



Start

MAKING

SENSE

H-4987



ALL AIRLINE BRANDS CAN BECOME STRONGER IF
THEY STRIVE TO OWN EVERY SENSORY ELEMENT OF
THEIR PASSENGER EXPERIENCE. FROM VISUALS TO
SCENTS, TASTES TO VOICES, THERE ARE WAYS TO
BUILD LOVE AND LOYALTY... AND PROFITS

Words by Adam Gavine. Illustration by Marta Cerdà at Debut Art

Make no mistake, we are in a golden age of aviation. Those retro images of Madison Avenue advertising executives sipping martinis on Pan Am B747s in the 1960s and 1970s exude cool, but they cast a rose-tinted lens over the period. Today we have flat beds in business class, private compartments in first, and wi-fi and widescreen movies for all. Today's flyers have a wide choice of great airline experiences to choose from, but when most airlines have great product, they need an edge, something to make people desire their brand experience over the others. They need to ensure that their brand appeals to every human sense, and appeals at every brand touchpoint.

MAGICAL, NOT ME-TOO

With a client list including airlines such as LATAM, Thai Airways, Iberia and British Airways, and huge household names such as PepsiCo, Apple, Microsoft and Samsung, Interbrand knows how to make a brand appealing. Vicky Leavitt is CEO of consumer and retail brand experience, but prefers to refer to herself as a 'customer experience

evangelist', which means she truly cares about every aspect of the interaction that a customer might have with a brand.

"Through my lens, everything is about, 'Is it an iconic brand experience that's uniquely ownable?'" she explains. "If you strip away logos or other brand elements inside an aircraft or an airline experience, is the experience still unique and ownable and differentiated by that airline?"

While airlines are busy promoting their new flat beds or wi-fi systems - which are of course essential investments to be competitive - Leavitt thinks airlines are misguided if they think a sole focus on product is going to strengthen their brand, as they are just promoting non-differentiated product.

"You want people to love your brand and be ambassadors and advocates for your brand. You need to create iconic brand experiences that transform the way people engage with your brand. Having a unique, ownable experience that will win a place in people's hearts is how people should be thinking about branding and touchpoints across airlines, and there is a lot of

VIRGIN ON GREATNESS

Both Steve Edge of Steve Edge Design and Interbrand's Vicky Leavitt expressed admiration for one airline brand in particular: Virgin Atlantic.

"We all love a maverick, don't we?" explains Edge. "What I like about Virgin is they shake things up, and we all love the fact that the captain of the ship is Richard Branson: that definitely plays a part in the brand. They believe in themselves, believe in their own brand."

Leavitt adds her view of the popular brand: "Virgin Atlantic owns a place in people's hearts and minds. Most other airlines feel pretty undifferentiated for the most part, with touchpoints designed in isolation. Virgin Atlantic feels more holistically designed and a brand brought to life. They've always had a point of view, a tone of voice, and use surprise and delight as they relate to people at every touchpoint."

opportunity," says Leavitt. "In my view the airlines that have these differentiated, iconic brand experiences are the ones that, to me, are winning, and they do it with the sensory elements as well as with other elements."

VISUAL APPEAL

The most obvious human sense to impress your brand upon is sight, with a raft of tools available including logos, forms and color.

Logos are carefully designed to reflect brand values and it is important for airlines to apply their mark throughout the journey to remind passengers exactly which brand experience they are enjoying. But how often should logos be applied in the cabin? Should it be a scattergun approach, on brand panels, IFE home screens, antimacassars and napkins, or a little more subtle?

RIGHT: THE VIRGIN BRAND IS DIFFERENTIATED BUT ALWAYS RECOGNIZABLE, AS IN THIS STRIKING BRANDING PANEL FOR VIRGIN AUSTRALIA.

BELOW: STEVE EDGE ADMIRES AIR FRANCE'S SUBTLE YET UNMISTAKABLE APPLICATION OF ITS LOGO AND CORPORATE RED.



