

THE INSIDE STORY

A captive audience inside the cabin presents the ideal opportunity for carriers to market their product. Charles Tyler looks at how leading airlines are working to reinforce their brand during the flight

It's true of all industries; strong brands and strong revenue performance go hand-in-hand. And for once, the airline industry doesn't stand alone – there is clear evidence showing that those airlines with strong brands are among the most profitable.

In these days of third-party online distribution channels, code-shares and common-use terminal equipment, many passengers may have had comparatively little exposure to the traditional visual cues of a brand – a logo, typeface and unique colours. And given boarding bridges and congested waiting areas, a lot of passengers may not even see the exterior of the aircraft.

It is why branding inside the cabin must work even harder to help the brand stand out and leave a positive, lasting impression.

"95% of a customer's exposure to the airline brand is inside the cabin," says Tokyo-based airline brand consultant, Dan Baron. "The top management at the world's most consistently profitable and top-rated airline brands understand that investing in well-conceived and well-executed cabin interiors brings rewards in the form of greater loyalty and higher yield.

"Good cabin interior design is based not on whim but on strategy – in other words developing specifics to communicate the brand's personality and positioning," he continues.

Earlier this year, Delta Airlines completed the interior refurbishment of its entire fleet. This was part of a total corporate image revamp following the carrier's emergence from Chapter 11 and won't be affected by the potential deal with Northwest. "We now have a new identity, which says that Delta's new and Delta's fresh," says Jake Frank, Managing Director, Global Product Development and Delivery at Delta.

"We have paid a lot of attention to our colour scheme – and our leather seats not only look nicer and feel more comfortable but they also have a lower maintenance cost over time. We are attempting to message, through our cabin design aesthetic, that we are a stylish airline – and that we want to entertain our passengers in a safe, clean and fresh environment."

NEW MATERIALS; NEW OPPORTUNITIES

To assist branding strategy, new materials, lighting systems and interior fittings are constantly being developed by manufacturers. Such improvements aren't necessarily an option for every airline. There are cost pressures and long lead times for certification, forcing some carriers to choose from a narrower range of choices than competitors with deeper pockets or larger fleets.

BE PROACTIVE

» The cabin provides the ideal opportunity to inform passengers not only about the airline brand but also industry efforts on the environment.

Industry leaders hope to emphasise through in-flight video the work being done by all stakeholders in the drive towards IATA's goal of zero emissions. Speaking at the 64th IATA AGM in Istanbul, Northwest CEO Doug Steenland said "aviation has a better story to tell than other industries".

Although airlines have a very obvious interest in saving fuel, there is still a need to convince the public. "We have been caught on the back foot," says David Savy, CEO, Air Seychelles. "We have to be proactive."

www.iata.org/whatwedo/environment/campaign/index.htm

Nevertheless, the constant upgrades are positive moves. Many of the enhancements offer long-term economic advantages in their own right and the step then to utilising them to convey a branding message is a short, relatively, inexpensive one.

For example, Air Canada and Jet Airways have recently installed wood-effect flooring in parts of their cabins, for them a cost-effective indication of quality.

Other opportunities for an airline to make a brand statement to passengers include all the on-board extras: amenity packs; in-flight magazines; menus; even items such as air-sickness bags.

Even the safety video can make a statement. Delta's new version has attracted quite a bit of interest from not only the travelling public but also on the YouTube website.

"Our new video is edgy and progressive and sends a clear message that safety is our number one priority," says Frank. "But we have been creative with it and added a couple of playful touches. It certainly gets the attention of the passengers and is another powerful mechanism for reinforcing our brand."

LOOKING GOOD; PERFORMING WELL

Perhaps most crucial for the airline is the service performance of the cabin crew – as well as the image they present.

"Many of the world's most profitable airline brands are →



Cabin crew uniform, interior design and onboard products all affect passenger's perception of a carrier

those that pay close attention to appearance and to making sure their staff consistently look and feel great," says Baron. "Poorly-fitting, poorly maintained or just plain ugly uniforms can linger in the mind of the passenger and accentuate the negative aspects of the trip instead of reinforce the positives."

Airlines are increasingly employing well-known celebrity designers to design new cabin crew uniforms. Christian Lacroix, for example, designs uniforms for Air France. British Airways flight crews and staff now sport designs by Givenchy star Julien Macdonald while Korean Air launched new outfits by Italian designer Gianfranco Ferré. Southeast Asian airlines, such as Malaysia Airlines and Thai International, immediately stand apart by using distinctively local fabrics and styles to reinforce local traditions of graciousness and hospitality.

Arguably the most impressive use of uniform to reinforce brand comes from Singapore Airlines. Since she was first introduced in 1972, the Singapore Girl, with her warm smile and gracious Asian hospitality, has become an icon in the skies – and was recently celebrated as an enduring classic design by *Wallpaper* magazine.

"The image of our cabin crew in their distinctive sarong kebaya uniforms is recognised by the public," says Stephen Forshaw, Vice-President Public Affairs at Singapore Airlines. "Designed by French haute couture designer, Pierre Balmain, our uniform stands out."

Balmain insisted the uniforms were fully tailored and fitted for each member of the crew. Singapore Airlines' in-house tailors have a minimum of two fittings with each crew member and provides four new uniforms each year. Of course it is not just about looking good: Singapore Airlines also runs one of the most comprehensive cabin crew training programmes of any airline. Each new recruit undergoes 15 weeks of training before becoming airborne.

RETURN TO GLAMOUR

Another carrier that has recently unveiled a new corporate identity is India's Jet Airways. The striking yellow design, which has been

IN-CABIN BRANDING

➤ From 18-20 November 2008, the AirBusiness Academy – which is linked with IATA's Training and Development Institute – is running a two-day course entitled 'Are You Sitting Comfortably?' This course will explore how the aircraft cabin is evolving, taking into consideration design, market needs and configuration to suit differing needs.

"All types of airline need to define their aircraft cabin in such a way that it meets the market need," says Professor Paul Clark, Director of IATA's Training & Development Institute.

The course counts as part of the ABA and IATA joint training diploma in Strategic Airline Management. Further information is available at www.airbusiness-academy.com

created for Jet Airways by Italian designer, Roberto Capucci, reflects a distinctive international look yet captures the spirit of the new India.

Capucci was an unexpected choice since he normally only works on very high-end projects. "I normally only do haute couture, not prêt-à-porter, so this project was something different for me," says Capucci. "I wanted to bring glamour back into the flying experience. If the crew dress elegantly, they feel good, and this will certainly be reflected in the service offered to the passengers."

Delta also brought in a new range of uniforms as part of its corporate revamp. Designed by celebrity designer, Richard Tyler, and inspired by the era of glamorous air travel, the uniforms include a wide variety of pieces that are both fashionable and functional, including clothing, outerwear and accessories. ■

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