

Airline hopes to fly smoker-friendly skies

Smokers Express Airlines

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For travelers who pine away for those long-last days of happily smoking on a plane, two Florida men have an answer: Smokers Express Airlines. The start-up carrier would not only allow smoking during flights, but encourage it. The antismoking brigade might do well to be prepared: The airline may portend a general readiness to let the smokers' backlash begin.

You're suffering from nicotine withdrawal at a smoke-free airport, so on the gangway to your plane you damn the consequences and light up. With the cigarette still dangling from your lips, you reach the plane's entrance, where you're greeted by a flight attendant who smiles and then takes a puff of her own cigarette. You find your seat, watching other passengers light up. The "No Smoking" light is off. Still, the man next to you isn't smoking. An attendant comes by "Coffee, tea or Marlboro?" she quips as he looks over the cigarette selection on her cart. He finds his brand, but she won't accept payment. "All tobacco is complimentary," she says.

What's going on here is more than the pipe dream of a few disgruntled smokers -- it's the vision behind Smokers Express Airlines, a start-up company based in Cocoa Beach, Fla., that expects to be airborne by late September. On Smokers Express, smoking won't only be allowed, but encouraged.

It all began when William Walts, one of the airline's cofounders, flew to San Francisco for his high school reunion. "They fed me a greasy meal, charged me for headphones to hear the in-flight movie, and wouldn't let me smoke," he told the newspaper Florida Today. Then came the last straw. Unable to smoke on the five-hour flight, he learned that pilots are allowed to puff away with abandon in the cockpit. "Ever notice that the stewardess sometimes disappears for a few minutes? She is up front having a cigarette with the pilot," says George "Mickey" Richardson, another cofounder and vice president of marketing for the airline.

Both men are new to the airline business. Walts is a manager of Zanadu Condominiums, and Richardson owns a small publishing outfit. Both are based in Cocoa Beach. In starting their airline, the men followed an old saying: Don't get mad, get even. Disgusted with service on most commercial airlines and with flights that keep "No Smoking" signs illuminated coast-to-coast, Walts and Richardson decided to start their own airline. To get around a federal law barring smoking on all commercial flights, they organized the airline as a private club.

The average member of Smokers Express is a fortyish female business executive. Almost 70 percent of members are women. One member who signed up early is Kathy Posner, the executive vice president of Comm.sup.2 , a public relations firm in Chicago. A self-described "militant smoker," Posner formed Comm.sup.2 more than two years ago after her former employer banned smoking in the office. Posner considers Smokers Express a breath of fresh air, and she signed up

to show her support for smokers' rights. "We should be able to smoke without fear," she says. She even considers smoking a business advantage because "smokers now bond in a very special way" given the "extreme prejudice" against them.

Of course, not everyone thinks Smokers Express is such a great idea. The government "should make certain that it is actually a private club and not simply a device to avoid Department of Transportation regulations," says Athena Mueller, general counsel of Action on Smoking and Health, or ASH. She says that, though in principle she wouldn't oppose Smokers Express, it does sound like "a tobacco industry gesture."

While Playboy, Forbes and the American Smoker's Journal provided blandly descriptive accounts, other members of the media haven't hidden their disapproval. Time: "The rear guard rebellion of resentful smokers continues." Fortune: "For a startup, the company appears to have more than its share of ifs, maybes, and ... uhh ... butts." Nation's Restaurant News: "In case of emergency, do passengers alternate between oxygen and Marlboros?"

Without any paid advertising, the against-the-grain airline is drawing members by word of mouth and through mentions in the press. The airline claims to have signed up more than 5,000 members at \$ 25 a pop. (An early brochure reads: "Send \$ 25.00 cash, check, money order ... or a bottle of Dewars White Label Scotch.") Richardson says ticket prices will be competitive with those of major commercial carriers.

"It's a ground swell situation," he says. The few mailings the airline has sent have prompted a 26 percent positive response rate. (In direct mail, a 2 percent response rate is considered high.) The airline is hoping to draw on the 900,000 self-described smokers' rights activists, as well as what Richardson estimates to be the 12 percent of travelers who stopped flying when smoking on flights was banned. If Smokers Express can capture only half that percentage, it will be a regional force to be reckoned with.

