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The recent re-branding of Air New Zealand: What does it say about a New Zealand ‘style of labour’?

Introduction

Several research studies have been conducted on the airline industry demonstrating the gendered and sexualised labour nature of cabin crew work. Hochschild’s (1983) classic study showed how cabin crew are selected and managed to display the ‘correct’ emotions at work. Many studies have followed up Hochschild’s work, and recent research attention has turned towards understanding emotional labour in the light of the aesthetic qualities that are also being promoted and sold in the service exchange (Witz et al., 2003).

Fierce competitiveness in the airline industry, and the discomfort and increasing perceived risk involved in air travel (Gottdiener, 2001) has ratcheted up the commodity status of flight attendant labour (Shalla, 2002; Shalla, 2004; Spiess & Waring, 2005). In other words, it seems increasingly imperative that the emotional, aesthetic and sexualised labour of flight attendants provides value to the experience of flight service. Mobilising gender, including sexual ‘availability’, is well recognised as being part of the value that service provides in different contexts, for example hospitality (Hall, 1993), and also as historically constructed in flight attendant work (Handy,
2002), where the bodies and appearances of cabin crew have historically been strictly managed to achieve an aesthetic pre-requisite.

The remainder of this abstract presents a brief discussion of the content of the presentation, which will be supplemented by recent publicly available images of Air New Zealand’s images.

**Air New Zealand: A discussion of style**

The basis of Air NZ’s brand strategy is to differentiate their service from competitors. Air NZ’s General Marketing Manager articulates this thinking:

> It’s all about evoking an emotional response in the passenger — one aimed at making them develop an attachment to your brand. It’s about making them want to travel with you to your place instead of with those other blokes. (Steve Bayliss, as cited in Daniels, 2006)

A ‘Pacific feel’, which is the basis of their brand differentiation, is designed throughout Air NZ offerings: the level of their commitment to design reveals the importance of the brand (and the employees that represent it).

The brand initiative extended to the ways that employee’s customer service style represents the brand. Steve Bayliss, Air NZ’s Senior Marketing Manager and spokesperson for the branding initiative, has said:

> It’s a design challenge. The way in which we interact with our consumers can be random, it will always be a reflection of our personal style, but ultimately needs to be a reflection of our branded style. (Daniels, 2006, p. 56).
The personality of Air NZ cabin crew was also re-branded and required the following:

A warm, natural and friendly personality with a strong sense of responsibility is essential. Flight Attendants must be able to deliver the service our customers value in a uniquely Pacific way… (emphasis added, 2006b)

In order to achieve this unique Pacific feel, Air NZ, ironically, provides a script that is not a script. Their customer service interaction has to reflect the ‘New Zealand brand’ of friendliness and lack of formality:

Instead of laying down strict guidelines about greeting passengers coming on board the plane, staff will be encouraged to give a traditional warm Kiwi welcome. Bring this to life from a design perspective will be achieved through storytelling. “If I gave you a ‘three-step’ approach to the New Zealand welcome, then that’s as un-New Zealand as you could possibly be. I would rather tell you about the characteristics that people from around the world truly value in their New Zealand experience”, Bayliss says. “We are not going to script it for anyone. Because that is alien to who we are as New Zealanders”. Passengers don’t have to step up to a formal desk and get permission to enter. Instead they are welcomed by staff like you would greet a friend arriving at the family bach. (p. 56)

Uniforms are a major way of providing a strong standardised visual statement to the customer about the unique service. A description of the Air NZ uniform for cabin crew which was launched in 2005 goes as follows:
“The new Air NZ uniforms are designed to carry the colours of the New Zealand landscape across the globe. Teal, greenstone and schist are the cornerstone colours, but the palette is softer than the airline's former favoured shades. Signature pieces - the ones that will be visible in any international airport - are a muted teal merino wrap, hats and a paua design scarf for women. Men will wear a long-sleeved shirt in mist or stone with a distinctive front panel featuring a Maori design. The overtly Kiwi connection continues with koru-inspired curves on jacket panels, pockets and sleeves and paua inserts on belts. The embroidered Maori design on the signature pieces is by well-known Maori artist Derek Lardelli, a former Arts Laureate who also recently helped compose the All Blacks' new haka”. (2005b)

Air NZ Chief Executive, Rob Fyfe, described the new brand roll-out as an ‘extreme make-over”, saying, “For the staff it is a huge event. They wear their uniform all day every day, it is like a second skin, so there is very much a sense of going in for an extreme makeover”.

