

Upgrade your business travel rewards – Getting the most out of loyalty programs

It costs up to five times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep an existing one. Brands know this, so will offer incentives to keep their customers coming back. And the travel industry, including hotels, airlines and car hire providers, are masters at loyalty programs.

The opportunities to earn business travel rewards points are endless, especially with affiliates, bonus point promotions, and even using a corporate travel management company. John Baty, Product Leader at Corporate Traveller, talks through the various major loyalty programs available to travellers, and how you can upgrade your rewards and make the most of your membership.

Basic Tips to Build Up Your Loyalty Rewards Points

With benefits of loyalty programs ranging from discounts, giveaways, exclusive offers, value-adds and, of course, the all-important rewards points, there are incentives and rewards to suit every traveller. And while each program offers its own benefits to business travellers, there are some tips that apply across the industry to help you build up your rewards points quicker.

Consolidate to accumulate

Travellers might fall into the trap of being a member of every program, to have options when they travel. But this approach will slow down your point accumulation, delaying the potential benefits from all of the programs.

"The main thing when looking at rewards programs is, while you could be a member of multiple programs, try to consolidate where possible to one. This will build your points faster and ultimately reach higher status tiers, which is a common goal for most travellers," says John.

Use affiliates where it makes sense to

Travel loyalty programs are always connected to affiliates, providing members with more incentives to buy and opportunities to earn points. And while the incentives might be enticing, John says that using affiliates to boost your points balance is only going to be a worthwhile exercise if you combine your existing everyday spending with the program.

"If your main rewards program has partners that fit your needs, then it can be beneficial to accrue points from your existing everyday spend, such as your groceries. But I wouldn't be switching providers or paying more just to get points. If you're spending the money anyway, and accruing points doesn't cost you more than it's a win-win," says John.

All points are not created equal

It can be easy to compare the points for one program with another, but you should keep in mind that all points are not created equal. That is, the dollar value of a point for one program is not necessarily equal to that of another program, and the number of points you'll need to cash in will differ as well.

"When looking at the value of a program, you'll need to take into consideration the fact that earning and redeeming points does not happen in the same currency. A thousand Qantas Frequent Flyer points are not the same as a thousand Velocity Frequent Flyer points; you need to look at how much you actually spent to get those points in the first place," says John.

Stay on top of your points balance with apps

It's easier than ever before to stay on top of your points balance with access via apps. Easily track your points and activity, including how and when you've earned points, and also opportunities to cash in your rewards points.

"Whether you're on your computer or phone, via their website or an app, it's easy to access your status and points level at any time. I don't know any programs that don't have an app these days. And most send regular balance statements too," says John.

Hotel Loyalty Programs

With most hotel chains offering a variety of accommodation styles, ranging from budget to luxury and trendy to traditional, most travellers are catered for. This can be of significant benefit for members of a hotel's loyalty program, as it provides options beyond just one hotel brand.

"Look at all the brands that come under a hotel chain and see what's available in your destination. You've now got a wider range of accommodation options that will earn you points under the overall hotel chain rewards program," says John.

You'll also get added benefits while travelling for business if you book through SmartSTAY, which will not only earn you loyalty points under your preferred programs, but you'll also receive free WiFi and breakfast, plus an additional bonus from your hotel.

Hilton Honors

Hilton Honors is the loyalty program of Hilton, which includes brands Hilton Hotels & Resorts and DoubleTree by Hilton in Australia. Members benefit from exclusive discounts, points toward free nights, digital check-in, choice of room, digital key, WiFi and late check-out. As membership status progresses up the tiers through Silver, Gold and Diamond, benefits include complimentary bottles of water, room upgrades, complimentary breakfast and executive lounge access.

"Because there are a number of hotel chains, each with their own loyalty program, there are a few times throughout the year that they will have an accelerated status promotion, where if you stay a certain number of times during the promotion period, they'll upgrade your status," says John.