"Airlines that have differentiated brand experiences are the ones winning"

We asked the opinion of Steve Edge, a London-based branding specialist who has some visual appeal himself, with his motto being: Dress for a party every day and the party will come to you. Edge is a colorful character and dresser, but his serious brand expertise has attracted work from some of Britain's oldest and most conservative brands with royal connections, including Garrard the jewellers, Lock & Co the hat maker, and Purdey the gun maker, with other work including yachts and a new, soon-to-be-revealed 'travel superbrand'.

"The application of the brand mark in the cabin is very interesting. Sometimes it's done in a perfect, subliminal way that brings value to the product," he says.

After all, he explains, if a customer has bought an airline ticket and boarded a flight, they already know they are flying with that brand, so there is no need to be too overt.



COOKIES ARE CRACKERS

All airlines should have a good catering offer, but is having a differentiated offer valuable?

Interbrand's Vicky Leavitt believes this is a great opportunity to differentiate, giving the example of Delta Air Lines, which stood out from the crowd by offering Delta-branded Biscoff cookies in coach at a time when US-based airlines were removing the complimentary nuts and snacks in that class.

This small treat gave the brand a little something its rivals didn't have, not just in terms of having a snack at all, but because this Belgian caramelized biscuit was relatively unknown in the USA when it was introduced by Delta, which added a little extra interest.

Free snacks have made a comeback on US carriers in recent years, but one carrier's snack of

choice came as rather a shock to Leavitt, with a humble cookie serving as an important branding lesson that airlines should learn from.

"After years of having nothing, American Airlines brought back snacks and, of all the cookies on the planet to choose, they chose to serve Biscoff cookies," she says. "Delta owns that brand equity and it just seems absolutely crazy to me that another airline would copy it. You could have Oreos or any number of other snacks, but to pick Biscoff, to me, is an example of just not getting it. All it does is make me think, 'Delta never took snacks away.'"

"As a customer experience evangelist, you have to care about every touchpoint. The details matter, because everything you do speaks of your brand," adds Leavitt.



Edge is particularly fond of the way Air France discreetly applies its simple but instantly recognizable red logo throughout the aircraft. "It's a subtle, subconscious reminder and creates a lovely branded experience. It's done in a way that is not in your face, but you're subconsciously made aware of the brand in a very tasteful way, which makes the brand work. I think where it goes wrong is when it's overdone."

Edge suggests that airlines can create a subconscious feeling of luxury and beauty by debossing logos into



ABOVE: A DISTINCTIVE SOUTHWEST BRANDING PANEL. COULD THERE BE A SUBLIMINAL MESSAGE?

BELOW: THE AIRSPACE BY AIRBUS CABIN EMPHASIZES THE USE OF CABIN LIGHTING FOR BRAND COLORS

Don't neglect economy

"Airlines love to talk about all the amazing things they're doing for their first and business class customers, and yes, we get it, those people are super important to you, but it's not okay when you're then treating everybody else like dirt," says Vicky Leavitt of Interbrand. "They may be your most important customers, but an awful lot more economy passengers experience your brand, so they shouldn't be treated like cattle."

leathers and other rich materials in the cabin - but it should be done sparingly.

Leavitt agrees: "It's about differentiated use of the brand identity or color. It isn't a rulebook like 'put logos on the napkins, but don't put them on the seats.' It's a design aesthetic that adds up to a total unique and ownable iconic expression of your brand."

FLYING COLORS

The colors found in an airline's brand logo are generally applied throughout the travel experience. But how much of the brand color should passengers be immersed in?

"Just shoving a brand color or logo everywhere does not create an iconic brand experience," says Leavitt. "You need to use it in a strategic way that has impact, not just plaster it on undifferentiated things."

In Leavitt's eyes, Virgin Atlantic has achieved one of the best airline applications of brand color and, unprompted, Edge also mentions his respect for the work and how it 'owns' touchpoints with its trademark red.



BRIGHT, BOLD BUDGETS

Even if you don't recognize the brand, a low-cost carrier (LCC) is usually recognizable due to its bold, bright colors that extend from the livery right into the cabin. So why do they choose this bold approach while flag carriers tend to be subtler?

