

United's big picture moment: CEO Scott Kirby redefines IFE and passenger experience

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Scott Kirby, CEO, United Airlines

This month Scott Kirby, Chief Executive Officer of United Airlines, will be recognized with the prestigious APEX CEO Lifetime Achievement Award. This honor celebrates a career defined by bold decisions, resilience during crisis and a vision for shaping the passenger experience in ways that will influence aviation for decades to come.

For Kirby, though, the recognition reflects more than personal success. "I often say I have the easiest job at United: to make our employees proud of our airline and the company we have built together," he tells *PAX Tech* in an August interview. "If they feel proud, they take care of everything and want to ensure that our passengers feel that way too."

Kirby emphasizes that United's progress comes from its people.

"The way I see it, this award is for our employees. The dedication from our team is what enables us to make our passengers' days, every day, and deliver on our United Next strategy to be the world's

biggest and best airline in the history of aviation.”

A legacy of bold choices Kirby’s leadership has consistently defied industry convention. While many airlines are shifting away from investing in seatback entertainment, United is doubling down, setting itself on course to become the airline with the most seatback screens in the world. By the end of this year, United is expected to hold the top position globally for most seatback screens—a decision that Kirby describes as both practical and responsive.



United is on track to be the global leader in total seatback screens

As of today, United Airlines operates nearly 140,000 seatback screens across more than 720 aircraft. Over the next few years, the fleet is projected to exceed 300,000 screens. With the delivery of new 787s and A321XLRs, United will be introducing cutting-edge Astrova 4K OLED displays. On the 787, these will debut alongside the Polaris Studio Suite, featuring 27-inch screens (largest of any carriers in U.S.) and 19-, 16-, and 13-inch screens throughout the other cabins.

“It is a feature passengers love, but it is also a feature that makes our employees proud,” he says. “Every time I fly and walk up and down the aisle, about three-quarters of the screens are on. Even if people are not watching a show, the latest movie release or listening to our library of podcasts, they are checking out the map or have the screen on in the background.”

The airline is not just outfitting its entire fleet with seatback screens—it is making them larger and more advanced. United unveiled its Elevated interior for new 787-9 aircraft this spring. United Elevated will include two Business Class suites, the greatest number of total premium seats in United’s fleet, Starlink connectivity, wireless charging, Bluetooth connectivity and 27-inch, 4K OLED screens in Business Class—“the largest among U.S. carriers,” Kirby shares.

Living room in the sky

Kirby says the airline sees seatback screens as more than a source of entertainment but an opportunity to build relationships. United uses seatback IFE screens to give its passengers personal, real-time information about the flight, such as connecting flight information.

“The screens are also a way for us to connect with and inform our passengers. We know the more transparent we can be, the better.”

United has built an entirely new business on this foundation of deepening connection with its passengers. Kinective Media, launched in June 2024, is the first airline media network that uses insights from travel behaviors to connect passengers to personalized, real-time advertising and offers onboard. Kirby says it aims to ensure that the ads passengers see are “relevant, personal and useful.”

Kinective Media uses anonymized passenger data to deliver personalized content and offers across screens, apps, lounges and airports. The platform protects privacy with opt-out controls and scales to provide dynamic, relevant inflight experiences.

Once Starlink internet comes online across the fleet, free for MileagePlus members, United will take its digital experience even further, bridging the critical link between seatback screen and PED content experiences.

“The whole seatback screen becomes more dynamic and becomes a version of your phone at 35,000 feet, allowing us to connect uniquely and directly with every single passenger,” Kirby says. “We want to offer a ‘living room in the sky’ experience for our passengers, and these screens enable that.”

From personal experience to corporate strategy

For Kirby, IFE is personal. His own experiences—one in particular—helped shape the decision to equip every aircraft with seatback screens.

“I made the final decision to put IFE onboard all aircraft while I was in a jet bridge. I had been in [Economy] with the kids, and my wife, Kathleen, was up front with our four-year-old, Sean. He was bouncing up and down with excitement to tell me that he had played someone in battleship on the flight and won two of three games. My wife said it was the best flight she would ever have with him. I was already leaning that direction, but Sean and Kathleen cinched the deal.”

