue to improve the travel experience.

[00:28:50] **Sally** So that's a perfect segue way for us to wrap up today's conversation with a few fun questions. Putting your traveler hat back on. So what is the one item that you absolutely cannot travel without?

[00:29:02] **Darren** I would say that is my iPhone because it's my camera, my notebook, my reading materials, all in one place. And it doesn't really do any of those one things really well, but it does everything, and it's one device.

[00:29:15] **Sally** That's key. I think I don't know what I would do if I didn't have my phone, so absolutely. What's the most memorable trip you've ever taken? This might be hard for you because something tells me you've traveled quite a bit.

[00:29:28] **Darren** I certainly have. I have traveled quite a bit. But one of my most memorable trips was the first trip I took as an employee of United. I headed to Montana to Glacier National Park right after we had launched a new flight from Chicago. And it was in early summer. So got to see the wildflowers, the air, the scenery and it was a highly memorable experience in nature.

Section title:

Key concepts and takeaways

Transcript text:

[00:29:52] **Sally** So I had some great takeaways today. Really interesting to get this behind-the-scenes look at the airline industry and how other travel leaders can stay plugged into this type of information. At Expedia, we have this saying that, if the traveler wins, we all win. And what I love is that I heard so much of that from Darren today. On how United is thinking about making things simple and easy for the traveler, whether it be the travel ready center or helping you navigate a busy airport with time, holding a connection, even potentially. And that just aligns so well that when we put our travelers first, really great things happen. And I just love to see other companies looking at it in the same way.

[00:30:34] **Brandon** It is great to see United Airlines really reducing that friction that's in travel, but also creating great experiences. And that's something that we're focused on at Expedia Group as well. You know, we have the new One Key loyalty program that we're going to allow our partners to engage with travelers, really to attract those high-value travelers for the business, the ones that, you know, stay longer, spend more on property. And if you take friction out of the equation, you really allow the partner to shine to create a great experience. And it's good to see that United Airlines and Expedia Group are aligned in our mission. Putting the traveler first. As Sally said, if the traveler wins, we all win. And this was the conversation that really cemented that for me with the airline side of the business.

[00:31:15] **Sally** So, Brandon, before we go, I'm kind of dying to know: you worked for United for a long time. I know you're up in the air quite a lot. What is your favorite United in-flight meal?

[00:31:26] **Brandon** This is a great question. And I'm going to answer it quickly and easily because I had it last night. There is a new, this is going to blow your mind, Sally, we've progressed from the dark ages of airline food. Airline food is great. Last night on a United flight home from Seattle, I had a barbecue bacon cheeseburger. Which, like, what? You know, normally it's like some chicken or some, you know, orzo salad. I was able to have a smoky barbecue bacon cheeseburger with blue cheese and chopped onions, and it tasted like I was at a restaurant. It was fantastic.

[00:32:00] **Sally** I love it. What do you pair with that, though? What was the beverage of choice?

[00:32:04] **Brandon** You know, I was lame. I was working. I had a Coke Zero. I really, really let you down there. I'm sure you were hoping like, oh yes, I had a lovely Michelob Ultra, but no, I had a Coke Zero and the water.

[00:32:15] **Sally** I'm glad you're working, Brandon. That's the most important thing, right?

[00:32:19] **Brandon** Indeed. I was preparing for this podcast. It's amazing, Sally. We are at the end of the season almost. We've got one final episode. It's coming in two weeks. We're really excited about it. We've got a couple of surprises, and I can't wait to share it with you all. So stay tuned. This is Powering Travel by Expedia Group.

[00:32:40] **Sally** We hope you enjoy this episode of Powering Travel. We want to hear from you. So connect with us at poweringtravel@expediagroup.com. Subscribe to get notified when new episodes are live and be sure to rate and review the show. A huge thank you to everyone Powering Travel. Thanks for listening.