

LOYALTY UNPACKED

by the NORTH AMERICAN LOYALTY ASSOCIATION

UNITED
AIRLINES





THE BRAND

United Airlines is one the world's largest carriers and a founding member of the **Star Alliance**, with one of the most extensive international networks of any US airline. In 2025 it flew a record 181 million passengers and posted \$59.1 billion in revenue, the highest in it's history.



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MileagePlus is a free, revenue-based program, overhauled in April 2026:

- Miles never expire, earned on flights, cards, hotels, dining and shopping
- Since April 2026, the card sets the earn rate: 3 miles per \$1 on United fares without a United credit card, up to 17 with the top card and top status
- Four Premier tiers plus invitation-only Global Services, qualified on spend (PQP) and flights flown (PQF)
- Basic economy fares earn no miles without a card or Premier status
- Dynamic award pricing with no fixed award chart, redeemable on United and 25+ Star Alliance partner airlines.
- Cardholders get automatic award discounts: at least 10%, rising to 15% or more with status, plus first claim on the cheapest award seats
- Miles pooling for up to five members, parent-child account linking, and free Starlink Wi-Fi onboard for members.

110

Million

Traveler profiles





MileagePlus was valued at \$21.9 billion, more than the airline itself.

The \$6.8 billion borrowed against it in 2020 was repaid in full by 2025, a year loyalty revenue grew another 9%



The program outgrew the airline.

MileagePlus runs as it's own business inside United. Most of its mile sales go to partners, led by its co-brand bank, and since 2024 it also sells attention: Kinective Media, the first media network built by an airline, turns nearly 100,000 seatback screens, the app, lounges and united.com into advertising inventory tied to the traveler profile, with free Starlink Wi-Fi as the login.



THE NALA™ INSIGHT

The flying now **supports** the card

The frequent flyer program was built so the card fed the flying. The April 2026 overhaul reversed the flow. **A member without the card now earns 40% fewer miles on the same fare**, while cardholders earn more, unlock automatic award discounts and get first claim on the cheapest award seats. United calls it investing in the members who engage the most. The economics are not hiding: the majority of mile sales come from flying, and those cash flows proved stable enough to carry the airline through the 2020 Covid crisis.

United has repriced loyalty to match where the money actually comes from. The move makes sense from a financial perspective, but has clearly been perceived as an unfair devaluation by frequent flyers. The risk is simple: if they stop flying, why should they keep the airline card?



OUR CHALLENGE

A member without the card earns 40% fewer miles on the same flight, and trade press called the overhaul a devaluation for most. Can **trust survive** a program shifting value from the seat to the bank relationship?

Dynamic pricing with no award chart, now layered with cardholder-only discounts and award space, makes the mile's value opaque. Independent valuations put it near 1.35 cents. Opacity protects margin, but does it **erode the currency's credibility**?

Free Wi-Fi and personalized ads on a captive audience is a fair trade on paper. At what point do members feel **monetized rather than rewarded**?

“Would you rebuild your loyalty program around your most profitable members, even if it meant giving less to your most frequent ones?”

JOIN US

NALA™ is a community for people doing the real work of loyalty, CRM and customer engagement inside brands and retailers.

We create space for real brand stories like this, open debate, practical exchange and celebrate success.



Meet us at **The BIG Handshake Loyalty™**
event in Chicago on November 10
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