
Jeremy's World: Brand or bland?

By **Jeremy Clark** on April, 30 2019 | Jeremy's World



It all started with a cup of coffee ...

I want to talk a bit about individualism, if I may. “What’s that?” I hear you ask. Well, what I mean is how airlines can or should take the opportunity to individualize service in the face of an ever-more homogenized marketplace.

Let me tell you how I came to this subject. I was tweeting around as one does ([@trayset](#) is where you need to be) and was driven into an uncontrollable, but not unusual, froth by a tweet from someone who was apparently delighted to be presented with [McDonald’s](#) coffee in Business Class. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

Now before I go further, and with apologies to my dear, *dear* friends and colleagues at [WestJet](#), but in what universe is that stuff remotely okay in any class, let alone Business?

However, it had me thinking about the lost opportunities for airlines to properly individualize themselves - not by hooking up to some branded products, but by actually developing products and services that are truly unique and that become identifiable with an airline brand; think [Singapore Airlines’](#) “Book to Cook” program.

Handing out (or rather, selling) [Marks & Spencer](#) sandwiches, [Starbucks’](#) “coffee,” [Pringles](#) (what are they?) and [Twinkies](#) is hardly “something special in the air,” as was a well-known airline claims. It’s a

lazy, safe and easy cop-out to avoid going the extra mile by developing a unique individual style and service. Controversial? Maybe. But true.

I realize that in a continent used to washing their bagels down with glorified brown drain water, chain coffee might come as a relief. At least they know what to expect, but for heaven's sake, this is an ideal opportunity to make a real impact.

As an airline you have a captive audience in your branded environment for a predictable period of time – plenty long enough for you to make the effort to really impress and influence your passengers' future travel choices.

How beneficial is it to you as an airline if your customers are more impressed by something they can buy anywhere else than for the service you gave them? Who are you working for, the airline or the coffee maker? And what happens if your featured brands suddenly hit a PR disaster through no fault of yours? You will have to take a hit.

Of course there are exceptions. You can't really go wrong doling out [Häagen-Dazs](#) or [Beechdean](#); high-end brands in medium market locations are a good idea and evoke a feeling of being cared for. I love the [Truefitt & Hill](#) razors in the [Emirates](#) amenity kit, as well as the [Beemster](#) aged cheese on [KLM](#) and [TUMI](#) on [Delta](#). What these products have in common is that they are not only high-quality but often beyond the reach, either financially or geographically, of the market they are being exposed to. A T&H razor handle will cost you the best part of \$100, but here you can aspire to it, courtesy of an airline.

But there's a tipping point between product placement to enhance a brand and the danger of common brands degrading your own. There is nothing special about Marks & Spencer sandwiches; [British Airways](#) would have done better to develop a range of high-quality products they could own and develop. Many passengers like to think they are entering another, very special world as they board an aircraft. These guests are the airline's for the next however-many hours, to influence and impress as they choose. You won't do that with McDonald's coffee, I'm afraid – with one known exception on Twitter.