Regarding the Air NZ uniforms, it is important to note that ‘style’ is a contested concept. Zambesi, a N.Z. fashion house, designed the uniforms. This association with a New Zealand fashion designer was part of a marketing initiative: Air NZ announced who was to design the uniforms, and then there was a series of media announcements as the new uniforms were unveiled, including a ‘fashion show’ to model the ‘new look’ (e.g. 2004, 2005e).

But as soon as the uniform appeared, it drew criticism for being ‘unbecoming to larger women’ (Kiong, 2005), and even as late as September 2006 the uniform was drawing criticism from the public and the media (Leigh,
In early September, the Sunday Star-Times, New Zealand’s weekend newspaper with the largest circulation, featured an article claiming there had been a “groundswell of complaints” about the uniform from cabin crew about it being “uncomfortable, poorly fitting, unflattering to larger women, and impractical” (p. 3). Zambessi was criticised for not understanding the functional requirements of the uniform. One fashion editor claimed:

The company’s signature style had always been layered looks “very much reliant on fabrics”. “Structural design is not what they do … A uniform by value has to be perfunctionary fabric and not layered. Zambesi’s handwriting is in conflict with what a uniform is.

The newspaper invited people to email them with responses to the question “What do you think of Air NZ’s uniforms?”, and over the following week a number of letters were printed in the paper criticising the uniform. The following Sunday Steve Bayliss, the General Marketing Manager for Air NZ, wrote a reply from Air NZ in the same paper saying, “Air NZ is very disappointed by the Sunday Star-Times article on Air NZ’s uniform that ran last week. The article was a beat up and lacked integrity of any kind…” (2006f, p. 7). The uniform was defended, and Mr. Bayliss stressed that the uniform was continuously being updated and improved in line with suggestions from staff.

The uniform also drew criticism when it was discovered that it was being manufactured in China (Bergh, 2006). There was a perceived credibility gap between the brand (that emphasises ‘New Zealandness’), and the fact it was
not ‘Made in New Zealand’. This drew attention to the fabricated nature of the ‘identity’ product.

Despite these criticisms, Air NZ appears to be committed to an association with the N.Z. creative sector, particularly through close ties to fashion. Air NZ nurtures links with the NZ fashion industry, particularly through NZ Fashion Week to which they have naming rights, and the increasingly popular World of WearableArt Awards (WOW).

Air NZ, WOW and Air New Zealand Fashion Week have a close association, the aim being to showcase New Zealand to the world (e.g. Bates), through the global travel industry. The events provide an opportunity for Air NZ to extend brand awareness and associate themselves with the sexy creative sector.

The media images that have accompanied this alliance between fashion and air travel, an alliance that has a long history (Handy, 2002), has featured some revealing images that have been widely promulgated in marketing campaigns. For instance, a recent entry into the WOW involved old Air NZ seat covers being remodelled into an evening dress. Another full-page advertisement features a supernaturally tall young woman of Polynesian descent, waking down a gangway to a plane. She is wearing a hat shaped like the tail of a plane, featuring a stylised Air NZ koru. Draping from half way down her bare back, and next to her arm encased in an elbow-length glove, is a long bride-like train which falls down from her body and along the floor. At its furthest end, the train has a picture of a plane on it, with the plane about to mount the runway. A pointed arrow helps the eye follow up the length of her
body, keeping it on the tarmac, and red stop lights appear just below the shoulder-blades of the young, very attractive, slim, female model.

Air NZ’s 2006 Report to stakeholders (2006a, p. 16—17) also features a WOW entry: a young, slim, female model is pictured in a feature garden – the Pure New Zealand Garden - at the Chelsea Flower Show. The model is clothed as a ‘Bird of the Sea’ which “reflects the colours of New Zealand’s breath-taking scenery and highlights our creative spirit as a nation” (p. 16). On the next page a Karen Walker style is worn by a young fashion model centred in the middle of a turbine engine of an Air NZ aircraft.

Although the airline industry does not overtly promote images of flight attendants as gendered and sexualised, the practices are now more subtle and symbolic. As the Illustrations I will show in my presentation will hopefully illustrate, there is a strong association between the sexualised images of fashion models with the firm, subtle connections made to the traditional sexualised stereotype of the flight attendant, and a branding that promulgates a ‘New Zealand style’. These issues will be discussed and participants in the session will be invited to suggest ways to frame the paper in its development.
References


Further case references available in full paper