



POWERING TRAVEL | SEASON 2 | EPISODE 6

Elevating travel: How loyalty and rewards make a difference

What to listen for:

Press play on the season two finale of Powering Travel, featuring freelance writer and loyalty expert Katherine Fan. In this week's episode, your host Brandon Ehrhardt is digging into the world of travel rewards with Katherine. Together, they're talking about the components of a well-rounded rewards program, how everyday travelers can maximize rewards points, and the benefits of universal loyalty programs like Expedia Group's One Key™.

Introduction:

[00:00:04] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Travel providers are the backbone of the travel experience. In this brand-new season of Powering Travel, we'll dive into industry trends, hot topics, and actionable advice to help business leaders continue evolving and enhancing travel experience one trip at a time. Welcome to Powering Travel. It's our season finale. I'm flying solo this episode, but our topic today is near and dear to me: loyalty and rewards. Those of you who are travel industry pros understand that when we talk about loyalty, we're talking about the rewards programs and the loyal customers that those programs attract. Coincidentally, this is one of the areas of focus I have with Expedia Group. I am overseeing the VIP access program today, so my team manages this invite-only exclusive program for partners who deliver the best experiences and member benefits to our travelers. So, properties in this program, they receive a distinguished visibility in our store front. They have always-on access to attract these high-value travelers and then access to improved support where they can get help with any of their loyalty increase. Loyalty programs are a two-way street when working at their best. Travel businesses benefit from return visits, increased traffic, and the most profitable guests who spend more and stay longer. And travelers benefit from smoother experiences and perks that give them more for their dollar. But travel is not linear, and neither is loyalty. People don't always want to book solely with one airline or one hotel for the rest of their lives. People change. They move. They have new home airports. The loyalty space needs to evolve and recognize mix and match traveler behaviors that we see. Travelers have become very savvy, and they want a booking journey that is frictionless and effortless. They want to be recognized and rewarded by the brands they do business with. They want to feel valued and special when they come to your website. But loyalty nowadays can feel a bit more like work and appreciation. Points here, vouchers there, not quite enough to do anything with anywhere. Different passwords and places and membership details are absolutely everywhere throughout the travel industry. And this fragmented world of loyalty programs has led to a loss of business opportunities for travel partners. Rewards might be forgotten about, points going unused, ultimately nights not booked for traffic that you'll never see. The industry needs programs that cover holistic travel experiences to piece together everything. Before we get into the interview, I want to do some setup at the top. The conversation covers a lot around the loyalty topic, and you'll hear us refer to One Key, which is the largest and most comprehensive travel rewards program that Expedia Group has ever created. I'll get into the details later in the episode, but put simply, One Key unifies Expedia, Hotels.com, and Vrbo under one simple and easy-to-use rewards program. This means you'll be able to earn on vacation rental stays through Vrbo, for example, and use for a flight, hotel, or car rental, whether you use Expedia, Hotels.com, or Vrbo. With this upcoming opportunity via One Key to attract high-value guests, we'll highlight how you can leverage loyalty to drive revenue results to your business. To discuss this more in depth with me today is Katherine Fan. She holds dual degrees in journalism and ethnic studies from the University of Texas at Austin and, of course, is an avid traveler herself. Here's our interview with Katherine Fan. All right, Katherine Fan's a freelance writer and loyalty expert. Her work has appeared

at NerdWallet, The Points Guy, Bankrate, CreditCards.com, LendingTree, and more. Katherine, thanks for joining us. Let's get to know you a little bit. I know that you're passionate about the loyalty space. Tell us about your experience.

[00:03:41] **Katherine Fan** Thanks, Brandon. Yes. So, I started like most people in this space. I wanted to go places. I didn't know where to go, how to get there, and how to pay for it. So, I hopped on the internet and started reading up on everyone else's experiences. Hotels.com was actually one of the first sites I found in that space, and I very quickly became a passionate fan of it because it's really difficult to earn loyalty if you go to a bunch of different hotels and only stay once per year at each chain or something like that. But I fell in love with Hotels.com because they rewarded me really well for every night that I spent. So as long as I stayed more than once or twice a year, I was starting to collect some small rewards, feeling like I was getting to be a somebody in the travel space and really loved that.

[00:04:30] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Traveling for free is the way to be. So, I definitely understand that your affinity for the Hotels.com program. I actually discovered you through one of your articles titled The Best Hotel Rewards Programs, which I ran to. So, talk to us about what makes a great loyalty program from your perspective.

