

EARNING

Thanks Again, Other Programs Reward Frequent Airport Users

BY JOHN QUINNIES

Loyalty

Left: The Thanks Again program allows airports to encourage loyalty by offering redeemable points for purchases made at airports.



Above: Marc Ellis, CEO of Thanks Again LLC, says rewards members spend about 30% more on concessions than the average passenger.



As airports across North America seek to push the margins of the passenger experience, loyalty rewards programs have continued to grow in popularity as a way to return value to flyers and gain insight into customer desires.

The most prominent loyalty program for North American airports is Thanks Again LLC, which boasts more than 100 airports and around 14 million users, of which 10-20% are active rewards earners, according to CEO Marc Ellis.

Meanwhile, other airports such as **Lafayette Regional Airport (LFT)** and **Gainesville Regional Airport (GNV)** have bespoke loyalty programs with similar benefits, marking their efforts to personalize the airport experience for their most valued travelers.

The Thanks Again Model

At its core, Thanks Again is a loyalty program that offers redeemable points for purchases made at airports. Users can link their debit or credit cards so when they grab a bite to eat or buy some gifts on their way through the airport, they rack up points. The most popular reward to redeem has been cash with a baseline redemption rate of 1,000 points to \$10. It depends on the region, but members can also redeem their points for airline miles, hotels, parking, concession credits, gift cards, and even donations to local nonprofits, according to Ellis. For certain participating businesses, members can also gain points for transactions outside of airports.

The goal is to reward a customer's change in behavior. It can be getting them to spend more, or use certain parking, or pre-ordering food, or anything. So far, it's working. The average rewards member spends around 30% more in concessions per transaction while the average parking member spends around 50% more, he says.

Leveraging Reward Data

Beyond its role as a loyalty rewards program, Thanks Again also serves as a customer management dashboard allowing airport operators to gain insight into who their passengers are, Ellis says.

Airports can encourage behavior changes, collect direct survey feedback, or plan experience improvements with insights from the Thanks Again program and its GlidePathCX platform. Airports have so far used the rewards program in conjunction with their own customer databases and customer relations management platforms to segment the customer base into personas such as the frequent business traveler or occasional leisure flyer, Ellis says.

The service can offer airport operators a glimpse of passenger market share such as the use of Uber and Lyft and what percentage of parking revenue they're missing out on. Airport operators can also use the data to see how flyers are spending at other nearby participating airports, and how often they are

traveling, offering further possible insight into customer preferences, according to Ellis.

The resulting data can help guide decisions such as where concessions should be located and what types of concessions offerings are needed, Ellis says. So, if a certain airline using a gate where 1,500 square feet has been designated for a coffee shop, airports can use their knowledge about the customer personas who frequently use that airline or gate to find the most favorable coffee brand and maximize revenue, Ellis says.

"I think we were ahead of our time in offering the initial loyalty program, because when we first started (in 2006) airports didn't think they needed to know much more about the passenger," Ellis says. "[They felt they] didn't need the data."

That's no longer our issue. Every airport is asking for the digital footprint. How do we engage? How do they accumulate more information to build the profile of their passengers so they can better service those passengers?"

One initiative lately has been concession scorecards, where Thanks Again asks customers to give feedback on the services provided. The direct feedback has been used to rank concession errors which can be used to improve service and revenue, Ellis says.

Thanks Again executives are also looking into new and better ways to process data. Part of that has been using language models to speed things up, Ellis says. For example, the company received more than 52,000 survey responses in 2023. "We went through, put it through the AI engine, and it came out with the top five issues on a month-to-month basis that customers are complaining about," Ellis says. "If we had tried to do that using manpower, it would have taken two years, but it completed it very quickly."

Below: Gainesville Regional Airport is among a handful of small airports that have a bespoke loyalty program. The GNV Ultimate Road Warrior Program offers a dedicated lounge to members and regular prize drawings for the most frequent flyers.





Left, Above: Denver International Airport promotes participation in the Thanks Again program using pop-up booths and signage.

So now, on top of the rewards program, Ellis says Thanks Again is also offering airports help with sorting through data to narrow down service issues, looking to find better correlations between purchase data and preference data, and hoping to help airports figure out what they're doing right, all in the name of improving the passenger experience.

Smaller Airports, Bespoke Programs

As Thanks Again grows across large airports, some smaller operators such as LFT and GNV have launched their own custom rewards programs to appeal to frequent travelers. The Fly Lafayette Club, which has about 13,000 members, regularly awards participants gift cards to local businesses often valued at \$25, according to LFT Executive Director Steven Picou. The regional airport saw about 460,000 passengers in 2023.

"Frequent travelers often form the backbone of an airport's passenger base. By offering tailored programs, the airport

can build loyalty and encourage these travelers to continue using Lafayette Regional Airport for their journeys," says Picou. "Airports that successfully cater to frequent travelers often gain a positive reputation for customer service. This can attract more airlines and travelers, further boosting the airport's profile and influence in the industry."

About 1,500 flyers participate in the GNV Ultimate Road Warrior Program, which offers a dedicated lounge to members and regular prize drawings for the most frequent flyers, according to Erin Porter, the airport's manager of public relations. The prize drawings have included tickets to unique community experiences such as the local theater or ballet, Porter says. Around 540,000 passengers used the airport in 2023.

Other small airports are also rewarding their most frequent users. At **Harrisburg International Airport** (MDT) in Pennsylvania, adult travelers who fly at least 25,000 miles per year on an airplane serving MDT are eligible to become a member of the Susquehanna Club. According to the

MDT website, the members-only lounge offers complimentary non-alcoholic beverages and a quiet place to relax or work while waiting for a flight. And upstate New York's **Greater Binghamton Airport** (BGM) rewards its business travelers with free airport parking passes and other rewards based on their usage of the airport.

Both the Fly Lafayette Club and Ultimate Road Warrior Program took hits during the Covid-19 pandemic, but airport executives say the programs are growing. GNV is looking to modernize its program and bring in more benefits such as hotel points and popular restaurant offerings, according to Porter.

"GNV is a smaller regional airport that competes with much bigger options such as MCO, TPA and JAX. Our motto is 'Fly Easy' and the ways in which we can set ourselves apart are through our more calm, friendly atmosphere, shorter TSA lines, easy parking, and less hassle," Porter says. "The Ultimate Road Warrior program is one way we can thank our loyal, frequent customers to stay that way." ■