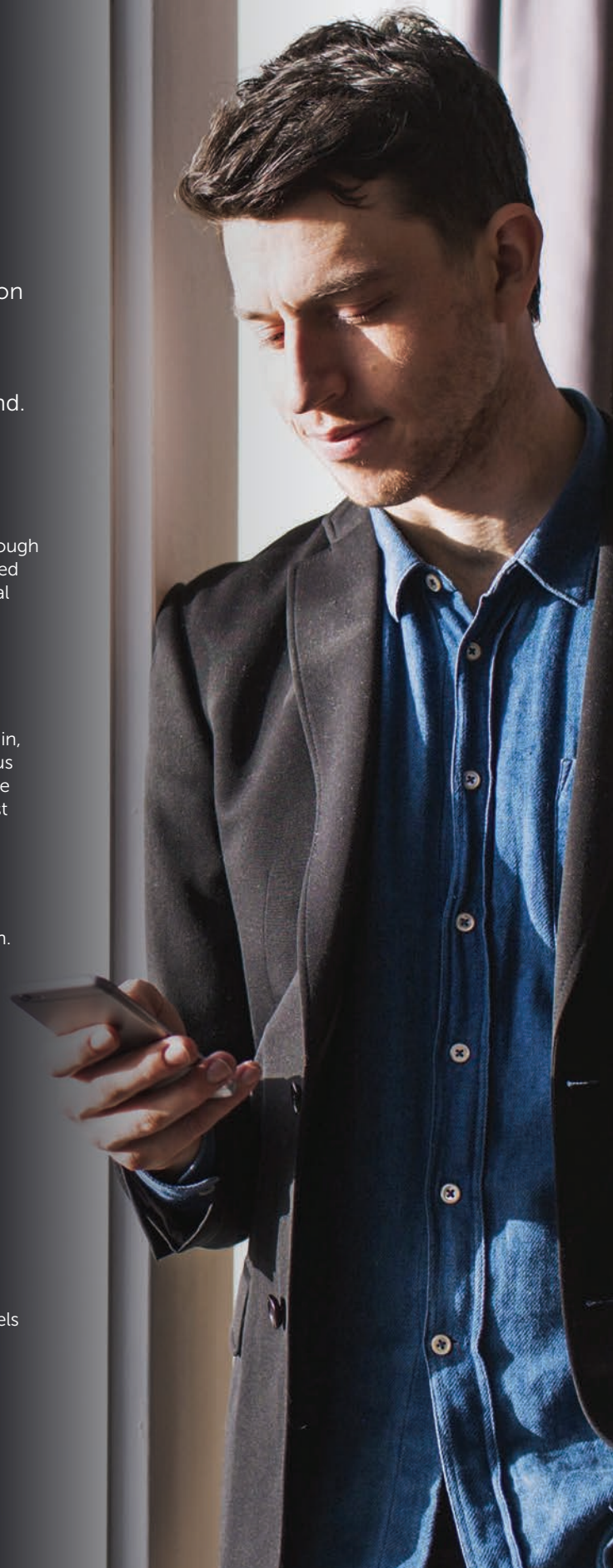
These promotions can secure travellers a status upgrade to enjoy the benefits of high earning potential when it comes to Hilton Honors.

IHG Rewards Club

The IHG Rewards Club is the type of loyalty program you would expect from one of the world's largest hotel chains, InterContinental Hotel Group (IHG). Membership types range from Club and Gold Elite to Platinum Elite and Spire Elite, and offer standard benefits such as exclusive rates, dedicated customer service channels and no black-out periods for redemption nights, through to late check-out, priority check-in, bonus points and point rollovers, room upgrades and guaranteed room availability.

"IHG is the perfect example of a chain that offers different hotel brands that you can choose from and still accrue your points. There are IHG hotels everywhere, including InterContinental and Holiday Inn, so you just have to look at where you're going and see what's in that area," says John.

You'll accrue points by staying at any of the chain's 5,000 properties around the world. But you can also earn points by using their affiliated partners and shopping through their online store, and you can buy additional points to reach a balance target.



Airline Loyalty Programs

Some of the most recognisable and popular loyalty programs belong to airlines. And it's not surprising, with over 10% of the Australian population flying for business purposes. But with a couple of carriers to choose from in the domestic market, business travellers often ask: 'what's the best airline loyalty program for me?'

With a number of similarities between the big airlines' frequent flyer programs, choosing the one that's right for you can be challenging, says John: "Look at your travel habits, what benefits you're likely to use, and whether their affiliates suit your lifestyle."

