

# Playing the jet card

by James Wynbrandt

*The concept is simple, but the programs have become complex. Be sure you do your homework.*

**D**on't leave home without it—not if you want simple, guaranteed access to a business jet at a reasonable hourly rate. That's the pitch that has driven the rapid growth of jet card programs. Almost a dozen national companies, including the major fractional and charter fleet providers, now offer these cards. Numerous smaller charter companies also provide jet cards.

"The jet card is popular because it's easy to understand," said Steven O'Neill, CEO of CitationShares,











provider of the Vector Jet Card.

Yes, the concept is simple. But the programs have become more complex as providers have worked to differentiate their card plans and add benefits to attract new clients. For example, 25-hour cards used to be the minimum denomination. Now you can buy a jet card for as few as 10 hours of flight time. Such changes mean that anyone considering a jet card needs to know how to tell the programs apart. But before getting to the fine points, let's review Jet Cards 101.

Think of a jet card as a debit card for private air transportation. You deposit a set amount of money for a specified number of flight hours, and as you use them, your balance is adjusted accordingly. (You don't have to physically present a jet card; the pilot won't ask for it to run it through a card reader before firing up the engines.)

Unlike fractional ownership programs, jet cards require no aircraft purchase. And no empty-leg charges are applied, as they typically are with charter. Jet cards