[00:04:48] **Katherine Fan** Yeah, I should probably have spoken with you all a lot sooner because I have been an avid Hotels.com since probably 2013, 2014. Not only have I done that article, I've done a podcast that's titled Hotels.com Is Underrated, and so I am a big fan of this program. Here's why it really gripped me. So, back in probably 2013 through 2015, I, like many people out there, was just a little desk warrior new in my career, didn't have much time off, didn't have much money, and I had the added hiccup of having a family, my parents, who lived really far away in Taiwan. All of my vacation time, my money went toward trying to figure out how to get back to Taiwan every year. I stumbled across Hotels.com because they allowed me to start collecting points for every little random thing I did. I think I did one small business trip for two whole nights, and I thought I was a really bigshot. I earned two nights' credit for the trip that my company paid for. And I really started getting hooked along that way. And here's why I think loyalty matters to the average traveler. Most people are like me, where you don't feel like you necessarily have all of your plans aligned already, and especially after the pandemic, nothing's for certain anymore. We all know that. Loyalty allows you to feel like you've got some kind of connection to the last trip you took, which feels you toward your next trip. And whether you travel 100 nights out of the year or just two nights out of the year like I used to do, it's a really big deal knowing the money that was really important to you and probably represents a significant chunk of your income and your discretionary spending is going towards something that you'll be able to reap the benefits of in the future.

[00:06:39] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Totally agree. As a traveler myself, nothing more depressing than coming back from vacation and not having another one planned. So, when I can earn on a future trip, it makes a lot of sense. And then if you think about where the loyalty programs exist today, they're still very segmented by the line of business or type where there's airline loyalty programs. So, as you think about the loyalty space and how travelers want to earn and burn points across different lines of businesses, how do you see travelers engaging with these programs today? And then do you foresee any pivot to programs that are more universal or allow you to earn on one line of business and burn on another one?

[00:07:20] **Katherine Fan** Yeah, I think one of the most interesting things about loyalty is that most people are pretty split down the middle, right? We've got the extreme couponers who go to the grocery store and clip out every five-cent coupon for paper towels and toilet paper. Then you've got the people who just want to get in and get out. I think travel and really every form of loyalty is similar. Some of us really care about getting our sandwich punch cards. Other people are just like, I just need lunch. So, I think we'll continue to see travelers pretty split like that as well. I was talking to a friend just this past weekend, and she didn't realize that she probably has a bunch of Southwest points from flying home to see her family in Orlando for the holidays. But I was like, no, most places will give you some form of recognition of the money or time or investment that you've spent with them. But like you said, it's scattered all over the place. I remember my mom carrying really big wallets as a kid to help her remember which store had which program. And even myself, I work full time in the travel industry right now, and I have a long-running Google Docs spreadsheet for myself and know exactly how much and when to fly where. They may be a little bit less likely to use this. But I think the One Key program

will open up opportunities for a whole new segment of travelers who can now plan the perfect vacation and earn points and rewards for every step along the way.

[00:08:45] **Brandon Ehrhardt** It's hard. It's work, right, be invested in all these loyalty programs as a traveler. You, at a minimum, you have to do some sort of currency conversion in your head and understand what the points translates to, which is, I think, one of the great things about One Key, when it's put into cash, it's a little bit easier to understand because you know the value of a dollar. Thinking about all the different loyalty programs that are out there today, one of the things that's also frustrating for travelers are these lost points. So, you've earned these points over time and maybe you don't earn enough to redeem a full flight or a full room night at a hotel. How do you think through programs that are cash based like One Key versus programs that are points or mileage based?

Loyalty strategies:

[00:09:30] **Katherine Fan** Yeah, I think the way that I advise people to think about loyalty in general is very similar to credit cards or your personal finance strategy. Before you think about what everyone else is doing, it's really important to understand your own lifestyle habits, your family situation. For instance, someone who is single and lives in a big city will travel very differently from a young family that lives in the suburbs with a couple of kids. Maybe for the family with a couple of kids, you're working around school schedules, and the kids are still at an age where Disney World is the most exciting thing ever. So in those situations, you would want to prioritize your travel toward whatever most incentivizes you and rewards you for that annual trip to Disney World, where someone who is single and traveling a lot, both for pleasure as well as for work, may really want to double down on picking a specific airline, a specific hotel chain to build up that loyalty with so that they can reap the benefits of status. Again, that family going to Disney World from the suburbs, probably a free breakfast in a nice pool will do for the times when you're not already at the park. So, in the same kind of way, you know that Disney World trip is way more expensive than most of us probably anticipate. So, that's where that cash-based benefit really kicks in. If I'm dropping \$5,000 for my entire family vacation in one fell swoop, I definitely would like to get some rewards out of that because I know that I'm not going to fly 10 or 15 times like that single city-dwelling traveler did. But I'm probably spending around the same amount, maybe even more if you factor in everything else.

