

Breaking Travel News interview: Bob Schumacher, managing director, UK & Ireland, United Airlines

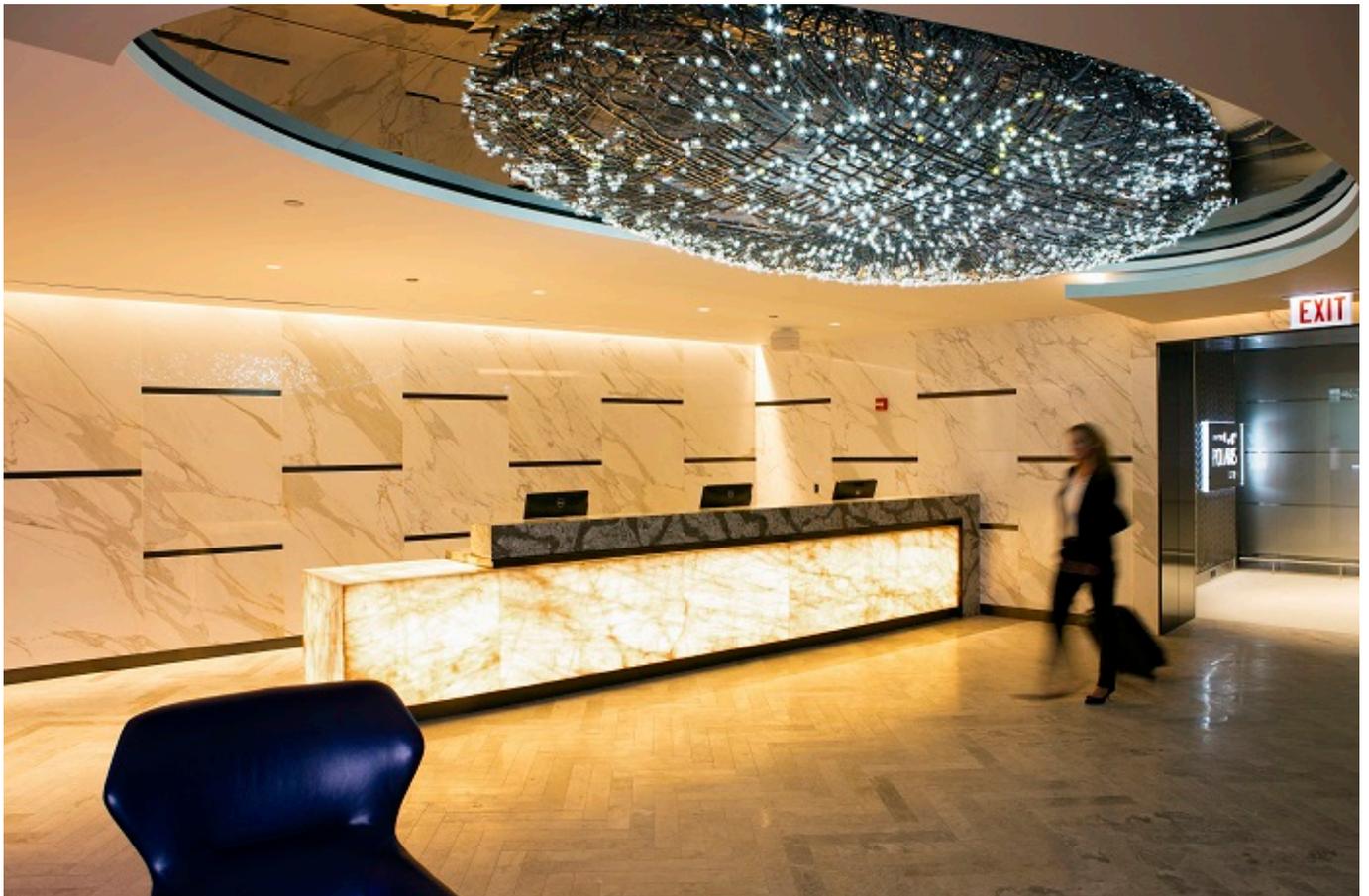
It took a while, but the recovery is taking shape at United Airlines.

After the deluge of negative publicity surrounding the forced removal of David Dao from a flight from Chicago to Louisville in 2017 and the unfortunate death of a passenger's pet dog – Kokito – a year later, the US carrier has managed to stem the tide of negative headlines.

All staff have been undergoing what the company calls core4 training in order to better understand the needs of guests, while there has also been a sharp uptick in on-time performance.