And when it comes to affiliates, that's often where you'll bump up your points balance to achieve your coveted upgrades.

"Airline loyalty programs are all about affiliates. Yes, you'll earn points when you fly, but you'll accumulate them so much quicker when you connect hotels, car hire, online shopping, credit cards, even dining out. Look at what you're currently spending anyway and see if you can earn points by booking via your frequent flyer airline" says John.

Qantas Frequent Flyer

There is perhaps no better-known loyalty program than Qantas Frequent Flyer. And with almost 13 million members, its popularity speaks for itself. Membership tiers include Silver, Gold, Platinum and Platinum One, and Qantas Points can be accrued through flying with the airline, as well as shopping, dining, using a credit card and staying with affiliate hotels.

Qantas recently announced a \$25million investment into an overhaul of their rewards program, including making more seats available for members to redeem frequent flyer points and reducing carrier charges. It's hoped the changes will increase member engagement and make it easier to access rewards, which business travellers can also use for personal travel.

"We know the majority of our members want to use their points to take a dream trip overseas, so we are adding more reward seats including First, Business and Premium Economy, to places like London, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Singapore as well as slashing carrier charges," says Qantas Group CEO, Alan Joyce.

As well as individual travellers earning points, your business can benefit from Qantas Business Rewards, which offers incentives such as discounts and points for your business to redeem.

Velocity Frequent Flyer

Virgin Australia's membership rewards program, Velocity Frequent Flyer, is extensive and offers members significant opportunities to both earn and spend points. Status starts at the entry-level Red before upgrading to Silver, Gold and Platinum, with benefits ranging from member-only offers with the airline and affiliates, using points to book seats and upgrade flights, lounge access, priority check-in and boarding, bonus points, flying ahead on earlier flights and Business Class upgrades.

Members can climb the status tiers by earning status credits in the air and on the ground with travel partners, as well as shopping with credit cards and Global Wallet. And according to Karl Schuster, CEO of Velocity Frequent Flyer, family pooling is one of the top ways to boost your membership status and reap the benefits: "A quick way to reach status and reward goals sooner is by pooling all of your family's Points and status credits into your account."

And booking with Corporate Traveller's SmartFLY program in partnership with Virgin Australia will open up even more benefits for travellers, says John: "Our exclusive program taps into greater sales discounts than the rest of the industry. Travellers will earn their regular points and status credits, and your company will save money in the process. Your company can also receive a rebate after 12 months, to spend back on travel, meaning you're saving even more."

Airpoints

With Air New Zealand's loyalty program, Airpoints™, members earn Airpoints Dollars™ and Status Points, which gives them access to a wide range of rewards and benefits. Airpoints Dollars™ can be earned by flying with Air New Zealand and its partner airlines, staying with hotel partners and booking through aligned car hire providers. Reward points from a range of credit card partners can also be easily converted to Airpoints Dollars.

What sets Airpoints apart is its transparent currency. One Airpoints Dollar is equivalent in value to AUD\$1, making it easy to know the value of your Airpoints Dollars and what they can be spent on. Members can use Airpoints Dollars to book any seat on any flight or to purchase a Koru membership to access Air New Zealand's lounges. Flights can also be booked using a mix of Airpoints Dollars and cash through Airpoints Flexipay. Members can also spend their Airpoints Dollars on rental cars and travel insurance, upgrades, companion tickets and flight gifting.

Earning Status Points moves members through the tiers to progress from Silver to Gold then Elite, unlocking a greater range of benefits from upgrades and lounge access to extra baggage allowance, priority check-in and additional lounge and upgrade privileges.

Car Hire Loyalty Programs

While there are choices when it comes to car hire as well, businesses will often have their preferred car hire company written into their travel policy. If not, you might like to consider which ones are aligned to your other loyalty programs to maximise points.

"You can earn standard points on your car hire when you book with the provider that is aligned to your frequent flyer program, but there will often be promotions for double points as well, so look out for those opportunities," says John.

Or simply book through SmartDRIVE, which doubles your Qantas Frequent Flyer or Velocity Frequent Flyer points with each car hire booking through their respective affiliates, as well as discounts on damage excess and premium protection.