[00:11:13] **Brandon Ehrhardt** And earning in places where you historically haven't and be able to redeem in places you historically haven't, that is a great unlock for travelers. So, it's in the One Key program. Vrbo is going to have a loyalty program for the first time ever. So, you'll be able to earn at all vacation rental stays. For the first time ever, you'll essentially be able to earn points that you got from purchasing a stay at a vacation rental and then potentially burn them on a flight, on a car, or maybe a hotel for your next trip. How does that change the game for travelers and how does that change the game for the short-term rental industry as a whole?

[00:11:46] **Katherine Fan** Yeah. So, I think here's where the Vrbo program gets really exciting. I don't know if you've been around people who are big credit card geeks. I write a lot about credit cards and their benefits. So, one thing you'll commonly see is people who are credit card nerds will all rush to pay the bill when they go out to eat together at the restaurant, and then everyone else will just Venmo them back. But the benefit there is that whomever puts down their credit card earns all of the points for that particular meal. In the same kind of way, Vrbo's rental program allows people who are booking a vacation house out by the lake or maybe a nice condo in Orlando, right by Disneyworld. Let's see, you're going with the grandparents and some cousins. If no one else in the family cares about earning those points, you can go ahead and pocket all of the points that come alongside of paying for a \$4,000 condo for four nights and everyone else pays you back. But you've got all that credit to use for the next trip as well.

[00:12:46] **Brandon Ehrhardt** You've just exposed my game. So, I know many of us with this podcast work and travel, and what is inherently true about working in travel is your family believes that you're a travel agent. Doesn't matter what you do, you could be marketing, finance, it doesn't matter. If you work for a travel company, you're a travel agent. And as a traveler myself, I absolutely do what you're talking about. So, when our family goes on a trip, generally I'm the

one booking it, or if we're going on a friend's trip, I'm generally the one that's finding and booking it. And then I earn all those points. And so, I think to your point, there is a great opportunity here for travel managers, whether that's for a small and medium sized business or that's just you're managing a lot of family and friends travel to leverage the One Key program because of the currency it's going to allow you to redeem in so many different places. So, as we think about accruing points over time, I'm curious. What's your strategy for redeeming points?

[00:13:41] **Katherine Fan** So, my personal strategy for points in pretty much any setting is I want to earn them at the best rate that I can. And then I want to spend them as low or as few or as simply as I can. Some hotels, for instance, will offer different rates depending on the country. So, even if you're going to a really high-end property or you're going to someplace like Thailand where the cost of living is a lot lower, you could stay in a Ritz-Carlton or somewhere like that for a relatively low number of points, because even though it's top tier in the world, a night is still only \$400 as opposed to maybe \$2,000 in somewhere like New York or Monaco. So, in the same kind of way, I want to use my points that way. I want them to go toward opportunities that give me the most bang for my buck or bang for my points in this situation. And in turn, I really like earning my points when there are special incentives. For instance, if there's a 20 percent boost for me to book during this time and travel during this window, I'll do that. A few weeks ago, for instance, Southwest offered 40 percent off of flights during their anniversary sale. I booked most of the rest of my trips for this summer and fall and winter during that time because I can change and cancel it. But I won't get that rate again if I do it later. So, flexibility is a huge part of my consideration, and then I'm always looking to get the best value in both directions.

