

# REACH FOR THE STARS

Airlines around the world aspire to uphold the utmost quality in the products and services they offer, but when put to the test by London-based Skytrax, only six carriers have achieved the highest level of quality excellence.

■ By Stephani Hawkins | *Ascend* Editor



A surefire way to win customer trust and loyalty is to ensure every customer's experience, time and time again, is nothing less than exceptional. That's a lot of people to please day in and day out, but that's what it takes.

It's every airline's goal, but amazingly, only six airlines around the world, according to Skytrax, currently excel. Asiana Airlines, Cathay Pacific Airways, Kingfisher Airlines, Malaysia Airlines, Qatar Airways and Singapore Airlines have all earned five-star status from Skytrax, the leading quality advisors to global airlines and airports.

That's not to say no other airline provides exceptional customer service, but when analyzing more than 400 airlines, these were the only six that met the criteria for Skytrax's five-star ranking, the most recognized and prestigious global award to honor airline product and service quality excellence.

Established in 2000, the star ranking program offers airline members a range of competitive performance analysis studies and a full rating breakdown. The program applies an internationally recognized evaluation system to assess a broad range of quality standards put forth by airlines. Five-star status recognizes those at the forefront of products and services achievement, generally setting trends that other carriers aim to follow.

For Qatar Airways — the Middle East's industry leader by virtue of being a step ahead of the rest — some of its most valuable attributes that contribute to its five-star status include fully flat first-class sleeper beds with mattress enhancers for added comfort as well as the largest seat pitch and biggest individual television entertainment screens across all cabins on long-haul routes. But that's only a fraction of what makes the carrier shine above some of its main competitors. The balance of superior products and its customer-devoted staff are necessary to reach the high accolade from Skytrax.

"Qatar Airways was awarded five stars in a number of categories such as onboard catering, cabin staff service, staff attitude and friendliness, lounge facilities, transfers, and also on the overall amenities and services relating to first class," Qatar Airways Chief Executive Officer Akbar Al Baker told New Delhi, India-based The Tribune Online. "The five-star ranking and our achievement in the popular Airline of the Year survey demonstrates that we are being acknowledged as one of the best airlines by the airline industry and by the traveling public."

A full star ranking determination examines more than 800 different areas of product and service delivery for each airline, including core airport and onboard functions such as long-haul business- and first-class service, staff grooming and presentation, assistance for families and children, check-in services, Internet/WiFi options, service efficiency, staff enthusiasm and attitude, dining options and food quality, washroom/aircraft cleanliness, seat comfort, priority boarding processes,



Photo courtesy of Airbus

**Five-star award recipient Malaysia Airlines has recently launched its MH campaign, which stands for Malaysian hospitality, one of its 125 customer value proposition initiatives. The campaign captures the true spirit of Malaysia Airlines where all of its customers are treated as special guests.**

personalization of service, in-flight entertainment, and consistency among staff.

"The agenda is based on frontline product and service audit studies that we have conducted for the airline industry during the last 19 years and is well recognized by carriers as representing a fair and full quality assessment format," said Skytrax Chief Executive Officer Edward Plaisted. "This is best underwritten by the fact that Skytrax specializes 100 percent in this market aspect, and the life of everyone working in our organization revolves around breathing, measuring and evaluating frontline airline standards."

The complete process for ranking airlines is based on thorough, hands-on research conducted by Skytrax. Once the company has gathered and verified all quality assessments for the set criteria, an airline becomes eligible for ranking. Because the criterion is specific to airline customers' needs and expectations, and a large portion of the scoring comes directly from customer feedback, standards for achieving five-star ranking are quite high.

"Five-star ranking is the pinnacle for which we have set some fairly stringent quality requirements," Plaisted said. "In broad terms, the five-



Photo courtesy of Airbus

**Seoul, South Korea-based Asiana Airlines has upheld its Skytrax five-star ranking for two consecutive years. The carrier excelled in the categories of business and economy class on its long-haul routes as well as in the areas of staff grooming and assisting families and children.**



Photos courtesy of Airbus

Cathay Pacific Airways, according to loyal customers, excels in every category across its organization, including areas such as on-time performance, baggage handling, customer service and in-flight amenities. The Asian carrier is one of six to hold the five-star airline title.

star ranking is awarded when an airline meets our criteria of product and service delivery quality targets; is able to deliver these standards on a steady basis; and has some individual strength, identity, flair, 'Wow' factor, etc., that we consider sets an airline apart — and above its peers."

For instance, a repeat Cathay Pacific Airways customer highly recommends the Hong Kong-based carrier, touting that its service across the board is excellent, time after time.

"Be warned! Cathay Pacific is not like other airlines! They depart and land on time," James P. Zaworski said about his carrier of choice in an online forum. "This is unusual in my experience of flying. Here in Asia, efficiency and punctuality are the rule, not the exception.

"I have been completely impressed with the in-flight services offered by Cathay Pacific," he said. "I have flown economy class each time and have been treated as if in first class. The staff of stewards and stewardesses is kind and cordial and friendly. They make you feel very welcome and they cater to any need you have, and no request is too much.

"In addition, my bags were never lost in my eight different flights using Cathay Pacific, and the bags were always waiting for me, undamaged and on time, when I got to the baggage claim area," Zaworski said.

The six airlines that currently hold five-star status are located in Asia/Pacific and the Middle East. But airlines in other regions of the world, such as North America and Europe, have the same opportunities to achieve the highest ranking.

"There is nothing to exclude an airline in Europe, North America, South America or any other region of the world from achieving five-star ranking," Plaisted said. "We'll work with any airline around the world to help them meet their goals of providing the highest level of products and services quality for their customers."