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Some Leading Jet Card Companies	Fleet	Minimum hours & dollars	Program highlights
Bombardier Skyjet Card: Skyjet Card Info: Skyjet.com; (888) 275-9538	 19 light, super-light, mid-size, large and ultra-long-range jet models from Bombardier fleet and charter operators. Aircraft include the Citation II and Excel, Hawker 800XP, Gulfstream III and Falcon 900.	25 hours, which costs \$94,000 for a light jet. Cards are also available for 50, 100 or more hours.	No positioning charges. One-ways, round trips and overnights billed at same rates. Can upgrade or downgrade to larger or smaller jets for each flight. Requires 12 hours' notice to fly. Company also offers the Learjet Card for use of a Learjet 31/31A or Learjet 60; Challenger Card for use of a Challenger 604; and Skyjet International Jet Card.
CitationShares Card: Vector Jet Card Info: Citationshares.com; (800) 340-7767	 Cessna Citations, including CJ3, Bravo, Excel/XLS and Sovereign.	20 hours, starting at \$108,900. Additional hours can be purchased in as little as one-hour increments.	Offers peak and nonpeak pricing. Customers who agree to black out the busiest travel days get a 5-percent bonus on their hours. Jet card for 25 hours also provides discounts. Under "preferred positioning" program, empty legs are posted and customers can book them at significant savings over peak rates, and request alternate departure or arrival airports. Program has no landing fees, fuel surcharges, ferry fees or other hidden costs. Combination Cards enable customers to have access to two different aircraft. CitationShares fractional customers can buy time in one-hour increments on the card program to supplement their fractional flight hours. Hours must be used within 12 months.
Delta Air Elite Card: Fleet Membership Info: Airelite.com; (800) 927-0927	 Uses Flexjet fleet, including the Learjet 45, Learjet 60 and Challenger 604.	10-hour card costs \$43,900 for a Learjet 45. Cards for 25 and 50 hours also available. Also sells Flexjet 25 card in association with Flexjet.	Two classes of membership: Membership Fleet and Premier Fleet, the latter offering the latest model aircraft. Members flying round trips can receive a bonus of up to 35 percent more hours than they paid for. No time limit for using hours; card balances are fully refundable. Owned by Delta Airlines. Members receive Medallion status in the Delta SkyMiles program. When flying on Delta or partner airlines, they get preferred seating and boarding and special check-in privileges.
Flexjet Card: Flexjet 25 Jet Card Info: Flexjet25.com; (866) 473-0025	 Bombardier's Learjet 45, Learjet 60 and Challenger 604. Plans to add Learjet 40 and Challenger 300.	25 hours. Depending on program, this card costs \$134,900 to \$155,000 for a Learjet 45 and \$219,900 to \$255,000 for a Challenger 604. Also available are 30- and 35-hour cards.	Card members can save up to 20 percent on rates through plans that black out peak travel dates. Unused card balance can be applied toward purchase of a fractional share in the Flexjet program. Upgrades and downgrades of aircraft can be purchased. No ferry fees to the Caribbean, Mexico, Bermuda or the Bahamas; no ferry fees to Europe or Hawaii on a Challenger.
Flight Options Card: JetPASS Ultimate Travel Card Info: Flightoptions.com; (877) 703-2348	 Beechjet 400A, Hawker 400XP, Hawker 800XP, Citation X, Embraer Legacy.	\$100,000. This buys about 15 to 29 flight hours in light jets and eight to 13 hours in large jets. Additional purchases available in increments of \$50,000.	Offers round-trip discounts and off-peak pricing 20 percent below peak rates. Customers can select the class of aircraft on a flight-by-flight basis with no exchange fee. No ferry fees for flights to Mexico, Bermuda and most Caribbean islands. No time limit on use of hours. Fully refundable deposit.
Jet Aviation Card: Privileged Travel Jet Card Info: Jetaviation.com; (888) 430-5387	 Small, mid-sized and large jets—including the Citation II, Falcon 20 and Gulfstream III—from Jet Aviation's fleet of managed aircraft and from other charter operators.	10 hours, which costs \$45,000 for a light jet. Also offers 25-, 50- and 100-hour cards.	Prices include fuel and standard catering. No repositioning fees. Forty-percent round-trip bonus hours for qualified trips. Ten-hour cards require 24 hours' notice to fly and are nonrefundable, though unused balance can be applied to new card. Higher-denomination cards require 10 hours' notice to fly and their unused balances are refundable.
Jet Network Card: FlightCard Info: Jetnetwork.com; (888) 255-5387	 Employs charter operators' fleets of light, mid-size and heavy jets, including the Learjet 35, Citation X and Falcon 2000.	\$100,000 Gold membership. Platinum (\$250,000) and Black (\$500,000) memberships also available. Hourly rates for light jets start at \$3,650 for one-ways and \$2,550 for round trips.	Requires 48-hours' notice to fly. All deposits refundable. One-way upgrades available with Platinum and Black memberships. No fuel surcharges. Pricing guaranteed for life of the card.
Marquis Card: Marquis Jet Card Info: Marquisjet.com; (866) JET-1400.	 10 models from NetJets' fractional aircraft, including the Cessna Citation V Ultra and Gulfstream G550.	25 hours, with prices ranging from \$119,900 for a Citation V Ultra to \$339,900 for a Gulfstream G450.	Access to NetJets programs like Mayo Clinic healthcare and exclusive events. Customers can exchange up or down in aircraft size for a fee, based on aircraft availability. One-hour minimum, though short-leg waivers are negotiable. Provides access to aircraft in Europe.
Sentient Cards: Sentient Travel Card (Silver and Gold), Sentient Preferred Plus Info: Sentient.com; (800) 760-4908	 Primarily uses brokered light, mid-sized and large-cabin jets. Models range from the Cessna Citation CJ2 to Gulfstream G550.	\$100,000 (Silver). Also offers \$250,000 Gold and \$150,000 Preferred Plus cards. (Hourly rates range from \$3,250 to \$4,300 for light jets and \$6,300 to \$10,200 for large jets.)	Offers "preferred" fleet with aircraft with an average age of four years and "select" fleet with aircraft 10 years old and older for a lower hourly rate. Members can switch among light, mid-sized and heavy jets and preferred or select fleets on trip-by-trip basis with no exchange fee. Silver and Gold cards don't expire and money is fully refundable. Preferred Plus card must be used within a year, is nonrefundable and provides discounted rates for use of the preferred fleet. Silver membership has a two-hour minimum for flights; Gold and Preferred Plus have one-hour minimums. All cards offer round-trip discounts.
TAG Aviation Card: TAG Aviation Jet Card Info: tagaviation.com; (800) 451-7734	 Employs wide variety of light to heavy models from AMI Jet Charter and other charter operators' managed aircraft, including the Beechjet 400, Learjet 45, Falcon 50 and Gulfstream IV.	\$100,000. Maximum is \$500,000.	No positioning charges or round-trip requirements. Cardholder can specify different aircraft class for each flight. Requires 12 hours' notice to fly. Cost of international charter flights may be deducted from deposit. No expiration date. Unused balances refundable.

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also guarantee an aircraft—unlike block charter, where customers get a discount for buying flight time in bulk and are out of luck if the provider's fleet is fully booked. Simply put, cards deliver the convenience and consistency of fractional ownership with a smaller capital outlay and no ownership commitment. But these benefits come at a price. Per-

hour jet card rates are higher than either fractional or round-trip charter rates.