Speaking to Breaking Travel News in London, Bob Schumacher, managing director for the UK & Ireland at United Airlines, is keen to present 2019 as a fresh start.

“We have a message to share, in terms of a healthy airline, one that is making healthy profits and one that has a story to tell,” he explains.



The new Polaris business class offering has been well-received

With United reporting pre-tax earnings of \$2.7 billion last year, the carrier does indeed seem to have turned the page.

A large part of this has been down to a renewed focus on premium passengers – those who make up a big percentage of revenue at any full-service airline.

Later this year United will roll-out its new Premium Plus product, premier economy seating for passengers with budgets just below business class.

This is in addition to the revamped top-end product, Polaris, that has been well received among passengers following its launch a couple of years ago.

As Schumacher continues: “United Airlines has a strong message in 2019, focusing on the increase in premium seats that we are bringing to market, including here in the UK and across Europe.

“The includes the Polaris business class, which has been out now for a while, but is rolling-out across the fleet at a pace of one aircraft every ten days, and, of course, the new Premium Plus, our premium economy seat.

“This is a new product for us in the UK, three rows of seats within the cabin that will have a differentiated service, and it is part of us responding to the marketplace.

“We have seen the premium market being very strong, and we have spilt a lot of passengers here and there, and we don’t like doing that, particularly if they are of the premium sort.

“People have been coming to us, choosing United, and we have not had enough seats in the premium cabin for that – this is our response.”



New Premium Plus seats are the latest addition to the United fleet

In total 21 Boeing 767s are being reconfigured to carry the new Polaris and Premium Plus offering, with these planes set to offer a total of 46 premium seats.

“This is an ideal time for us reconfigure this sub-fleet, those 21 aircraft, as they roll out by the end of September, headed to dedicated destinations, including here in London, as well as New York,” adds Schumacher.

In the tail of the plane, United has also been recalibrating its offering to cater to an emerging, price-savvy generation of travellers.

The new Basic Economy fare seeks to match the price offered by low-cost, long-haul carriers, but to include a superior service.

“This is something you are seeing across all walks of life – you have the young, new traveller, who is price sensitive and has been brought up on Southwest Airlines and Ryanair,” continues Schumacher.

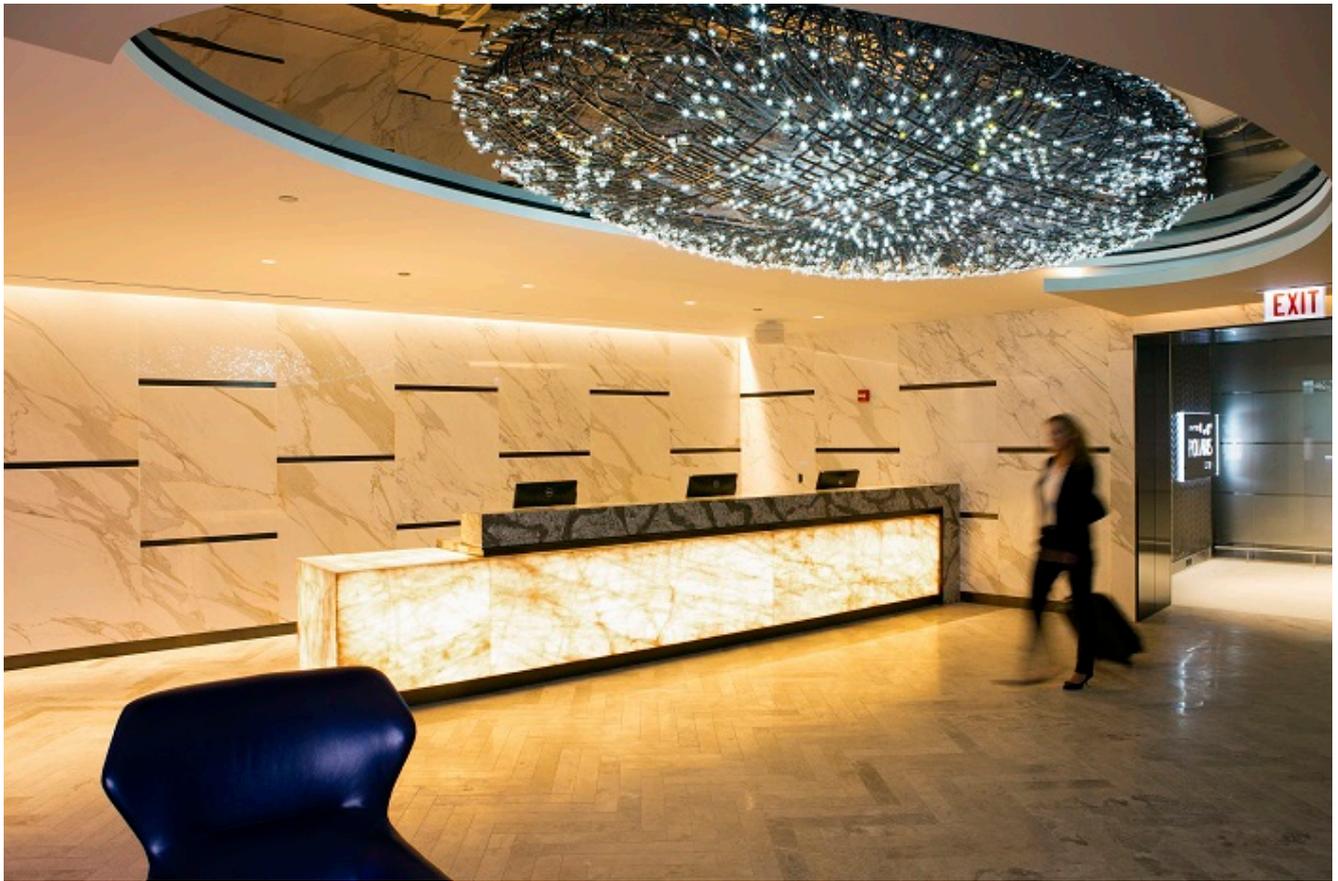
“They have an expectation on a price point, and they are willing to travel without their kitchen sink.