"They want to be noticed. They want to stand out above the crowd," explains Steve Edge. "It's not about being tasteful, it's about flying their flag to get more business and to say, 'Look at us.' I think it's a totally different market."

While their approach to branding is different from that of the legacy carriers, LCCs still need to create quality brand touchpoints to earn affection and loyalty. As Edge says, "Just because you buy a cheap ticket, that doesn't mean you should have a terrible time. It doesn't mean that you should be treated any differently than on the full service airlines, and it doesn't mean that you should get an inferior service."

"Low cost shouldn't be seen as a bad thing. It's still about having something of value – a lower value – but still a fabulous experience. There's no reason why that shouldn't be the case."

A case in point is Irish LCC Ryanair, which at one point offered a passenger experience and customer service as low down as its fares. However, in 2014 the airline introduced the 'Always Getting Better' program, which brought in a series of initiatives to improve the customer experience, including upgrades to its aircraft interiors, inflight menus and digital experience – and just being a little friendlier.

This approach had dramatic results. In December 2013, five million passengers flew with the airline, growing to six million in December 2014, and December 2015 brought in 7.5 million customers. New program initiatives are still being rolled out.

BELOW: IT MAY BE OVERLY BRIGHT FOR SOME, BUT THAT BOLD APPLICATION OF YELLOW COULD ONLY MEAN YOU'RE ON BOARD A RYANAIR AIRCRAFT



The power of words should not be underestimated, and in Welch's view airlines need to consider the way their crews talk to passengers, and the way they use words.

The safety announcements are essential and the captain's announcement is usually of some interest, but do we really need the crew announcements, with suggestions that everyone sits back and relaxes (especially if seat pitch is tight), or enjoys a beverage? Where else but in an aircraft do you hear the word 'beverage' nowadays?

"So many airlines have created wonderful moments through lounges and airplanes, building a sense of affiliation and preference, so why ruin it with a script?" asks Welch. "It makes no sense. The last remaining bastion of differentiation is in how you speak to passengers. Not in what you say – as I appreciate that's regulated – but in how you say it."

Welch recommends that brands employ a verbal communication expert who understands who their audience is and what the brand is about, and can find a way of connecting the correct tone to that audience.

However, as with logos and color, less can be more, so airlines shouldn't feel the need to fill flights with their newfound, differentiated verbal product. Those

Branding suppliers

Even with so much consolidation in the aircraft interiors market, there is a wide range of suppliers to choose from for anything from seating to IFE. How should suppliers make their brand stand out? With cabin hardware generally being expensive, the key is that customers need to have faith that it is good quality and that it will last, according to Edge.

"In a big, very competitive market, the way to stand out, the thing to sell your brand on, without a doubt, is supreme product quality," states Edge.

"Creating something iconic could also help," he adds, giving the example of classic furniture designs such as Panton and Eames chairs. With such iconic designs, the seat models are brands in their own right, with the actual manufacturer's brand playing a secondary role. There's a challenge for aircraft seat designers: create a seat so iconic that all airlines will desire it and passengers will actively seek it.





PEOPLE & PRODUCT

Interbrand's Vicky Leavitt flies every week and notes more lows than highs in her travel experiences. The problem in her view is that airline brands can become fixated on one thing, be it an onboard product or lounges. "That isn't the be all and end all that's going to solve things for you," she says. "In some instances, the lows are because you're not even meeting the basic expectations. It's more the overall experience and how it feels, because a lot of it is down to the brand attitude and the service, which of course is projected by the staff."

She gives the example of an airline that had opened a new base, complete with opulent lounges. However, that investment in differentiated product was diminished when she found the lounge staff inattentive, even to top customers. "That is a huge part of a brand experience, and that's not okay. No amount of 'Put the logo here' or 'Put the brand color there' is going to fix that."

"Similarly, airlines are now talking about their new onboard wi-fi systems. Yes, but you're behind the curve. That isn't a differentiated offer."