When they were introduced at the end of the last decade, jet cards were aimed primarily at customers who would fly fewer than 50 hours per year—an amount of flight time equivalent to a one-sixteenth fractional share, the smallest ownership stake many fractional companies offer. But since then, cards have proven popular with a much wider range of business jet travelers.

“There used to be traditional cutoff



points in the market that said if you fly only a few hours [per year], use charter; the next increment, use a jet card; next, go fractional; then buy an aircraft,” explained Steve Hankin, president and COO of Sentient, one of the major card programs. “That isn’t as appropriate as it was. Today, people have multiple [aircraft access] solutions because each provides different capabilities.”

Michael Green, president and CEO of Delta Air Elite, agreed. “We’re getting people who are exiting fractional programs, people who are participating in fractional programs but need supplemental lift and a lot of aircraft owners that need more than one airplane,” he said. “We’re also getting people who are new to traveling on a business jet. It’s a great test drive for somebody who’s not sure what it’s all about.”

Jet cards are even becoming stocking stuffers among the affluent. “More and more companies, around bonus season, are giving jet cards to employees,” said Randy Brandoff, vice president of marketing for Marquis Jets, whose card program uses the NetJets fleet. “And they’re writing jet cards into retirement packages.”

### Finding Your Own Card Solution

Is there room for a jet card in your wallet? To answer that question, you first must ask yourself some others: Where will you be flying and how much? How many people will be flying with you? Will you need access to more than one class of aircraft? Would another travel solution make more economic or practical sense for you?

The major economic advantage of jet cards comes from the one-way pricing and the lack of direct charges for repositioning the aircraft. All members essentially share these unoccupied flight time costs. So, a jet card makes more sense if you usually fly one-way trips great distances than if you make frequent round trips. In the latter case, charter is likely a more cost-effective solution—even by comparison with card programs that offer round-trip discounts.

If your travel needs point you in the direction of a jet card, the next step is to identify the card program best suited to you. The aircraft in the fleet, the price structure, the availability of discount plans and numerous other variables give you wide latitude. Investigate

the following areas:

**The fleet.** Almost all card programs offer light, mid-size and large-cabin airplanes, but the models vary. Make sure the aircraft fit your needs. For example, mid-size jets can't all carry the same amount of luggage, or get in and out of the same length runways. Some programs emphasize the modernity of their jets while others focus on affordability.

Bombardier Flexjet, which offers both fractional and card programs, sees the jet card market in two segments, according to Sylvain Levesque, vice president of marketing and administration. "Some [customers] trade quality of service and consistency for price, and a clear segment is looking for the highest level of service," she said.

**Flexibility.** Will you need more than one model or category of aircraft, or more than one aircraft at a time? In most programs, the cost of a card is pegged to the category or type of aircraft you sign up to use. But programs differ in their policies on access to the fleet. Some limit you to the type of aircraft you sign up for. Others allow using a larger or smaller aircraft for a given flight for a fee. Still others will allow an exchange only on an as-available basis, and some allow you to choose an aircraft on a flight-by-flight basis with no fee. If you anticipate needing two or more airplanes at the same time, be sure to check policies regarding simultaneous use.

**Minimum flight times.** Some programs have minimum flight times—one or two hours, for example. Make sure the minimums and your missions match. A flight from New York to Boston, for example, takes less than one hour. You don't want to join a program and learn you're being debited for flight time you're not using. (Make sure response time—how quickly a flight can be arranged—fits your needs, as well.)

**Discounts, deals and hidden charges.** Several programs offer discount pricing plans for flights during off-peak hours, for round trips or for customers who are willing to forgo travel on high-demand days. Find out

about the pricing plans at any program you're considering.

Also, while jet cards are sold as all-inclusive, additional fees are often levied for such things as fuel, overnight crew stays, catering, landing, taxi time, ground holds and repositioning outside

the U.S. Programs treat these costs differently. Make sure you factor a card program's policies on such fees into your decision.

**Operational control.** You should know who has operational control of the airplane. Does the card program use brokered air-

craft or does it own and operate its fleet? Who's responsible if service breaks down? What standards does the card provider set for its aircraft and crews?

A jet card can provide substantial benefits, as the growth of these programs suggests. But research-

ing and selecting a program that best suits your needs can be labor intensive. Seek help from a consultant, accountant or the staffs at the card programs if you need it. If you want to get into the card game, that's how to make sure you're holding a winning hand. □