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THE PITCH: Airline Ads Offer Almost Everything But Safety

By Brian Steinberg and Cathleen Egan

NEW YORK -- Are these the friendly skies?

You might not know it based on a batch of post-attack ads from the nation's major airlines attempting to appeal to consumers' wallets rather than their peace of mind.

Now departing: Airline talk about comfort and first-class amenities. Now arriving: No-frills ads that call on consumers to "get up and go" or "get back to business." Rarely do any of the major fliers address the issue on every would-be traveler's mind - safety.

"Airlines have really been afraid to bring up the issue. It's a jinx," says Jenni Cooper of BrandJuice, a Denver branding consultancy. "They think, 'If we talk about it, we're almost asking for problems.'"

One notable exception is Continental Airlines Inc. (CAL), whose new advertising campaign pledges that employees will "work as hard as we can," so that, among other things, travelers can fly "with the knowledge that your safety is and always has been our number one priority."

An airline using the "S-word"? That's not easy to do in these troubled times, suggests Elizabeth Diamond, director of Continental's brand marketing. "Obviously, things are different, but a lot of the security - it's unclear whether it's going to be our responsibility or the government's responsibility, so it's hard to say too much about it."

Nonetheless, Continental print ads currently running in major newspapers communicate that "Times have changed. Our commitment hasn't." Continental also returns to the airwaves next week with TV ads that stress "Your safety has always been our number one priority" and "Don't fly us because of our standards. Fly us because of yours."

For most other airlines, however, it's apparently easier to simply avoid the safety issue altogether,

American Trans Air Inc. (AMTR), for example, has urged consumers in recent weeks to "Get Up & Go," while offering a range of reduced fares (Kids fly from New York's LaGuardia to Seattle, for example, for \$69 one way). UAL Corp.'s (UAL) United Airlines recently started running a TV spot designed by Publicis Groupe SA's (PUB) Fallon agency featuring employees talking about going back to work after Sept. 11. Since the ad began running, UAL has indicated it may be on the verge of bankruptcy, which could undermine the effort altogether.

Recent Southwest Airlines Co. (LUV) ads sport a patriotic theme. Air Jamaica offers "Freedom Fares." Print ads from AMR Corp.'s (AMR) American Airlines tell us in large type that "American's Getting Back To Business." In smaller letters: a commitment to "your safety and comfort" and a reminder that "we've never been more proud to bear the name American."

Now that airlines are starting to boast about reinforced cockpit doors, how about a slogan saying, "We've never been more proud to insist on better hiring standards for the people who screen your luggage?"

Not anytime soon. "The idea of talking about safety is so anathema to them," says David Stempler, president of the Air Travelers Association in Washington, D.C.

Security Won't Soothe

Advertisers believe hyping security would make fliers more nervous, not less. "I begin to feel a little suspicious if I can hear the airlines say they are more secure than ever," says Richard Coad, an executive creative director at Publicis Chicago who advises American Trans Air.

As for the airlines themselves, they are saying little. An AMR spokesman declined to comment on future advertising plans, and a UAL spokeswoman could not be reached for comment. Delta Air Lines (DAL) could not be reached for comment. Two airlines that have not established a major marketing presence since Sept. 11, US Airways Group (U) and Northwest Airlines Corp. (NWAC), could not be reached for comment on their future plans.

For now, expect less attention to legroom and more focus on elements that get keisters in the seats: Reasonable, attractive fares.

"You are not going to see as much 'amenity-type' advertising: How comfortable is my plane? How new is my plane?" says Andrew Swank, a senior vice-president at Envoy Communications Group's (ECGI) Hampfel/Stefanides, a New York agency that advises Aer Lingus Group PLC (U.AER). "You will see the 'direct-benefit' consumer relations: What is my fare? Am I going to be on time? What schedule do I have?"

