

ANOTHER BRAND BITES THE DUST

Why high-potential brands may never make it to 'GREAT'!

By Suzanne Tulien, Principal & Co-Founder

I am writing this with sad news. Another one of my newly experienced, 'fav' brands I was so excited about has fallen from grace. Oh, and it soooooo didn't have to be this way!!!

A few articles ago I wrote about a new up and coming brand in the airline industry, and how excited I was about their model, the overall experience, and it's savvy potential in a decaying airline service business. They were definitely creating their own 'Blue Ocean' (*re: Blue Ocean Strategy, by W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne*) in the airline industry marketplace.

And then,...we flew them again (optimal word; AGAIN).

With a fairly limited flight schedule, I was so excited that this regional airline flew to the destination we were planning for my husband's birthday week (San Diego). A reasonably priced, non-stop, fun, easy flight featuring rare amenities like XM Radio, a meal AND snacks, \$3 wine and \$1 beers, not to mention a 'farewell' mint candy, a smile and an audible 'thank you' delivered by the flight crew as you step off the plane.

I told all my friends. I touted the brand in my workshops while covering the importance of creating powerful differentiators, and I wrote about my experience flying them. It's not so much the embarrassment for 'jumping the gun' and actually believing they were different and telling 'the world', but the pain of realizing it was only a or a 'one-off' experience and then KNOWING that it didn't have to go there!

In brief, here's what happened.

There were three in our travel party. As we were getting settled in our seats (two on the right, one on the left with an aisle in between), our stewardess interrupted the hum of passengers settling in by announcing on the absurdly loud intercom that we will not be receiving a meal as this city was not a 'catering destination,' in her short, sassy, memorized shtick. I was confused as we were served a meal and snacks the last time we flew from this same city just a few months ago. Disappointment #1.



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Our travel buddy neglected to grab a set of individually packaged headphones from a wicker basket at the ticket counter (for listening to the onboard XM Radio) and politely asked the stewardess for an extra pair. She abruptly replied, 'you were supposed to get yours before you boarded the plane, I doubt I have any onboard for you,' as she whizzed by slamming the overhead bins closed. We started to feel like elementary school children being scolded by the bus driver. Disappointment #2.

Once airborne and beyond 10,000 feet, our stewardess began her beverage service. We were close to the front of the plane and one of the first to be served. As she pushed the cart down the aisle and asked us our beverage preference, we noticed that her short, sassy comments were not few and far between for her passengers. When she approached our buddy and asked for his order, this is what our friend recounted, *'I was dozing lightly and had my ear phones in and the 'flight attendant' asked if I wanted something to drink. I had a little trouble pulling out the head phones (3 seconds) and when I did she said 'I'm not your wife, I can't read your mind.'* She didn't yell at me but delivered a tone to show cue me that she was frustrated with my delay in responding...Yikes! Did that really happen? Thank goodness our friend was mildly tempered and held back his reaction to the comment. Disappointment #3.

Disappointment #4 - A 'no go' on the candy mint farewell treat. A big deal? In the scheme of things, no, but when it comes to creating a memorable brand experience that caters to small but meaningful emotional connections, then I would argue that YES, it is a big deal. As Americans, we are lucky to have the array of choices that we do in everything we seek to purchase. It is the brand's job to carve out a unique position in our minds and emotions to the point of basing our buying decisions on these emotional connections.

In a the most recent annual survey (2007 Brand Marketers Report by Interbrand) on brands and branding by experts from top global brands, what was cited as the most critical aspect of successful branding? *Consistency!* Hands down! At 36%! Note that 'Marketing and Advertising' rated at less than 1% (.8%), and 'Innovation' rated only 18.2%.

This article is really about missed opportunity, inconsistency, and cognitive dissonance of the brand. This airline has a great concept, super differentiating behaviors, and much appreciated amenities that no longer permeate the airline industry; all lost in a single experience – a moment in time forever embedded in the minds of the customers. The customer question becomes, 'How do I trust my experience with this brand? What will I receive next time? When prices and schedules are the same (a 'commodity'), which brand do I choose?'

Questions for your brand are:

- 1) What are the true costs of inconsistencies in our brand's behaviors?
- 2) Do we truly know what our brand represents? Our Style or Values?



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- 3) Do our employees understand, live and embody the brand values?
- 4) What investment do we make in our people to assure the brand is articulated correctly and consistently to our market?
- 5) What systems and processes can we put in place to assure proper cognitive resonance and affirmation of the brand with our customers?

Another very thought-provoking statistic that helps to justify the case I am making:

A mere 5% increase in customer RETENTION can translate into 25-95% toward your BOTTOM LINE profits.

Source: Fred Reichheld, Author of Loyalty Rules And The Loyalty Effect, Fellow – Bain & Company, and Founder of Bain's Loyalty Practice

Brands with consciousness become mega-brands. Brand consciousness consists of being fully aware of who and what the brand stands for; not just today, or the first 6 months of business, but everyday, in every behavior, through every process. It starts internally with defining the brand's DNA, integrating it into the culture, systems and processes, and leadership. It's not rocket science, just tenacity, due diligence, and a passion for the brand.

So, will I fly this brand again? Probably. But I won't be seeking it out, ranting and raving about it or using it as an example of what powerful brands can do to differentiate themselves. No, as of this moment, they have unfortunately been converted into a commodity (in my perception), lumped into a blur with every other airline in my mind. Another promising idea that didn't consistently fly...sadly, another one bites the dust.

Our advice? *Get brand-conscious and don't let your brand go there!*



P.S. Just got the news via email that as of September 2, 2008 – the airline referenced in this article is officially pulling out of our home town hub – citing 'fuel prices and other market conditions'. Suzanne Tulien is Principal and Co-Founder of the Brand Ascension Group, LLC. She is brand consultant, award-winning graphic designer, a certified trainer and certified in Accelerated Learning Methodologies. She is author of [The 6 Myths of Branding](#), and co-author of [Megapreneur](#). She regularly writes article on branding for entrepreneurs.

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