[00:15:08] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Brilliant strategy to book all your flights at once. Take advantage of the promo. You raise an interesting point around specifically point-based programs, because what we've observed in the industry is two things. Number one, points have a shelf life. If you don't continue to earn in that program, generally speaking, the points are no longer viable to be used or they're devalued. And then there's a second scenario where oftentimes, especially in the airline and hotel space, there are these charts, and these charts command how many points you need to redeem. Right? And so we've seen the airlines move to more dynamic point-burning opportunities. We've seen hotels go in that direction, but at the same time, what I've continually seen is devaluation of points. So, I'll give you an example. Large United States carrier where you could in the past you burned 60,000 points, it's a one-way business-class ticket. Now that's like 400,000 points because they value it differently or it's dynamic. How do you advise people to maximize their points and not get caught up in this game of spending them right before they expire or potentially holding on to all of them and seeing the value cut in half?

[00:16:24] **Katherine Fan** I think I know which airline you're talking about, although there are at least two I can think of off the top of my head where that's true. So, I think for a lot of people, this is a super important thing to think about. Think of that like you would a snack or a treat, once you collect it, you don't want to keep it forever. You'll still have something, but it definitely won't be as big or as valuable as it was at any point. And you know, the same can be said for money. We've been talking about inflation for some years now, and what is important for a lot of people to keep in mind is that just like stashing money under your bed, it's not actually doing you any good if you don't utilize the resources that you've collected. So, whether it's your points, your cotton candy, your cash, make sure that you're investing it where it's meaningful. Know what you're talking about, Brandon, here is the way that the devaluation works is that companies start realizing, wow, our costs have gone up 20 percent. We have to pass that along. We see that not just in the cash flights, but we also see that in the points redemptions as well. And where everyone is particularly vulnerable is the fact that unlike the value of a dollar, any time you're earning points, that's that particular company's currency. And especially during the pandemic, a lot of the major airlines, actually their loyalty programs were worth more than the companies themselves, which includes those multimillion-dollar planes. So, that's just wild to think about the value of what a loyalty program looks like, but that is where especially these more infrequent travelers can really suffer, because if you feel like, oh, you know, I earned 60,000 points last year, that's a really big deal. That's going to get my family a great vacation. The same villa you might have been able to book for 60,000 points last year is now worth 80,000 points. And so you have to keep that in mind and maybe go ahead, like I did book that condo for next summer in advance. If anything changes, you might pay a nominal fee to cancel it. Very likely, you won't even have to pay a cancellation fee. But planning ahead really is key. On the airline front, a lot of the people who are booking award travel hop on the moment those calendars are

released. So that's up to 330 days in advance, or they're booking super close up. If you're the kind of person that doesn't like to live and fly by the seat of your pants, it's a really good idea to book your points travel early on, plan around that, find the best dates where you can get the best deals, and then make everything else work around it.

[00:18:53] **Brandon Ehrhardt** I love it. I'm going to throw in one more tip there. It's the flip side. So, I worked in airline revenue management, and I 100 percent agree there are the people booking their trip to Hawaii that like at 331 they were booking it. They were hoping to find a saver award. I've also found that like one to two days of departure, if you can be flexible with your plans, you can find some really amazing deals, especially in the business-class section of international flights like those seats are going to go unsold. They want to take those points off the book. So, it's just another opportunity.

[00:19:21] **Katherine Fan** That is such a great point, and I think those are the ones to, I always really recommend people keep their points for emergencies as well. This is totally a feel-good story, but when, exactly as you were saying, when my grandmother passed, she was 98 and it was my dad's first time going through such a big loss. And I happened to have some time, it was right before Thanksgiving. The flights were \$3,000 one-way back to Taiwan. And this is one of my very first points redemptions. I think I barely had enough, but I managed to find them one-way that will get me to Taiwan within 36 hours of me finding out this news. And I'd never done anything like that before. I flew in. I was able to surprise them at the front door, which I'd also never done before, and I'll never forget how excited and he literally teared up and was like, "You're here." And that is the power of having your points. Because if I were to pull \$3,000 out of my savings at that time in my life, it would absolutely have been a really bad thing for my savings for that year. But because I had been fortunate to learn about the flexibility of these points through other people, that is exactly what having an extra stash of points in your pocket can do for you. It's fun to go on vacation with your friends or family, but more than anything else, it's incredibly meaningful to be able to show up for the people that you love on short notice in a way that doesn't damage your financial stability.

