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## **Metro-North Could Learn a Lot from Amtrak: Cameron on Transportation**

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As I enjoyed a speedy — 148-mph— ride to Boston last week on Acela, I started thinking about the differences between [Amtrak](#) and Metro-North.

They each have a different mission, but there are a few things Metro-North could learn from its national counterpart.

### **Quiet Cars**

Amtrak invented the concept in 2000 and it's been a big success. The cars are well marked and the “library-

like atmosphere” rules are explained and enforced, both by conductors and passengers. But on Metro-North, the QuietCalmute concept didn’t happen until 2011. The cars are not marked and the rules are seldom enforced.

#### **Wi-Fi**

Amtrak was an early adopter by offering free Wi-Fi back in 2010. The response was so great the “tubes” were quickly clogged, forcing a major tech upgrade. The Wi-Fi is now fast and dependable, allowing passengers on all Northeast Corridor trains — not just Acela — to be productive during their journey. Metro-North says it has no plans for Wi-Fi.

#### **First Class**

First-class seating is available on Amtrak complete with at-seat dining options. The upgrade from coach isn’t cheap, but highly popular and the cars are usually full. When the New Haven Railroad ran our trains, there were private parlor cars on some commuter runs. Considering the demographics on Metro-North, I’m pretty sure a premium seating option would be quite popular. But none is planned.

#### **Dynamic Pricing**

Book an advance seat on Amtrak and you’ll find three different ticket prices, the cheapest akin to airlines’ no-show/no-refund pricing, and others with higher fares and more flexibility. Metro-North doesn’t book seats, it only offers peak and off-peak fares. You can walk up and grab a ride anytime on Metro-North, but you will usually need a reservation and an advance ticket to ride Amtrak.

#### **Refunds**

I was once on an over-booked Acela with literally no empty seats. I contacted Amtrak after I arrived and was given a full refund for having to stand on the train for more than three hours. On Metro-North, your ticket only gets you a ride, not a guarantee of seating.

#### **Rewards**

The Amtrak Guest Rewards program allows you to earn loyalty points toward upgrades and free tickets. I went to Los Angeles from Chicago last year — in a private bedroom with meals included — for free by using points I earned riding Acela. There’s also a co-branded credit card where everyday purchases earn you these perks. On Metro-North, there are no points, perks or rewards.

#### **New Cars**

To its credit, Amtrak has already ordered the next generation of its popular “high-speed” Acela trains long before the current rolling stock has worn out. On Metro-North, the railroad and state [Department of Transportation](#) waited until 2005 to order the new M8 cars to replace ones that were more than 25 years into their 20-year life expectancy and were being held together with gaffers tape.

### **On-time Performance**

You will receive a text or email if your Amtrak train is running late, just like the airlines. Metro-North will only tweet or email if several trains are affected. Metro-North trains are also considered “on time” if they’re up to six minutes late, so the railroad’s more than 90-percent on-time record is dubious. Still, it’s better than Amtrak where even Acela, the pride of its fleet, is on-time only 74 percent of the time (even including a 10-minute leeway).

Apples and oranges? Sure. These two railroads are quite different. But Metro-North has a monopoly while Amtrak must compete with everything from discount buses to airlines. Maybe that’s why Amtrak is better?

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