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Commentary: Bonus points! Free stuff! For our loyal customers

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As we waited in the airport for a plane back to Philadelphia recently, we glanced at our boarding passes and were pleasantly surprised to see Group 1 printed at the bottom. Group 1? We are usually in Group 4, along with the woman who forgot she has a 24-ounce bottle of shampoo in her purse.

When the agent announced that the plane was ready for priority boarding, we got up from the plastic seats, ready to go. Then he welcomed those seated in first class.

Then families with small children were “welcome to board.”

Then, “any uniformed members of the Armed Forces.” That seemed fair.

We moved toward the front: Group 1 had to be next.

Then he called for “all members of the Admirals Club, the Advantage Club and those with elite status: the diamond, ruby, and emerald credit card holders.” What credit card did we use to buy these plane tickets with again?

As our fellow passengers streamed by, it seemed like everyone but us had E-ZPass. By the time he pre-boarded all the “special people,” we were standing alone. Turns out, Group 1 wasn’t very special at all.

We know that when we don’t pay \$18 for extra legroom, we’ll be squished in our seats. That’s what we bargained for. But we didn’t bargain for this, and we don’t recall ever even being invited to join the “elite diamond club.”

Many other clubs do want us as members, and not a day goes by without them emailing us with offers of bonus points, free food, rewards, and advantages. Sometimes the advantages are dubious, but if you ask us, we’ll likely sign up -



just in case. We once stood in line to try a cronut and found ourselves signing up for the delicious cronut loyalty club - just in case we have the urge to spend \$5 on a trendy iced pastry, in a city we once visited, again.

When the clerk in the frozen yogurt store looked at our cups overflowing with Oreo cookie crumbs and wet walnuts, she asked, "Do you want to join our frequent-eater Yummy Yogurt club?" We couldn't resist. We were hoping that the next time we flipped the handle to start the flow of mint chocolate chip, she'd announce: "All members of the super-secret Yummy Yogurt club get free jimmies today."

Between us, we now belong to about two dozen loyalty programs. That's a lot of loyalty.

We can remember a time when we guarded our privacy, reluctant to divulge our email addresses and phone numbers to strangers. But now that we - and everyone else in the world - can see the front of our houses on Google Maps, we know that keeping our details private is a lost cause. Privacy is a pipe dream.

At the chain drugstore, the employee at the register prods us to enter our Plenti rewards number before she'll even think about ringing up our greeting cards and Q-tips. "You get points and some money off," she chirps happily every time. We do as we're told, but invariably, we get Plenti of nothin'. At the competing chain, our reward is a coupon for \$4 off - next week. Since we just bought \$45 worth of cold medicine, it's unlikely we'll need to come back in time to use that coupon. It'll expire on the floor of our car.

We do like our supermarket loyalty program, which provides instant gratification. After we rack up hundreds of dollars in groceries, we scan our super-shopper card and watch the discounts come off with a "ding." Blueberries: minus \$2.50. English muffins: minus 50 cents. At the end of the receipt is the proof: We saved \$23.76. Woohoo! That \$20 will cover our impulse purchases of caramel sea salt gelato and organic cucumber face wash.

Even though the club cards clutter up our wallets, we prefer them to clipping coupons and then searching for each item in the store. We never mastered the art of extreme couponing. And those computer-savvy companies that use reward apps? We've downloaded some that promise to keep track of what we eat and what we earn, but it's hard to remember our user name and password. When we do log on, we have to swipe through five screens to choose our salad ingredients online so we can get credit for our purchase.

So what do these loyalty clubs get us? When a friend wanted to get a speedy appointment with a world-famous gastroenterologist, her membership in the Rita's Water Ice cool customer club didn't impress the receptionist enough to get her in to see the doctor. Maybe it would have worked if she were a member of the "elite diamond club."