[00:20:46] **Brandon Ehrhardt** So, it's super powerful, right? Whether you're buying travel or redeeming points for travel, the connections made and the emotions felt in traveling are just incredibly strong. What an incredibly powerful story from Katherine. So glad she shared that. She's clearly a pro, and quite frankly I think we have a lot to learn from her experience, from both a traveler and business perspective. Before we move into the next part of the interview, let me give you that One Key rundown I promised before. By now, all the details are available on our website, and we'll also link to it in the show's description. But to break it down for you, here are a few things that stand out to me. A flexible and easy-to-use program was important for us, and this allows travelers to better understand rewards currency with OneKeyCash. Travelers don't need to worry about calculating the dollar amount of their points. The rewards currency, termed OneKeyCash, makes it simple and easy for members to understand the value of their awards and use their OneKeyCash soon after their trip is completed. Since this program covers our family of brands — Expedia, Hotels.com, and Vrbo — this means more exposure to members who are already committed and loyal customers. This results in attracting incremental travelers who spend more and book more often. And how do we know that about our members? Well, we've got the data to back it up. These members are planning to travel a whole lot more than nonmembers in the years to come. Check this out. Based on a consumer survey from earlier this year, 95 percent of members are planning to travel for leisure in the next 12 months compared to 67 percent of nonmembers. If you're already a partner of ours and using offers to attract our travel rewards members today, such as member-only deals or being a VIP access property, those will automatically transfer to One Key and One Key members, so there's no action to take. If you're not, now's the time to leverage those programs. One Key is now available in the United States with additional markets to follow starting in 2024. Our current travel rewards programs will remain in place in any market where One Key has yet to launch. For more details on One Key, visit www.expedia.com/Onekey. Again, it's linked in the show description, so you can easily click it. Okay, let's get back into my chat with Katherine to hear her take on the elements that make up great loyalty programs. So, points, one aspect of a loyalty program. Discounts, experiential benefits like upgrades, free breakfast. They're all now very popular with travelers. How do you think about a well-rounded loyalty program? What are the components?

[00:23:24] **Katherine Fan** I think a well-rounded loyalty program incentivizes everyone to feel like they have a place at the table. And I think it's very fair to reward your most frequent or your top-spending customers in ways that show the amount of loyalty they're offering you. Because, exactly like you said, we have so many options these days. Why would someone come to this particular company or this particular program? And I think convenience is a huge one. A well-rounded rewards program that makes it clear and easy to understand how you're earning, what you're earning, and what you can use it toward. And something that has a little bit of room for grace and forgiveness, especially with the way travel has been going. Something that has a little bit of room for grace and forgiveness, especially with the way travel's been going. Delays happen on flights and stuff like that. So, I think programs that have really good support and just kind of that human aspect really stand out at this time. If you feel empowered to use the rewards that you're earning, you're a lot more likely to keep coming back and accumulating them.

Earning points for travel:

[00:24:37] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Yeah, I totally agree. I remember my first experience setting up loyalty accounts, like all with an airline. Like 2009 and signing up for airlines that don't exist anymore, like Northwest. And I sign up and I'm like, "All right, I am the man." And then you realize that you don't actually get anything. I think what's really cool about the direction that we have taken, specifically the One Key program, is the minute you sign up, there is a benefit for you, namely the member pricing, right? And so starting at 10 percent off and then as you accelerate your spend with Expedia and how many times you book you Expedia, you're earning as much as 20 percent off at select hotels. Like that's super powerful. Is that going to be something, a trend that we see across the supply of travel? Do we feel like we're going to see expansion into discounts, or have the high rates of the past year and a half, two years really embedded these suppliers into thinking they should be charging more and just delivering points?

[00:25:33] **Katherine Fan** I think there's something to be said for all of it. A few months ago we were all freaking out about how expensive eggs were, but I feel like that as of my last grocery run, they are back to a normal price again. So, I think there's an ebb and flow to all of it, especially in the travel industry. A lot of businesses are still trying to catch back up from the pandemic. And as consumers, I know it's not our job to bail them out necessarily. But I do think that as we all start getting back out there and getting back to routines that make us happy and help us feel fulfilled again, we'll see a lot more flexibility coming up from providers. I think we might start seeing more companies being willing to offer up discounted rooms or lower cost seats just to make sure that they're more efficient. For instance, when you fly, every plane emits a certain amount of carbon footprint. To minimize that, one way to do that actually is to fill up flights. I know we all love to fly with a lot of empty seats next to us, but actually we're doing our part to help save the environment when we are able to efficiently sell flights so that we're running less of them more efficiently. And I think the same goes for hotels. The operating costs are already there. The cleaners will be there anyway. So, the more rooms they are able to fill, the better. And the way businesses can do that in a way that really benefits consumers is to make sure that even when you're at peak capacity, the traveler is still getting a good experience. I don't mind if my hotel is full as long as I don't have to wait five minutes for the elevator or hear my neighbor snoring all night or on the plane. I think you'd agree with me that travelers who have some flexibility in schedule are the ones who absolutely will get those best deals. So, it still happens that most of the time, midweek flights are the best. One thing I saw this past week was some families are getting really creative about how they're meeting each other up. So maybe they meet up the week after New Year's and then they get the best deals out of the year. The holidays are past, so they're not as stressed and they're able to actually enjoy each other. And if you really care about the discounts, that's when all the presents are on sale anyway.

