

big noise

Long Prosper Enterprise (LPE) will demonstrate its LPE-502S product (pictured) – surround-sound headphones for in-flight entertainment (IFE). LPE produces three million headphones monthly, with a product line that includes pneumatic headsets, low-cost headsets for economy class, and electronic headsets incorporating noise cancellation (NC) technology for premium and business classes. It has also added a new mid-size noise cancellation headphone product (SF-07NC) and surround sound and noise cancellation headphones to its range. The company says that by combining surround sound with noise cancellation, it can eliminate the space-restraint perception that normally coexists with noise cancellation.



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How would you define Asian airline style? Asia is home to a huge selection of airlines of every size, shape and flavour. Is there a common link? Not really, until we group them by popular image or ranking. The top-rated legacy airlines in Asia spend a huge amount of time and energy on market research, cabin interior design, inflight product development and service delivery. These carriers take a traditional approach to service – in front of the customer, front line staff perform in ‘customer interface mode’ – every action and utterance is focused on service delivery. This goes a long way to protect the brand image when seat hardware or in-flight entertainment (IFE) fails to live up to expectation.

In terms of colour and pattern, the cabins of Asian airlines tend to reflect not only the brand identity, but also the country of origin. In most cases, the airline is a flag carrier, and selling the country as a destination is part of the vision of management and/or the owners. The desire for a dose of local flavour means that one is less likely to see the insanely boring generic look found in the cabins of many Western countries. For a designer, this is one of the most rewarding aspects of working with Asian carriers, as there is a huge amount of variety in this vast region.

Related to this is the challenge of finding the right balance of ‘modern’ versus ‘ethnic’ in the cabin. Much of Asia is made up of developing or recently developed countries, whose airlines are seeing explosive growth in passenger numbers as incomes rise (present crisis excepted). Many of the new local fliers expect the cabin to appear ‘contemporary’; in all likelihood they see traditional patterns every day and thus perceive them as nothing special or even cheap looking. In countries with a tropical climate, where high humidity accelerates corrosion and bright sunshine causes colour fading, certain colours may carry negative associations among locals. The long-haul tourist coming from outside the culture, however, might be expecting to have an ethnic-infused “I’ve already arrived” feeling from the moment he or she steps on the aircraft. So one must find the right balance of ‘wow’ while reflecting the brand. And then the top management may have yet a different view or set of priorities.

Standing still is simply not a part of the DNA in Asia

Why are Asian airlines known for product innovation?

During their formative years, the largest and highest-rated carriers in Asia were government-funded or supported, and the image of the country or territory as a tourist destination or business hub was linked with the flag carrier. Intense competition among Asian airlines, and between them and established Western carriers, fuelled an obsession with becoming top performers in product. In a few cases, such as the ones with no domestic market, being ahead was necessary for survival. As their size increased and the ratings went up, the airlines came to understand the link between product and profit, and the tremendous brand equity resulting from continual investment in cabin interior and inflight product. Even in the extraordinarily challenging climate today, the top players in the market are looking ahead toward the next innovations, the next trends. Standing still is simply not a part of the DNA in Asia.

What are the key opportunities for Asian airlines going forward?

Historically, many countries in Asia enjoyed government protection of varying levels and/or access to cheap loans for aircraft. This helped the carriers gain and maintain an edge in product. Market liberalisation has been slow but it is definitely happening. New carriers have popped up throughout the region, and the notion that Asian travellers would never embrace the low-cost carrier approach has been negated by the success of several new entrants. As competition increases, we will likely see even greater segmentation and differentiation with cabin interior hardware and soft product. This is particularly so in mainland China, where the proposition used to revolve mostly around price. The mainland now has hundreds of thousands of millionaires who can afford to fly in the premium cabin and expect hardware and service delivery to be on par with the highest-ranking carriers in the region. The Chinese carriers are likely to rise to the task with large investments in both cabin hardware and soft product.