

Airline companies as nation branding ambassadors

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If there is a business market in which competing companies have traditionally been linked to their country of origin in an intrinsic, almost organic sense, that would be the airline sector.

For historical reasons, the national origin has often been very explicit in national carriers. In the past, most airline companies were created by the State and consequently distilled a sense of national pride.

In fact, for many years no nation could graduate as a ‘real’ country unless it had its own national carrier. For instance, the recently self-declared state of Kosovo hasn’t secured its independence yet, but it has already founded its own, brand new national carrier, Kosova Airlines.

Today, however, most of the new carriers are private-held companies, and many of them deliberately lack a specific national identity. They have been designed to be global brands from the start off, and most of them are, exceptions aside, country-neutral, at least in a significant portion of their brand identity.

But the old, veteran State-funded companies are still surfing the skies, making us recall the times when a bigger aircraft told a story of a bigger economic muscle of its country of origin. Because airline fleets were not only a series of planes – they had a national meaning and showcased a country’s industrial strength.

So, in the early times, national carriers were, no doubt, representatives of their country of origin. Lufthansa’s impressive aircrafts said something about Germany’s engineering might, while SAS told the story of the Scandinavian sense of uncomplexed Nordic togetherness, cooperativeness and cool practicality.

Still today, nationally-branded airline companies have a role as nation branding ambassadors. Just think about Singapore Airlines, the awarded company that speaks for Singapore and represents in an obvious manner the aimed welcoming and exquisite human touch of the country. This carrier has risen to the status of an admired service brand internationally, and it tells a story about the character of Singaporeans. Or think about Fly Emirates – this carrier has probably made more for the United Arab Emirates than any advertising campaign.

So intertwined are airline companies and nation brands, that most carriers continue to display the country’s national flag on the aircrafts. Except for airline companies hailing from the United States (which is the only country in which the official flag carrier tradition is illegal because of strict antitrust laws), most aircrafts can rightly be seen as a vehicle for nation branding.

The British Airways fiasco

So important is the country of origin when it comes to airline brands, that UK national carrier British Airways had to put the Union Jack flag back to the tail-fin of its aircrafts after

a company's unfortunate move to distance itself from the negative connotations of Britain's imperialistic past led British Airways to face harsh criticism.

In an attempt to upgrade from 'just' a national carrier to a truly global brand, the UK carrier removed in 1997 all traits of Britishness: it replaced the Union Jack with internationally-minded designs, it changed its name to BA and dropped all visible references to Britain.

Many people in Britain saw this move as unpatriotic and the new identity was perceived to be a slight against 'Britishness', causing a political storm in the country¹.

Ironically, complaints came not only from sensitive patriotic Britons, but from non-Britons too. Customers and partners outside Britain also disliked BA's new 'international' re-positioning and complained that they wanted Britain's flagship airline to look more British. To make things worse for the disgraced company, the astute Richard Branson, boss of the company's arch-rival Virgin Atlantic, was quick to paint Union Jacks on his aircrafts and adopted the former British Airways slogan 'Fly the Flag'.

As Simon Anholt rightly writes in his 'Competitive Identity' book², *"in their rush to appear global, BA overlooked the crucial point that a global brand isn't a brand which comes from nowhere: in many of the most successful cases, it is a brand which may be sold everywhere, but comes from somewhere quite definite. British Airways would never have become the world's favourite airline if it hadn't been, first and foremost, British Airways: the age-old popular perception of "brand Britain" (methodical, punctual, predictable, efficient, traditional, heritage-obsessed, class-ridden, status-driven, ceremonious, perhaps a bit boring) makes Britain the ultimate, the supremely logical country of origin for any brand in the business of air travel, hospitality and tourism. It's easy to be wise after the event, but by cutting off its connection with its homebrand, British Airways simply pulled the plug on its principal brand equity. In 2001 the airline's new chief executive, Rod Eddington, an Australian, ordered the Union Jacks to be painted back on the planes. It often takes the objective viewpoint of an outsider to understand the essence of a nation's image."*

Nationally un-branded airlines

While the strong and intimate relationship between a national carrier and its country of origin can't be denied, it's also true that there are exceptions too. This kind of exceptions occur when the carrier's name, brand colours or logo have no obvious visual relationship with the country it hails from.

For instance, no one could guess that TAM Airlines is Brazil's largest carrier, that LAN is the principal Chilean airline, that Avianca aircrafts come from Colombia or Conviasa from

Venezuela. In Europe, it's a bit hard to guess that airline brand Olympic Air comes from Greece, JAT from Serbia or Adria Airways from Slovenia.

Except for Brazil, the lack of an obvious relationship between the carrier and the nation, however, has little effect on these countries as these small-sized nations usually have modest fleets and the potential nation branding effect they miss is also small thereafter.

But there is one country located on Europe's Northern coast that hasn't reaped the benefits of having a truly leading airline brand. That country is the Netherlands. Because everybody knows that British Airways comes from Britain, Air France from France, former Swissair from Switzerland and even the obscurely-named Lufthansa (even if it's only because the name sounds so similar to the more famous Luftwaffe) from Germany, but how many people knows KLM is actually Dutch?

