

Jet ka Sahara

by *Sundar Sankaran**

Last year, in the course of the same week, I had two contrasting air travel experiences. Despite being a Jet frequent flier I chose Sahara, because Jet did not fly to Lucknow.

The experience started at the Sahara check-in counter, where a packet of sweets was offered to all fliers. I noticed that the counter staff was happy to offer more than one packet to kids who asked for it. There was none of the “only one packet per passenger” policy.

A unique event in the flight was “Bid ‘n’ Win,” an auction where passengers could bid for a range of products. Apart from the excitement of bidding and winning, there was a touching gesture. The auction proceeds would go to Sahara Welfare Foundation, a fund that takes care of 800 families of Kargil martyrs and the earthquake victims of Bhuj.

Next came the fortune cookie. Inside the cookie was a piece of paper that mentioned my free gift. I soon had a cricket-ball autographed by the Indian cricket captain, Saurav Ganguly. Incidentally, Saurav is a part of the “Sahara parivar”. The fortune cookie helped Sahara promote Saurav economically. And I was richer with a memento. A win-win transaction.

What is the corporate punch line of Sahara Airlines? *Emotionally yours.* If my experience is any indication, they are certainly living up to their punch line.

Air Sahara won the ‘Sapphire Award’ at Orlanda, USA in recognition of Outstanding Performance in In-Flight Entertainment category for its “Bid ‘n’ Win” programme. It also won the “Mercury Award”, the highest award in In-Flight innovation, quality and service at Cologne, Germany, co-presented by International In-flight Food Services Association and International Flight Catering Association.

After an overnight train journey, when I reached New Delhi airport this morning, there were several reasons to prefer Sahara. One, the extremely positive experience just four days ago. Two, Sahara had a scheme where I could use my Standard Chartered Credit Card to buy the tickets, and pay in equated monthly instalments over 12 months at 0% interest.

I used my Standard Chartered Credit Card but bought a ticket on Jet Airways. You can attribute it to *brand loyalty*.

By the time the steward reached me in the rear of the aircraft, he had exhausted all copies of The Times of India. On offer were some second-rate newspapers that you would normally not touch with a barge pole.

The worst was yet to come. When the stewardess checked whether I was a strict vegetarian, I sensed trouble. They had run out of vegetarian food. Cornflakes and fruits, and the courtesy of the flight attendants, are poor succour – particularly after traveling all night.

* Mr. Sundar Sankaran is Director with Advantage-India Consulting Pvt. Ltd, a strategy consulting and knowledge incubation boutique

What is the corporate punch line of Jet Airways? *The Joy of Flying!!!*

For once, I used the suggestion card. But I am not even sure whether the airline does anything about these suggestions. A few months ago, I offered suggestions on possible improvements in service levels. I even went to the extent of sharing thoughts on how the suggestions could be implemented. To date I have not even received an acknowledgement that the suggestion card was received.

The objective here is not to deride Jet. It is one of the few airlines in the world that is ISO 9001 certified. I have several favourable experiences with the airline too. What is the learning from these two personal experiences?

Organizations set their mission, freeze on a vision and choose certain values. It is important to ensure that these are translated right across the organization so that customer interactions, and interactions with other stakeholders are in synch with the mission, vision and values.

How can Jet live up to “*The Joy of Flying*”? I think there are four things we do while flying – eat, read, sleep, or talk.

1. **Eat** - Meal preference is the most significant aspect of eating. Admittedly, I bought my Jet air ticket just an hour before I boarded the flight. Yet, the ticketing clerk should have checked on my food preference. When I purchased the Sahara ticket, the ticketing clerk checked.
2. **Read** - While traveling with some of the international airlines, I like the newspaper rack placed just outside the aircraft door. You can pick up the newspapers you prefer before you board the aircraft. Such a contrast from what I heard the Jet steward telling one of the passengers – “Read this newspaper first. Then you can exchange it for some other newspaper”.
3. **Sleep** - Jet certainly provides all the conveniences. Well maintained aircraft leave no cause for complain.
4. **Talk** – Jet can do something innovative. Seat preferences across airlines tend to be driven only by two factors – window or aisle; front or back. Jet can seek information about areas of interest (business, politics etc) and discussion preferences (chat v/s do not disturb) – at least from frequent fliers – and build this into the seat allotment logic in their check-in system. This would be smart use of technology to further a good in-flight experience.

As Hamish Pringle and William Gordon opine in “Brand Manners” (John Wiley & Sons Ltd), the true test of delivering on promises to customers occurs at the interface between the customer and the organization. The heart of this delivery lies in the interaction between individuals, in terms of the four key dimensions set below-

1. The *rational quality* of the transaction: “It’s even better than I expected!”
2. The *emotional benefits* springing from the feelings generated on both sides: “I would like to do that again”.
3. The *political realities* of perceptions of “win-win”: “Was this a good deal for me?”
4. The *spiritual experience* in terms of its inherent worth: “I really believe that I am better off as a person for that, and the world may be benefiting, too!”

The ability to deliver what we call brand manners rises exponentially as the customer moves through these four dimensions.

Sahara certainly lived up to all four dimensions.