

COLUMNS

## Closing the gap between commercial and private air travel

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*Susan Sloan is co-founder/CEO of VolJet.com*

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By **Susan Sloan**

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According to the U.S. Travel Association, domestic leisure travel grew steadily for most of 2015 and will lead the United States market into 2016. At the same time, attempts are underway to narrow the affordability gap between private and commercial aviation, with both sectors adopting trends from the other.

For example, some airlines are enabling a paid, last-minute upgrade for their elite first class passengers to fly on a private jet.

There are trends in the private jet industry to sell seats or share, imitating scheduled airlines. This blurs the traditional distinction between two types of travelers: those who fly by private jet (the “haves”) and those who cannot (the “have nots”).

With more options available to fly by private jet for a wider range of people than ever before, the new question for luxury travelers is “why not?”

Change means choice

In the contemporary sharing economy, what does this crossover between the commercial airline and private jet industries mean for luxury consumers? More choice and control.

In the U.S., flying private provides access to more than twice as many general aviation airports as compared to commercial.

For those whose time is the ultimate asset, this means no more crowded check-in lines, expected delays or long layovers at congested commercial airports and saving up to two hours on each leg.

Over the past several years, we have experienced a surge in the number of travel applications and sites offering discounted private jet booking services, including selling seats.

However, there are fundamental differences among the models that capitalize on filling planes that would fly empty (i.e. solving the empty leg dilemma) versus the booking platforms that satisfy the customer's schedule and desires with options.

For example, most of these private jet booking service companies have an operator-focused business model that brings value to empty legs.

The ideal private jet booking model operates from the customer demand-side, and is accessible and flexible. It is designed to offer premium passengers access and control, while reducing the cost of luxury air travel through options, such as sharing the cost. Its offerings are centered on connecting people to private jets, on your schedule versus the jet's schedule.

Perks or pitfalls?

Nearly 40 percent of chartered aircraft fly empty or at very low capacity during one leg of a trip.

Many business models built around filling empty legs struggle with drawbacks that limit customer choices and impact the passenger experience.

Your itinerary may be restricted by the other passengers' travel desires. Other programs that require membership fees in return for flying a certain number of hours per month can be even more limiting.

The process for booking a private jet with many operators is time-consuming and cumbersome. The perks of "all-you-can-fly" and other discount programs – some that even claim passengers can fly for free – quickly erase the flexibility and benefits of private air travel.

Sharing with sophistication

The great news for luxury travelers is that change is inspiring the creation of customer-based jet sharing systems whose offerings are designed around you.

First class passengers who previously considered aircraft charter unaffordable or unattainable can enjoy all the advantages of private jet travel at prices well below full charter cost.

Existing private jet travelers who are value conscious can also save.

New technology is modernizing and bringing new benefits to this industry.

Jet operators are tapping into a new market space and customers have access to unprecedented options, enabling the gap to close at your fingertips.

HOW DO YOU select the optimal online reservation system?

First, be sure you can instantly and easily search for flights and fares without providing personal information, upfront fees or a membership commitment.

Then, select a luxury travel site that offers pre-set and buy-now pricing, with no hidden costs.

To simplify the traditional booking process even more, the system may automatically select the ideal aircraft type depending on the group size or range between the city pairs.

Finally, relax and enjoy the freedom, time-savings, fun and prestige that come with flying on a private jet.

*Susan Sloan is cofounder/CEO of [VolJet.com](http://VolJet.com), Sherman Oaks, CA. Reach her at [susansloan@voljet.com](mailto:susansloan@voljet.com).*

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