I've pinpointed the Netherlands' visual brand image inconsistencies on other occasions³, and KLM is yet another example of this fragmented, uncohesive country brand. The Dutch carrier's look and feel has nothing Dutch in it – it does not have the colors of the flag, let alone the Netherlands' trademark orange, which is almost a Dutch-proprietary color and the color that represents the country best. The KLM name is supposed to stand for "Royal Dutch Airlines", but deducing that is just too much to ask for. It's completely undecipherable to the ignorant's eyes. Additionally, there is no "D" letter as a clue for Dutch, no "N" letter as a clue for Netherlands, no "H" as a clue for Holland, nor anything painted orange. Absolutely no clue to let people know that great airline they appreciate and respect is actually a Dutch company.

It's a pity that Holland does not make more of one company that could be the skies' equivalent to ING. KLM is the oldest airline in the world still operating under its original name and one of the most awarded ones, but its country of origin is downplayed to almost zero, so the Netherlands get no brand equity back at all.

Another country with some remarkable inconsistencies regarding its nation brand visuals is Australia, an issue that I have mentioned on www.Nation-Branding.info before too. Australia's national carrier is called Qantas and it's the world's second oldest airline and is consistently considered to be among the top-ten best airlines in the world, but while Australia's flag is red, white and blue and Aussies run around in green and gold, Qantas goes its own direction ignoring both of these color sets. As in the KLM case, the Qantas name has no evident link to its country of origin in its name, but at least the Austral airline has a kangaroo on a red background on its logo to give a clue about its nationality.

In both cases, these two countries would need their national airlines to have a more cohesive "national" look to enhance image, raise awareness, sharpen impact and strengthen

mindshare – and it's certainly a pity they let pass the wonderful nation branding opportunity that national carriers are.

Using national carriers to brand the nation

On the opposite corner of the ring, Singapore uses Singapore Airlines as a representative of its national culture, values and character. As mentioned above, Singapore as a country brand leverages on the fact that its national carrier has built up a strong brand in terms of service excellence to nurture, by natural extension, the country's image as one of service excellence.

In a very similar way, Germany and Lufthansa feed each other with a mutually supportive, bi-directional flow of brand equity around efficiency, reliability and uncompromised seriousness, just like Britain and British Airways exchange with each other their reputation of being the undisputable champions of punctuality and heritage.

Just like Singapore, Germany or Britain, countries can use their national carrier to tell a story about them too. But make no mistake: for many countries, it would be an error to use their flag carriers to compete against the exquisite service of the Singaporean, the efficiency of the German or the punctuality of the British – that's mostly a lost war.

However unjust it may be, no matter how punctual the national carrier of the Dominican Republic could reach to be and prove it with actual figures, it will not surpass the perceived punctuality of British Airways in dozens of years. That's the nature of stereotypes: people stick to them and they affect the way products and services coming from one specific country are perceived. And it takes years to change them.

On the contrary, countries should be more creative and inventive and devise new ways to use their national carriers to speak about themselves, to say something about their countries. Smart countries use these companies which, as seen above, most of them are intrinsically linked to their country of origin, as vehicles to get their message reach the world.

A living example

A good example of how a country could use an airline company is Kulula, a privately-held South African carrier. Kulula (a word meaning "easily" in the Zulu language) was the first low cost carrier in South Africa, starting operations in 2001. Since the beginning, Kulula has made a name for itself with its young, fresh, fun and anti-establishment brand identity. Its advertisements are quirky, focusing on humor and fun, showcasing real people, with whom their customers can relate to. Recently they painted their aircrafts in an absolutely brilliant way, with large white signals such as "Co-captain", "Black box (actually orange)", "Secret agent code" on a fully-covered green

background. It's worth watching the pictures, which are available on the Internet.

Kulula is casted as the most fun airline in the world and, either by design or by default, it says something very powerful about the nation it hails from.

But the best substantiating evidence of it is this customer's testimonial⁴, which reflects an impeccable brand experience execution at 35,000 feet:

"The highlight of any flight has to be the announcements from the crew; when landing in Port Elizabeth after a short hop from Cape Town, a booming voice came onto the PA system, saying "welcome to Zimbabwe!", which had everyone in the cabin briefly looking a bit surprised before all bursting into laughter.

On the return hop to Cape Town, a hard bounce on the runway which turned into a go-around resulted in the first officer apologising over the PA, and asking if any of the passengers wanted to have a go instead.

And even the pre-flight safety announcement on another hop to PE whereby passengers were told that in the event of cabin depressurisation, masks would drop from the compartments above – to use the masks, let go of the passenger next to you, stop screaming and pull the mask over your face".

Now that sounds like a truly fun airline, isn't it? What do you think about South Africans now? You probably won't change your preconceptions overnight, but now you have the seed of a new brand image for South Africa in your brain. If you continue to be impacted by consistent, aligned images, the image you have of South Africa will change in that direction.

If we imagine that Kulula is South Africa's State-owned airline company, South Africa could use its carrier to say something about itself and its population. That they are a humane, tieless, colorful, humorous, festive people. And that their country is welcoming, unrigid, vibrant, colourful and great to have fun there. That's just an example of how a country can use an airline company to shift perceptions – and that's nation branding in its purest essence.

Notes and References

¹ Keith Dinnie, *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice* (Elsevier, 2008), 89

² Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 93

³ Andreas Markessinis, *Branding the Netherlands* (2008)

⁴ Shashank Nigam, *Kulula Airlines – the most fun airline brand in the world?* (2010)