When considering your options, John says an additional cost outlay might not be worth it just to gain extra points: "When looking at car hire, if it's a similar cost across providers, then you probably want to choose the one that's going to help your frequent flyer balance. But would I go with one that's going to cost me \$50 more per day just to get the points? Probably not."

Hertz Gold Plus Rewards

The Hertz Gold Plus Rewards program offers a tier-based status program, including Gold, Five Star and President's Circle, offering points across the Hertz global network, which are redeemable for free rental days. Accumulate enough points to reach top-tier status, and you'll also receive complimentary car class upgrade. Members also benefit from exclusive discounts and no fees for additional drivers.

Hertz appeals to the corporate traveller by offering personalised customer service, which is embedded in their loyalty program, says Eoin MacNeill, Vice President Asia Pacific at Hertz Australia: "A great customer experience is at the core of the Hertz business and our award-winning loyalty program, Hertz Gold Plus Rewards Program, is a natural extension of that."

And for busy corporate travellers who value efficiency, you'll appreciate by-passing the check-in counter at 50 of the world's busiest locations. Simply show your license and pick up your keys.

Take Your Rewards Points to the Next Level

Between hotels, airlines and car hire, there are extensive opportunities for business travellers to accrue rewards points. But, as we know, building up loyalty rewards faster is not just about flying; it's about spending.

"If people really want to start taking their points to the next level, they should be looking at things like credit cards, shop to earn, even dining out these days," says John.

Credit Cards

Using a co-branded credit card, whereby you earn rewards points for dollars spent on the card, can be a big boost to your points balance. Bonus point promotions when you sign up to a credit card are also popular and can be a quick way to get a six-figure points balance or upgrade your status.

But, as John says, you need to look at the fine print and ensure you're staying on top of your spending: "Credit cards can be worth it if you're paying it off. Just pay them off on time to avoid costing you more in interest, and you can get the value out of the annual fee."

And it's a good idea to ensure the offers actually suit your existing travel habits, says John: "Some credit cards will have lounge passes included, which might be two or four passes per year. As long as you're a frequent flyer and you're travelling on that airline, you can redeem them. So, this can be a good option if you travel only a couple of times a year and don't have a higher status level that provides lounge access."

Shopping

Earning points via shopping is another easy way to reach a target and upgrade status tiers. Find out which supermarket is affiliated with your loyalty program and whether it's going to be more beneficial for you to do your regular grocery shop there.

"Things like bonus points offers in selected periods and on specific products can really add up, simply by swiping a card," says John. "This applies for online shopping too; if you've looking for something in particular, visit the online store of your loyalty program and see which retailers they are affiliated with. Velocity Frequent Flyer and Qantas Frequent Flyer both have a number of retailers that you can earn points through by buying what you are about to purchase anyway; for example, Apple, David Jones and The Iconic."

Dining out

A growing trend with loyalty programs is the ability to earn points when you're dining out. If you're looking for a local restaurant while travelling for business or planning on heading out near home, booking a table via your loyalty program's website can earn you a discount on the meal and reward you with points in the process.

"You might wonder what's in it for the loyalty program provider, but they're getting what they want: your data. They're getting an understanding of your buying patterns so they can market to you better. But, if you're comfortable with that, then it's beneficial for everyone."

Redeeming Your Points

With so many options to redeem your loyalty program points, it can be hard to know what's going to be the best use of your hard-earned points. But John says this is a no-brainer: "If you're looking at the best way to redeem points, my recommendation is always going to be on airline redemption seats."

Whether travelling for work or looking for a family getaway, using your points on travel can often take you further than spending them on tangible things. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't cash them in elsewhere.

"You've got to work out what's going to be best for you; travel will always be the best option value-wise, but if you've got points to burn and no travel plans, buy your headphones or vacuum cleaner with points," says John.

Upgrade Your Status

Feeling overwhelmed by the world of loyalty programs and what's best for your business and personal use? Contact a dedicated Travel Manager who can help to assess your travel patterns.

The information presented in this article is general in nature. Conditions may apply to offers and benefits. Visit the respective loyalty program websites for further information.

To find out more, visit
corporatetraveller.com.au

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