



If You Can't Beat Them, Don't Necessarily Join Them

Let's be honest: it's hard to make a distinction between one airline and another. Sure, one might boast that they offer the finest organic food, and another might argue that their fares are the cheapest around. Attempting to differentiate airline Brands seems pointless and unproductive – they all do the same thing: they get you from Point A to Point B. And if the airline can't deliver on this sole task, well, we have a much larger problem, don't we?

What, then, can an airline Brand do to distinguish itself from other carriers? Delta is attempting to soar ahead of the crowd by introducing its Simplifares, explaining that Delta and the new fares are “changing everything.” But wait a minute – American Airlines has announced its new Domestic Fares, which promise “more access to great low fares.” It's likely that other airlines will quickly follow suit and introduce new ways to lure consumers to their airlines. It's a vicious cycle where no airline Brand can become victorious.

So, amid a rocky economy, an increased fear in air travel, and a surge of low-cost airlines such as Jet Blue and Southwest, many predominant airline carriers have joined forces to create what have been appropriately called alliances. When a solitary airline's name and Brand are no longer enough to attract consumers' devotion, the Brands move to a concept of a superbrand – a Brand name that allows supposed strength, leverage, and more awareness in the market. But are these superbrands really living up to their super status?

Take the three relatively new airline alliances: SkyTeam, Star, and oneworld. They believe that, by creating partnerships for strong alliances, they not only offer passengers convenience, but they afford the alliance members increased loyalty.

The SkyTeam, for example, which was launched in 2000 and includes such airlines as Delta, Air France, and Continental, allows its 341 million annual passengers the ability to choose from a wide range of flights and times. What's more, according to a SkyTeam representative, “passengers will be able to accrue and redeem frequent flyer miles interchangeably on any of the nine member airlines.” Not such a shabby deal for travelers.

Or is it? Could these superbrands actually increase consumer confusion and decrease consumer loyalty?

For starters, consumers are not nearly as aware of the alliances as they should be for the alliances' success. It was Forrester Research travel analyst Harry Harteveltd who stated in 2001 that “airlines have to rethink the real estate on the plane. The first major network airline that gets this will find itself swamped with demand from business travelers.” The alliances have numerous opportunities to sell themselves on their aircrafts and elsewhere and to reach out to prospective loyal fliers.

But think about it. When was the last time you saw an advertisement for one of the three alliances? When was the last time a flight attendant explained the benefits of flying other alliance airlines? Rather, the alliance members slap a SkyTeam or oneworld bumper sticker on their aircraft, make a few lousy attempts to regurgitate the alliance name in flight, and call it a day. Missed opportunities to attract consumers? Most definitely.

Adding to consumer confusion is the idea of Code Share flights. Let's say you are flying from Atlanta to Boston on Delta flight 1164. You aren't only flying Flight 1164, however; you are also flying Continental Flight 1424. And it gets better. You aren't just flying these two flights, but you are also flying AeroMexico flight 650. Why? Because the flight is “co-operated” by Delta's other SkyTeam alliance members in order to grant more Brand visibility. But it's a Delta plane and a Delta ticket, so where does Continental fit into the picture? And you're flying domestically, so why is AeroMexico part of the flying experience? Confusing? Absolutely.

And there's more confusion and missed opportunities to clearly explain the alliances and their benefits to the consumer. Try going to any of the three alliance websites to find a central contact number, postal address, or e-mail address. You won't find any. Consumers' experiences with the superbrand fail before they even set foot in an airport, and, therefore, loyalty and dissatisfaction turn the alliance concept sour. These superbrands are failing to actively attract consumers; they look great on paper, but in action, they just don't deliver.

So what are the alliances to do? First, they must break down the complex concept of an alliance and clearly explain what it means for consumers. If there is an opportunity to strengthen the alliance name, take it; the consumer experience with the alliance Brand must be improved. This includes easily accessible contact information and more alliance presence in airports. There's never been a Star or SkyTeam attendant answering a flyer's questions, but it sure would be a nice start. And, finally, the consumer must benefit from the alliance. Will the formed bonds really mean more ease for flyers, or does it really indicated increased sales and monopolistic control by airlines?

Perhaps, rather than constantly trying to defeat the other airlines in an industry where very little differentiates one Brand from another, airlines should strengthen their current consumer base. Send personalized e-mails and letters to valued flyers, offer exclusive and clear incentives for being a “frequent flyer.” Make the Brand-consumer relationship so strong that, if a consumer flies an airline other than their usual one, they feel a disconnect and apologetic for not remaining loyal to their beloved airline. Make the relationship one of love. Make every consumer feel like First Class.

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