Guided by the passenger mindset, United’s inflight interface now updates quarterly with a streamlined layout and personalized recommendations. Features include FlightPath3D maps and smart content tiles.

Defining the premium journey



United Airlines' Polaris Studio Suites feature 27 inch OLED screens, wireless charging and Bluetooth audio, reflecting its premium cabin ambitions

United's Polaris Studio Suites feature 27-inch OLED screens, wireless charging and Bluetooth audio, reflecting its premium cabin ambitions. Kirby describes the design as more than an upgrade, but a philosophy of surprise and delight.

"We are always innovating, but I actually think innovation is an overused term. Our job is to constantly surprise passengers with something new and exciting that they have never seen on any airline before," he explains.

The new United Elevated aircraft interiors embody that mission.

"Before we announced Elevated, we were already delivering a best-in-class international experience and flying to the most places across the Atlantic and Pacific. To continue to win what I call 'brand loyal passengers,' you have to continue to raise the bar and deliver," Kirby says. "These investments set our airline up to win into the next decade and beyond."

Impactful partnerships

Partnerships with technology leaders strengthen United's inflight strategy. The airline recently became the first to integrate Spotify's app experience across seatback screens, enhancing entertainment with curated music and podcasts.

"Spotify is a leader in innovative entertainment experiences. Including its content on our industry-leading inflight entertainment system was a natural opportunity," Kirby says.

The first-of-its-kind collaboration delivers 450+ hours of content now available to passengers for free

on the airline's 130,000+ seatback screens. Starting next year, United passengers will be able to log into the Spotify app on the seatback screen, allowing them to access their existing playlists, podcasts and audiobooks to continue listening where they left off. On Starlink-equipped aircraft, MileagePlus members can stream Spotify content on their PEDs with gate-to-gate connectivity.

"There are many other new partners we will be announcing shortly that will bring that 'living room in the sky experience' to our passengers," Kirby adds.

Resilience in crisis

Kirby's tenure as CEO coincided with some of the airline's most turbulent years, including the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. One date in particular remains etched in his memory.

"October 1, 2020—this is the day that our first round of CARES Act funding expired and because the pandemic was still raging, it also meant that if we wanted to stay in business and preserve our employees' careers for the long-term, we would have to resort to short-term furloughs."

The experience shaped his long-term strategy.

"That was also the day that I made a commitment to myself that post-COVID, we would do everything possible to position the airline to never again have system-wide furloughs. And to do that, we would have to carry more cash, have industry-leading profit margins and pay down our debt."

By eliminating that fear, Kirby believes employees can focus entirely on delivering for passengers.

"Since then, I made a commitment first to myself, and then to all of them, that we would build an airline where they can sleep well at night, even when there are risks and challenges in the world."

Looking down the runway

Looking forward, Kirby promises that United will continue pushing boundaries.

"We are going to wow and surprise you. We are already doing things that no other airline in the world has ever done, and we are working on the next two-to-three generations of 'Wow!' moments."

Technology, transparency and proactive communication will remain at the core of the airline's strategy.

"One goal I have for our ops and technology teams is that they are as proactive as possible. I say, anytime there is a delay or cancellation, pretend I am on the flight and I have called to ask what is going on. I want to proactively tell all of our passengers that exact same story every single time," Kirby explains

A recognition of vision

Receiving the APEX CEO Lifetime Achievement Award is a recognition of Kirby's passenger experience leadership. As the second U.S. airline CEO to receive the honor in APEX's five-decade history, the award stands as both a reflection of his vision and a testament to the airline's employees.

With the largest fleet of seatback screens soon to be in the sky, new premium experiences rolling out and a strategy grounded in resilience and transparency, United is positioned to deliver on its promise of a "living room in the sky," representing the cultural shift that has inspired the global airline industry.

For Kirby, the award is a recognition of what United has built together. And for travelers worldwide, it signals that the journey with United is only just beginning.