Or, what's the difference, really?
There is an old joke about a fighter pilot getting refueled by a big, lumbering tanker plane. To show off a little, the fighter pilot does some fancy maneuvering and radios to the tanker pilot, "Let's see you match that!" The tanker pilot says okay, and then radio silence for a few minutes as the tanker flies straight ahead. Then the tanker pilot picks up his mic and asks, "Did you see that?" To which the fighter pilot says, "See what? You didn't do anything!"

"Oh yeah", says the tanker pilot. "I just got up, went to the restroom, grabbed a coffee and pulled a snack out of the fridge. Let's see you match that!"

I thought about this when I read from Amtrak's news feed this article, about how they are cutting the ribbon on the new Metropolitan Lounge at New York's Moynihan Train Hall. It has an appropriately pretentious headline, "AMTRAK INTRODUCES PREMIUM DINING EXPERIENCE IN THE METROPOLITAN LOUNGE AT THE MOYNIHAN TRAIN HALL".

I dunno. You read the article and see if it sounds like it will be a "premium dining experience". I suppose it should no longer be surprising to read such drivel. We have long ago graduated from being a hype society into an over-hype one, and possibly even beyond, where over-hype just doesn't cut it anymore, so we have to hype the over-hype. (At least we aren't yet to the point where we routinely over-hype the hype about the over-hype, but we are making steady progress!) And so Amtrak has to ring the bell and pat themselves on the back for putting a hospital cafeteria in their primary station.

Then you read down the article and you see there is something more pernicious than a little bit of shameless promotion. "The lounge is available for Amtrak Guest Rewards® Select Executive and Select Plus members, *Acela* First Class and private room customers and Single-Day Pass holders, with same-day reservations."

If that doesn't sound like the airline industry and airport model then I am a dumb hick from west Texas. (Okay, I *am* a hick from west Texas, but not, arguably, dumb.)

Which brings up the question, why is Amtrak emulating an industry that is universally reviled for their lack of service and care for customers, and hated by the common passengers who have to watch the premium customers get all the attention and perks? Why do they consider it innovative to offer themselves as a somewhat slower carbon copy to their peers in the air? It really does baffle the mind.

Perhaps the airlines have to treat their premium customers better. Maybe it makes sense for them because the ill will that creates just isn't definitive to the bottom line, but like the pilot of the tanker plane, Amtrak and rail in general can offer an experience that airlines are simply not able to. They can, to use marketing terminology, differentiate themselves. So why aren't they?

I have found that people are generally accepting of different classes of accomodations. After all, you get what you pay for, and second class passengers are not likely to become enraged until you start treating them like second class citizens. Why not go for the egalitarian approach? Open up, Amtrak, let anyone use that lounge. Heck, let people come off the streets and enjoy your fine dining experience. If it is as good as you seem to think it is, it might provide a little more revenue.

Better would be to quit trying to make your train depots like airport terminals. Any major station will have dining available within feet and you don't need to add your poor second rate service to the mix. What you need to do is offer fine dining experiences on the train itself, like you used to. What you have done is sort of like if that tanker pilot tore out the coffee pot, turned off the refrigerator, and made himself pee in a bag, just so he could be more like the fighter pilot.

Heck, your passengers may get to their destination a day later than those frenetic passengers in the sky, but when they debark they could be smiling.

Share this:

- Share on X (Opens in new window) X

- Share on Facebook (Opens in new window) Facebook
- Email a link to a friend (Opens in new window) Email
- Share on LinkedIn (Opens in new window) LinkedIn
- Share on Reddit (Opens in new window) Reddit
- Share on Tumblr (Opens in new window) Tumblr
- Share on Pinterest (Opens in new window) Pinterest
- Share on Telegram (Opens in new window) Telegram
- Share on WhatsApp (Opens in new window) WhatsApp