In the end, the airlines might want a whole new public face - a good thing, some say, for an industry that historically hasn't launched an overwhelming number of memorable marketing efforts. "The industry is experimenting, which is understandable given that, frankly, we don't know what the right approach is," says Bernd Schmitt, who heads Columbia University's Center on Global Brand Leadership.

One thing is certain, he says: The current "back to business" approach won't last. "It's not clear what that means," he says. "It could mean getting back to business in the new context and doing videoconferencing" rather than taking to the air. Maybe the airlines should borrow a page from AT&T (T), creator of the famous phrase "Reach Out And Touch Someone." Tell consumers that face-to-face contact during business deals and family occasions beats the heck out of talking over a flat screen.

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 24, 2001

Airlines Launch New Ad Campaigns Using Emotion to Restore Confidence

By Melanie Trottman, Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

More of the nation's airlines are launching advertising campaigns using raw emotion rather than sunny beaches to connect with customers and restore confidence in flying following the Sept. 11 terrorist hijackings.

Both UAL's United and Continental Airlines recently unveiled major ads, with United's featuring first-hand employee accounts and Continental's emphasizing safe and reliable service. AMR's American Airlines is expected to launch a new campaign today, encouraging people to spend time with family and loved ones for the holidays and beyond. Northwest said it will launch a new campaign next month aimed at business travelers.

Although it isn't an airline, Boeing hopes to boost an interest in flying with a new campaign later this month featuring a "nothing beats being there" message. The Chicago aerospace company will emphasize the right and freedom to fly, taking the proposed campaign to its airline customers this month for feedback.

Interpublic Group's Foote, Cone & Belding created Boeing's ads. Bcom3 Group's NW Ayer is responsible for Continental's advertising. Interpublic's Temerlin McClain, based in Irving, Texas, created the advertising for American Airlines. Interpublic's Carmichael Lynch does consumer ads for Northwest.

The moves follow those of Southwest Airlines, which was the first to boldly launch patriotic ads shortly after the attacks. Now on its third round of ads since Sept. 11, Southwest has received the most praise from marketing experts for its swift moves, which have helped it assume a category leadership role that will benefit its brand value long-term, ad executives say.

Southwest said it hopes its latest ads, which include sale fares, will motivate people because of price and emotion. The ads are "a bit more human and personal" than the previous ones, in keeping with the progressing mood of the country, says Joyce Rogge, senior vice president of marketing. Branding executives say the ads are clever because they sell the category of flying instead of just the airline itself. The ads feature messages such as, "You can't tickle a voice

mail, you can't e-mail a kiss. Some things are just better in person." Southwest's agency is Omnicom Group's GSD&M in Austin, Texas.

"It elevates it to a smart, emotional level of 'Oh, that's why we used to do this,'" says Claude Salzberger, president of FutureBrand, a New York branding-consulting firm owned by Interpublic.

United's campaign also uses emotion. Three 60-second television commercials feature employees giving personal accounts of events surrounding the airline since Sept. 11. In one, a customer-service agent talks about the outpouring of emotion on board a flight when the captain told passengers a New York fireman was on board with his wife headed for their honeymoon. Publicis Groupe's Fallon Worldwide in Minneapolis created the United campaign.

"It was a very quick and sincere way to express the feelings of our employees and the company," says Jerry Dow, United's director of world-wide marketing communications. Mr. Dow says United wanted to send a message of moving on while giving consumers a sense of comfort. Some employees in the ads express their confidence in flying United with their families.

"United is a really gutsy play because they're using their own employees as the ambassadors," says Don Pettit, president of New York branding agency Sterling Group. Experts agree the airline pulled it off and showed itself and its employees as human and empathetic.

Continental's new ads, which focus on the company's core values of providing safe, reliable, consistent service, were met with less enthusiasm. *"I think they're not being specific enough. To me it's a very bland message,"* says Jenni Cooper, lead consultant of BrandJuice Consulting in Denver. Other branding executives suggest that focusing on safety as a benefit is generic because all carriers are concerned about providing that.