If anything, Smokers Express is an anti-airline airline. Once a passenger is aboard, drinks, newspapers, movies and headphones will be free. Passengers will even receive a free lottery ticket. Because a person must be 21 years old to fly the smoky skies, there will be no screaming babies or unruly children aboard. Smokers Express brochures promise "real food for real people -- steaks and burgers." The in-flight magazine, which on most airlines is usually a predictable corporate vehicle, is called Free Skies, a combination club newsletter, merchandise catalog and smokers' rights forum.

Even the planes will be a throwback to better days -- renovated DC-9s.

Smokers Express executives plan to plaster the hulls of the planes with beer ads; the airline is negotiating with Budweiser, Richardson says. The airline originally planned to court tobacco companies for advertising, but the companies' attorneys were skittish about the risk of liability. "What if the plane crashes and someone finds the name Philip Morris in the wreckage, or the plane is seen on TV?" Richardson asks. Tobacco lawyers are probably right about America's trigger-happy, "I'll sue ya" society, but Philip Morris and R. J. Reynolds are still willing to get involved in other ways. Richardson says he is discussing everything from merchandise sales to ads in the airline's magazine.

Did someone say merchandise? You can buy a real set of pilot wings with your name on them for \$ 20. There are also plans for caps, T-shirts, sunglasses, watches, clocks, ashtrays, mugs, radios, jackets, keychains and plastic figurines of a yet-to-be-designed airline mascot (think Joe Camel). "I used to work at Disney," Richardson explains.

Needless to say, Smokers Express planes will have to be modified. Among the changes: Passengers will have the use of in-flight faxes and access to computerized weather and stock reports, and they will even be able to buy advertised products via sky phone and credit card. The seats and carpets of Smokers Express planes will use new types of fire retardants, and the company is examining alternative lubricants and cleaning fluids. Most importantly, the planes will be modified to refresh the air inside the cabin at least every 10 minutes, perhaps every two minutes, with a mixture of outside and recirculated air. Conventional aircraft usually recirculate air every six to 20 minutes and use little outside air.

As permissive as Smokers Express will be, there still will be one place on the planes that passengers cannot smoke -- the bathroom. It's a fire hazard, says Richardson, and a violation of Federal Aviation Administration regulations to boot. Besides, a bathroom fire could not only ground the aircraft but also cost about \$ 17,000 in repairs.

"We're structured a lot like Southwest," says Richardson. Southwest Airlines, a regional powerhouse, is known inside the industry for its unconventional solutions to problems. Does Smokers Express have a lot of Southwest Airlines veterans? "No. They don't tend to quit. But I've got lots of Eastern folks," Richardson says with a laugh.

The airline has about 50 people it plans to hire as soon as it is certified by the FAA. Richardson says he doesn't know how many of his potential employees smoke. He considers that a private matter -- but the budding civil libertarian will give drug tests to all his employees.

Smokers Express plans to fly to hot spots such as Cancun, Mexico; San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Montego Bay, Jamaica. Flights to gambling centers such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J., are also planned. At first the airline will operate on a charter basis, but it hopes to eventually lease 28 DC-9s and fly regular routes.

Smokers Express may turn out to be the king of special offers. Casinos want to offer their smoking clientele special gambling and travel packages. Cruise ships want to offer discounts and tie-ins to Smokers Express members. The airline will even consider a cigar-only flight, if enough members pony up. There will even be a nonsmoking section for the traveling companions of smokers, though it will be in the back of the plane.

Smokers Express may be part of a growing trend toward smoke-filled travel services. For smokers who prefer to travel on the surface, others are trying to tap into the market. William Butterworth, one of the few Americans who own a private railcar, reportedly is planning to offer train tours for smokers. And Dean Rouse, who runs the group Friends of Tobacco, is planning a free bus tour of North Carolina tobacco fields because "the tobacco industry is being unfairly targeted for taxes and smokers are being discriminated against." More than 100 people have signed up.

Smokers Express hopes to be in the air in time for the Smokers' Rights March on Washington on Sept. 25. (Organizers, who were inspired to plan the march when President Clinton banned

smoking in the White House, say they expect representatives from more than 30 states.) If this trend continues, expect "Thank You for Smoking" signs to pop up in airports, train stations and bus depots.

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