Trends in "travel hacks":

[00:27:44] **Brandon Ehrhardt** That's so true. What's been really clear to me over the past couple of years is travelers are getting really savvy, right? They're reading articles like the ones that you write. They're finding their own kind of, quote

unquote, travel hacks. What are the trends you see with travelers, and how do you think that their behavior will change over time to maximize their use of loyalty rewards?

[00:28:03] **Katherine Fan** I think, more than ever, we're seeing everyday travelers understanding that there is this world of travel hacking out there. And so you've got thousands and thousands of people trying to break into it and understand a little bit more, which I think is fantastic for everyone. Hopefully, this leads to more opportunities for all of us. I think where people will really be able to get the best value is by understanding even just one to two programs really well instead of trying to get the whole lay of the land all at once. It's like anything else we learn in life, right? If you can get one thing down and really understand that, it will inform the way you understand everything else. I think effective loyalty programs will be, the best loyalty program is one that you use. Like you were saying about Northwest, I had an account, too. I have no idea how many points I ever had. I don't think I did. Exactly. They were probably gone before the company was acquired. So, any program that you consistently use, it will count towards something. One of my brothers, his girlfriend's parents signed her up for a loyalty program as soon as she was born. So, she's been flying on this one airline for pretty much her entire life, and she's done that back and forth from Taiwan to the U.S. probably as many times as I have. So, she's got a lot more butt-in-miles seats to her name, she's a lot closer probably to that million-miler bragging right than I am. So again, anything that you consistently stick with, it will count for something. Even when Northwest was acquired, if you had loyalty or status with them, that transferred over to Delta, too. So, it counts for something. Just learning to track what you have and staying on top of when it might expire or how you can utilize it can really help you out in a pinch.

[00:29:52] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Yeah, and I think flexibility to double-click on what you've been referencing throughout. To me, that becomes the key. Personally, I don't want to track 50 different loyalty programs and my new invaluable points that I have in those programs, because I can't really do anything with them. So, when I think about what you're saying with one or two programs and knowing them well, to me what that means is wherever I spend money and travel, I can then reinvest that. But you want to just have this flexibility and really utility for the points that you have earned or the cash that you have earned. And I think that we're headed to a world of where travel hacking becomes less and less. There's less and less loopholes to take advantage of, right? You think about travel hacking today and booking like a hidden city ticket. They can close your loyalty account for that. And I think the risk sometimes of hacking those programs outweighs the benefits of just smartly applying your knowledge to stay within the rules of the program by just finding the program that fits for you, right, whether that's in travel or not. That flexibility and ability to earn discounts and experiences. From your loyalty, I think it's the game changer going forward. Especially experiences. You think about having a front-row seat at the NBA Finals or having a meeting with a player that's on a Liverpool football club because you're a member of the One Key program. These are all avenues that you can really take more advantage of the program versus just travel by itself.

[00:31:21] **Katherine Fan** I agree. And I'm going to tout my favorite, Hotels.com, again. One of the reasons I've been so loyal to that is because I've gotten to go to some really ridiculous places in the world, especially these last five to six years. And a lot of the time, I've worked for companies where kind of your bragging, right, is the top-tier status. You have with a hotel or airline. We're nerds and we're weird. Mine is always and has always been Hotels.com makes it really easy because I can go anywhere in the world. I don't have to worry about whether or not Marriott or IHG or Hilton has hotels there, and a lot of that time they haven't. I have checked and tried. But especially for me, when I go somewhere off the beaten path, I really want to see how locals live and I really want to support local businesses in particular. I don't want to live just in the central business district or something like that, where I'm going to be far away from locals. And that's the real beauty for me of these more flexible programs that are not specifically about the brand itself but more about streamlining what is available to travelers. It can feel very powerless to travel with big corporations doing this and that and devaluing everything. But still, on the flip side, I think it's more of a consumer's world than ever, because if enough of us revolt or enough of us are pushing for things to go a certain way, companies have no real power but to concede. One great example is that a lot of U.S. airlines have done away with change fees. We've had to deal with that for years and years, ever since that kind of all went in a race to making life more difficult and expensive for us. But during the pandemic, they realized they were having to change flights so often anyway due to