Regardless of a carrier's location, Skytrax must maintain such a strict approach because when it awards a five-star ranking, it not only puts the airline's reputation up for scrutiny, but its own reputation and credibility are on the line as well. It has to maintain complete confidence that a five-star airline lives up to the expectations of the award. Therefore, the company keeps a close eye on all five-star award recipients' quality fluctuations and spikes.

Skytrax also uses a similar measuring system to determine lower-ranking levels — four-star, three-star, two-star and one-star. Each reduction level reflects a set of product or service delivery criteria an airline has been unable to achieve, particularly when inconsistencies exist.

"We cannot award a five-star rating when an airline might be delivering top-level quality on eight out of 10 experiences," Plaisted said. "We have to seek as near perfection as can be expected for the top tier. It is a customer-facing industry based around human service, and for that reason, we know that 100 percent consistency and total



India's Kingfisher Airlines, which refers to its customers as guests, credits its five-star status to its staff's consistent ability to deliver high standards of service efficiency — in a sincere and charming manner that makes the airline stand out from the rest.



Qatar Airways, the third carrier in the world to achieve five-star status from Skytrax, offers fully flat first-class sleeper beds, the largest seat pitch and the biggest individual television entertainment screens across all cabins on long-haul routes.



**Singapore Airlines, one of six carriers to earn five-star status, also achieved the overall 2007 Airline of the Year title for the quality of its economy- and premium-class services. The carrier, which flies more passengers every year than the entire population of Singapore, was recognized for its exceptional food and friendly flight attendants as well as quality excellence in several other categories.**

Photo courtesy of Airbus

shout about their achievement; to demonstrate to existing and potential customers that they have reached this level," he said.

Plaisted said one of the greatest attributes and strengths of the ranking program is that Skytrax does nothing to encourage airlines to achieve five-star status.

"The global recognition of the star ranking program is now such that airlines will come to us to establish exactly how they can try to meet the required quality criteria and to understand the complexity and requirements," he said. "As a quality-based program, it has to remain something that is developed and nurtured within the internal operations of each individual airline. They need to want to achieve five-star status and determine if the right culture and attitude will work in their organization. We deal directly with airline presidents, chairmen and CEOs around the world, with the knowledge, experience and understanding that they can only develop a true five-star culture by having 100 percent involvement from top to bottom of the management and service chains."

Malaysia Airlines Managing Director and CEO Idris Jala acknowledges that all employees across the organization, from top executives to customer-facing staff, strives to always put their best foot forward — not only to maintain five-star status, but most importantly, to constantly achieve the high service standards their customers deserve.

"This award is indeed a timely recognition of our employees' continuous commitment towards maintaining superior standards in product and services delivery to our customers, both in flight and on the ground," he told *Qantas Business Travel*.

"The competition in the airline industry will continue to intensify," he said. "Therefore, it is imperative that Malaysia Airlines maintains its high level of product and service quality so Malaysia Airlines continues to retain its premium customer business."

Like the six carriers that have achieved five-star status, airlines around the world aim to bring the best possible experience to their customers, and while there are many options carriers can use to measure the effectiveness of their product and service standards, reaching five-star status for some airlines gives added assurance that their current practices are aligned with customers' expectations.

"Being recognized by Skytrax is an honor," said Vijay Mallya, Kingfisher Airlines chairman and CEO. "It is gratifying to see that our approach of providing our guests with a delightful and unique flying experience has been recognized." 

*Stephani Hawkins can be contacted at [stephani.hawkins@sabre.com](mailto:stephani.hawkins@sabre.com)*

perfection will never be achieved by any airline in the world. But those that achieve a five-star rating must come close."

An airline that offers a five-star product (seating, catering, airport services, in-flight entertainment) but fails to deliver in the service area, or if top-quality service is delivered time and time again but the product is inconsistent or incomplete, the carrier earns only a four-star ranking. And as the inconsistencies increase, the status is reduced.

"The Star Ranking awards are based upon the 'total' travel experience an airline delivers to its customers," Plaisted said. "Ranking is not about whether caviar is served in first class or in-flight entertainment offers 100 different channels — it is the service experience that counts. The friendliness or efficiency of staff on the ground and onboard flights are major elements behind good service, but in a five-star ranking, we look for service standards that you can describe as being truly special."

Today, the largest group of airlines falls within the three-star ranking, which conforms to an industry average of acceptable products and services standards.

"We spend a lot of time discussing our rating system with airlines that believe their three-star rating should be upgraded to four-star status, but in the end, they understand the importance of creating a true balance of product and service quality to determine the ranking," Plaisted said.

That doesn't mean the door is closed to carriers that want to achieve a higher ranking; it's

quite opposite. Skytrax works with many airlines to help them identify their weaknesses so they can make changes to achieve and maintain higher ratings.

"For some airlines, the catalyst between four- and five-star ranking may be based on delivering a better quality product, or it may be reliant on increasing service consistency or, quite possibly, it may require the introduction of a new product," Plaisted said. "For others, the improvement of frontline staff service standards may be the feature for change. It tends to be very different from one airline to the next."

While reaching five-star status poses challenges for many carriers, it also comes with some pretty significant, worthwhile benefits. According to Plaisted, the biggest benefit for an airline is the exclusivity of the five-star ranking. With the ongoing exceptional service and product delivery that's required to achieve this ranking level — contributing to customer satisfaction — five-star airlines naturally benefit.

"Airlines achieving five-star ranking benefit both internally and externally," he said. "Internally, it's used as a daily measure to which their service staff must perform and to ensure product quality always meets customers' expectations. And externally, an airline will generally want to publicize the five-star ranking award, largely because they know that it is a unique and globally recognized sign of quality assurance toward their past, present and future customers.

"Finally, to an airline achieving five-star status, it is their opportunity to stand up and