# Barnett on Business Travel: Gumbo of travel tips and rips

*by Chris_Barnett*

While the U.S. House of Representatives Financial Services Committee recently lobbed softball question at CEOs from the nation's biggest banks who pocketed $700 billion in taxpayer bailout dollars, these lenders and credit card companies are quietly doubling interest rates and slashing credit limits even on their best customers.

Diane Nissen, an art dealer and educator, who has been charging airline tickets, meals and other travel expenses to her Capital One credit card for past last 15 years, got a letter stating that her 8.9 percent interest rate was being doubled to 17.9 percent and her $12,000 limit was dropped to $5,000. And Nissen says she always pays off her monthly charges.

"I called and was told, very courteously, that Capital One has a new policy and I either accept the terms or they will close the account," she said. "They wouldn't budge."

Others say some card issuers are burying the credit tightening and fee changes in fine print in statements, while stuffing envelopes with pamphlets trumpeting promotions in large, eye-catching type. "I don't have time to read fine print," said Tiffany Kramer, chain sales representative for Classic Wines of California. On the other hand, she says Nordstrom Visa sends her reward checks based on her spending. "They really care about your business."

Kramer says she's dumped her other credit cards and uses one airline Visa for everything. "I'm a Virgin girl now, and I want to support them (Virgin America) because they are an absolutely amazing airline. I like the relaxing lighting colors when you step in to the plane, the flight attendants are friendly and caring and the entertainment center is great. Virgin's flights are never late, in fact most that I've flown have arrived early."

American Express, once the gold standard in so-called "travel and entertainment" credit cards, has lost Kramer's loyalty and is angering people like Allison Wolfe, a hair-color specialist for Minneapolis-based Aveda, maker of beauty and wellness products.

"I travel constantly, but if I'm a day late on their cycle with the payment, I get charged $29 and a percentage of the balance," she says. "I can't expect my company to pay those costs so end up eating them." Wolfe also complains that AMEX's automated voice line makes it "very inconvenient to cash in reward points."

Bottom line: Check your credit cards for higher interest rates, lower credit limits, shorter payment cycles, new or increased fees now â€” before you use them and get a surprised "not valid."

A Stylish Bargain: Chicago's very hip Hotel Blake (www.hotelblake.com), created inside the 19th century Morton Salt Building, looks a little too cool for the corporate crowd. But savvy management is rolling out the green carpet in these tough times.

From now through March, rooms start at $139 a night. In good times they fetch $169 nightly, which still isn't a bad price. The Blake has a business center and fitness center that are both open 24 hours, and free Internet access. Tip: All 161 rooms have WiFi Internet access and only a few have hardwired broadband net access. If your laptop is temperamental, ask for a hardwired room when you book.

Bar Etiquette: Unless you're mentally stuck in the 1950s, you'll notice that businesswomen often outnumber guys sitting at the bar in up-market hotels and restaurants. Want some company for a cocktail, you can still sit down and try your best opening line. But today women have a new, subtle "no thank you." They will whip out their BlackBerry, PalmPilot or computer phones and start reading and answering e-mail or checking the news. When they start watching a movie, that's pretty strong hint to buzz off.

Snack, Sip in Silicon Valley: Hot spots are even wheeling and dealing in high-tech heaven. MacArthur Park in Palo Alto, Calif., has added a happy hour bar menu, 4-7 p.m. nightly, and live music 5-9 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Lures: a trio of Angus Beef, pulled pork or spicy chicken sliders go for $4. A half-dozen "specialty drinks," including margaritas and Old Soldiers Lemonade, sell for $5. For more details, visit online at www.macarthurparkpaloalto.com.

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