weather or disruptions on their end that eliminating it made it look like it was a really good move for consumers. But I'm sure it simplified their lives by quite a bit as well. And it wasn't that much money but really was padding their pockets. So, I think the more we continue to speak up for our rights, take advantage of the opportunities ahead of us, and keep living our best lives but most informed lives, we do have the power to collectively influence the way our travel industry goes.

[00:33:32] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Super interesting. We're going to finish with some fun. You've been a great guest. First, thinking outside the travel industry, what are your favorite loyalty programs?

[00:33:42] **Katherine Fan** Ooh, favorite loyalty programs. Honestly, I just wanted to say Hotels.com again, but I find Starbucks very fascinating. You've probably seen some articles recently about how Starbucks is one of the best banks in the world, and I find that so fascinating.

[00:33:56] **Brandon Ehrhardt** I was so in on the Starbucks rewards programs, and I feel like they've just devalued it to a point where it's gotten crazy. In the past, like during COVID, it was like buy three Americanos and you get 150 points. I was, like, buy three, get one. Now, it's visit Starbucks seven days in a row and get 20 points, which equates to 1/10 of a drink. I'm like, "What do you mean?"

[00:34:16] **Katherine Fan** You can get half cream on top of your drinks?

[00:34:20] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Exactly. Maybe they figured out that I'm going to be loyal either way. No, I don't spend any money on this guy. He's coming no matter what.

[00:34:26] **Katherine Fan** I feel like at this point they're jerking you around, Brandon.

[00:34:29] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Yeah, they are. It's very unfair. What's the most absurd thing you've ever done for a travel loyalty program?

[00:34:36] **Katherine Fan** Oh, I, again, work in this weird niche. So, for those people, that's not crazy. The mileage runs that people do sometimes. One of the cheapest ones that my parents hate that I did is several times to keep Southwest A-list status. I've literally booked the cheapest flights I can find and just made a giant loop across the U.S. Slept in the L.A. airport or St. Louis or something like that. Never leave the airport, but I earn a boatload of points and I keep status for the next year, and I've probably spent about \$300 total out of pocket. And especially when I last did that, I was freelancing, and I wrote an article about it. So that kind of paid for itself as a business expense. So, that's pretty absurd, I think.

Final thoughts and key takeaways:

[00:35:21] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Thanks so much for your time today. Anything that we didn't cover that you'd like to cover?

[00:35:25] **Katherine Fan** I'm just going to randomly throw it out there. The last amazing place I went was Antarctica. It was incredible. So, all of you get down there. Maybe not too many people. Make sure you keep it clean. It's incredible. It is mind blowing. It is out of this world.

[00:35:39] **Brandon Ehrhardt** All right. Let me ask you one more, then. What's the bucket list trip that you haven't taken yet that I'm sure you're going to be using your OneKeyCash for in the future?

[00:35:50] **Katherine Fan** Oh, my gosh. Whenever you open her out to the moon, I'm down for that.

[00:35:53] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Both. We'll see what we can do and put on the roadmap for it. Awesome. Thanks so much for your time today. I really appreciate the conversation. We'll definitely be in touch.

[00:36:01] **Katherine Fan** Thanks, Brandon had a great time talking with all of you, too. Bye bye.

[00:36:06] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Thanks for sticking with us this season. It's been super fun bringing in my colleagues as guest hosts and some very smart guests along the way, dialing in from around the world. Next season is coming up in the next few weeks, so make sure you're subscribed and you'll be notified when it starts. In the meantime, tell us what you thought of this season at PoweringTravel@ExpediaGroup.com. That's PoweringTravel all one word at [Expediagroup.com](https://expediagroup.com). And if you have a few seconds, make sure to rate and review the show. That's how people like you find us. Thanks so much for listening. We'll see you next season. This is Powering Travel brought to you by Expedia Group.