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Delta to Cut Number of Attendants on Some Flights

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Delta Air Lines, intensifying its search for ways to cut costs, is planning to reduce the number of flight attendants on some flights and eliminate meals for flight crews, according to a company document.

The latest belt-tightening steps by Delta, which recently cut wages for pilots and many other employees and is cutting 7,000 jobs as part of a restructuring plan, follow its move last week to cut its most expensive U.S. fares by as much as 50%. Other major airlines have scrambled to match the lowered fares on routes where they compete.

The new cuts highlight the balancing act Delta and other big airlines are attempting following \$25 billion in losses over the past three years and intense competition from lower-cost rivals. Delta still is trying to do more to bring its costs within striking distance of those at carriers such as Southwest Airlines, while hoping to charge slightly more in return for higher levels of service and amenities such as frequent-flier programs that low-cost rivals typically lack.

With fewer flight attendants, Delta passengers may wait longer for already skimpy food and beverage offerings in coach-class seats. A Delta spokesman confirmed the contents of the memo but declined to discuss its specifics.

Starting Jan. 31, the third-largest U.S. airline will reduce to seven from eight the number of flight attendants on transoceanic Boeing 767ER flights, which carry up to 285 passengers, according to an internal memo reviewed by The Wall Street Journal. The 268-passenger Boeing 777 flown by Delta to Japan will carry nine flight attendants instead of the current 10. Delta might add an extra flight attendant on full flights, but those aircraft still would have smaller crews than in the past.

Delta also plans to eliminate an extra flight-attendant position it normally adds when U.S., Caribbean and Delta Shuttle flights are particularly full. And crew meals on domestic flights will be dropped April 1, meaning that pilots and flight attendants will have to bring their own food, just as many passengers do.

Anthony Black, the Delta spokesman, said the Atlanta airline would exceed minimum staffing requirements following the flight-attendant cutbacks. The Federal Aviation Administration requires five flight attendants on the 767ER and eight on the 777. FAA staffing requirements "are based on evacuating an aircraft, not delivering Delta service," said Andrea Taylor, a union activist trying to organize Delta's flight attendants.

UAL Corp.'s United Airlines uses nine to 11 flight attendants on similar 767 aircraft, and 12 to 14 on 777 aircraft, depending on passenger load. United still offers three classes of service on those flights, while Delta offers two. Other airlines have lowered flight-attendant staffing to cut costs, including US Airways Group Inc.

Paul Matsen, Delta's chief marketing officer, last week said Delta was planning to change in-flight food service to make it more consistent. For example, Delta still offers food in coach on some domestic flights, though the airline largely has switched to food-for-sale on many domestic flights.

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