“We have seen the low-cost carriers evolve into medium- and long-haul and offer those price points.

“What we did initially, as an industry, was ignore it, but we have now realised it is a significant market in size.

“With Basic Economy we keep the quality of service, in terms of meals and drinks, seat assignment, but also to strip out everything else.

“There has been a real segmentation onboard that aeroplane – at some point we will end up with individual seats with your name embroidered on it,” he jokes.



United has renewed its focus on premium passengers

With a number of low-cost, long-haul carriers – including flag-bearer Norwegian – facing financial trouble, Schumacher

is keen to point to the strengths of diversification.

“This unquestionably makes these routes sustainable for us,” he explains.

“Of course, there are many variables, but offering services to 160 million customers a year through several key hubs, which ebb and flow through like a beating heart, is a key to our success.

“Having the right sized fleet, not a uniformed fleet, for the right route and the differentiation of the number of business seats we offer in a market, are real strengths.

“Corporate customers will want their passengers turning up at the other end capable of doing their business – and that is never really going to be offered by a low-cost carrier.”

He adds: “Low-cost carriers, I am sure, had their business case built on metrics that they thought were sufficient to serve their purpose on long-haul routes, we would argue that the ingredients we have are what make us successful.

“Connectivity is key to that – point-to-point works in primary markets, but once you go into secondary, tertiary markets, you will find you need to go through hubs that feed frequency.”



United has recovered from a deluge of negative headlines

Of course, no conversation about aviation in the UK in 2019 would be complete without mention of Brexit and the potential for the UK's departure from the EU to disrupt the sector.

But here Schumacher is sanguine.

“As a United States-based carrier, with Open Skies with the UK signed, there will be normal operations whatever happens at the end of March,” he explains.

“This is perhaps more of a leisure market issue for travellers in Europe, but we will continue to operate the following day, whichever day that might be.

“It is no different to an election cycle.

“If the pound were to rally, that would also be useful, as we would see more travellers looking to visit the United States.”

Looking ahead there are no new United routes set to debut in the UK in 2019, but several summer services will return.

“We are returning to Denver, with our summer only slot out of

London Heathrow, while Manchester will go wide-body for the first time in many years, with a Boeing 767 flying to New York,” explains Schumacher.

“Edinburgh-Washington will also return this summer, after a successful launch last year, as well as Chicago and New York from Scotland.

“We are also celebrating 21-years out of Glasgow to New York.”

The image Schumacher is keen to present is of an airline comfortable with where it is and enthusiastic about where it is going, having put recent troubles behind it.

He concludes: “United tends to reflect what is happening in the wider economy, as we connect business, and the US economy, where we sell 70 per cent of our corporate tickets, is very strong at present.

“We are in a very strong revenue environment, with low unemployment and economic growth, while the strong relationship between the United Kingdom and United States endures – we are set fair.”

More Information

United Airlines and United Express operate approximately 4,700 flights a day to 356 airports across five continents.

The carrier claims the most comprehensive route network in the world, including US mainland hubs in Chicago, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Newark/New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

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