ABOVE: ALL AIRLINES SHOULD HAVE ONBOARD PRODUCT SO GOOD THAT PEOPLE WILL WANT TO KEEP IT

BELOW: FINNAIR FELT MARIMEKKO'S DESIGNS COMPLEMENT ITS BRAND

BELOW LEFT: LANDOR'S ANDREW WELCH WANTS TO HEAR THE BRAND, NOT A SCRIPT

words will become less charming and more annoying if passengers' enjoyment of movies, work or sleep is being frequently interrupted.

"Respect the personal space of the people that are paying a lot of money for your flight. If you do speak, entertain them, tell them something they don't know in a manner that is approachable and human," Welch urges.

"I would like somebody to break the script and think of a different way to address passengers," says Welch. "If you gave this task to Elon Musk you can be damn sure you wouldn't get a script. The status quo needs to be challenged and recrafted for a customer that is becoming more discerning and deserves a little more intelligence and sensitivity, in the right language."

SENSES COMBINE

The beauty of addressing all these touchpoints is that they cost relatively little, and indeed in some cases could save money if they involve using less of a particular element. Applied wisely, they could attract that love and loyalty from flyers that can boost the bottom line, too.



"The status quo needs to be challenged and recrafted"





STRIKES

DISASTER

But some things are more important than money, and when all the senses are considered in the crafting of every part of the journey, that's when the magic happens for a brand.

As Edge says, "It's the personality that you buy into. It's the power of the brand. When everything comes together, when you get it right, passengers have a wonderful experience because they believe in the brand. When you believe in a brand, you're going to enjoy everything about it."

Leavitt leaves us with a final piece of good sense: "Airlines need to look at the total passenger journey – the highlights and the low points – and think about how they can really create an iconic brand experience and use every touchpoint. If they understand what the high points and low points are, and work on the key areas for differentiation, I think you could have very different airlines." ❁

"When you believe in a brand, you're going to enjoy everything about it"

The worst thing that can happen to an airline brand is a crash. But if the unthinkable does happen, how it reacts is critical. A rebrand is tempting, to leave a tarnished image behind. For example, ValuJet disappeared after its crash in 1996, to re-emerge as AirTran following a merger with Airways Corp. Germanwings rebranded to Eurowings shortly after Flight 9525, a plan it already had in place before the incident, but the timing attracted some criticism. All eyes are now on Malaysia Airlines – should it rebrand and start afresh?

We asked Steve Edge his opinion on what an airline should do following a brand damaging incident. "I don't think a rebrand is wise," he says. "You have to put your hands up. You have to be honest. You have to take it on the chin, find out the reason why something bad happened, and then make sure that you learn from it and get it right."

"You have to be very careful in changing the brand. A lot of people will find it offensive, thinking the

airline had a crash and just started up again under a new name, which actually damages the brand even more. When word gets out that could be very, very bad for the new company," he warns.

The problem is that such a move is perceived as being intended to deceive the public. "Starting again is not going to cut it in the world today, especially with something as important as a crash. Once somebody finds out, with social media everybody will know. You have to tell the story truthfully to really carry on building that brand. It's about believing in the brand and being truthful. People buy into the truth, because it's authentic. People are looking for authenticity in brands. Definitely, without doubt, do not change the brand – but do make it better."

A prime example is Korean Air, which wrote off some 16 aircraft during the 1970s and 1990s. However, during a brand and corporate structure refresh, the airline kept its name – and is now posting record profits.



SPITFIRE SPIRIT

Can you compare reclining in an A380 to sitting in a Spitfire? In terms of brand experience, of course you can.

"You climb into the Spitfire and everything's stripped back bare and it probably smells moldy, but without that it wouldn't be a Spitfire," says Steve Edge. "A Spitfire is a Spitfire because it gives you that total experience. If it was anything other than that, it wouldn't be a Spitfire."

"Whether you're flying in the Spitfire or flying with an airline, you want an experience that gives you that hit of why you're with them. This means everything plays its part. For example, the uniform needs to look crisp and smart because you want it to show that you can trust that the crew know what they're doing. It's all about the subconscious messages that tell you you're with the right airline."

LEFT: A SPITFIRE ISN'T A GREAT COMFORT BENCHMARK, BUT IT IS AN EXCELLENT BRANDING BENCHMARK.