

Foreword



"An airline brand is not what you say it is, it's what they say it is."

In a recent conversation with an airline CEO, he mentioned to me how he likened the rise of social media and Web 2.0 to the growth of the Internet in 1998. I couldn't agree with him more. Back then, every business seemed to need a B2B or a B2C web strategy.

It's pretty similar now, where all businesses are being advised to come up with a social media strategy, regardless of whether they make planes or fly people in them – B2B or B2C, just like before. However, for airlines, it's a little different.

If social media became popular in 2009, then, in 2010, it will become mainstream. In fact, as I wrote on Mashable.com, "when it comes to airlines, social media is no longer the "new" thing. JetBlue has over one and a half million followers on Twitter. Lufthansa allows passengers to update their Twitter or Facebook statuses informing others about their whereabouts in the sky. AirAsia drives buzz about its new destinations through custom micro-sites."

However, a number of social media incidents have scared airlines to embrace the medium fully. Seen the YouTube video "United Breaks Guitars" yet? Heard about Kevin Smith tweeting about Southwest Airlines? Many senior airline executives are

not sure yet about how airlines can build a strong brand through social media.

Yes, it can be difficult to dive in, but the repercussions can be terrible if airlines choose not to use social media. In the words of Bill Marriott, CEO of Marriott Hotels, "Social Media is not going away, it's not a passing fad. If you don't start playing now then you are going to be playing catch up and falling further behind as it moves more mainstream"

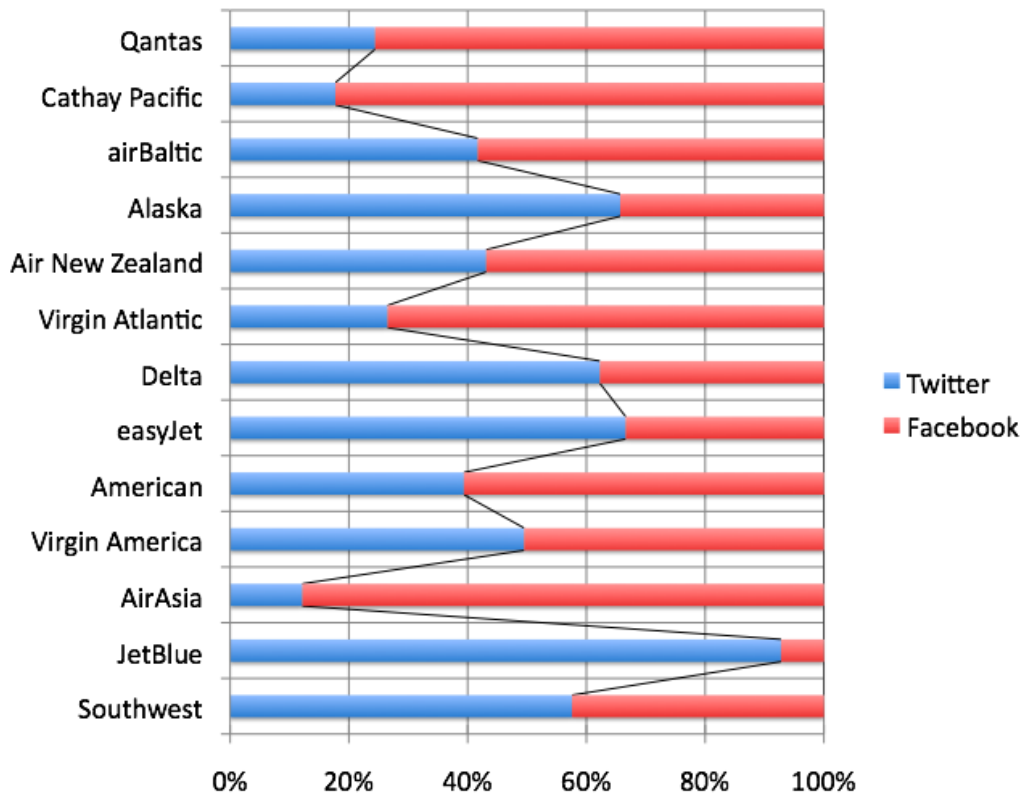
Hence, this series of six case studies by SimpliFlying, which aim to share with airline executives best practices from the ever-changing landscape of social media branding for airlines. After all, we all want to learn from the best. From airBaltic, which is proud to have a larger presence online, than probably in the real-world, to AirAsia, which has become a master in using social media for driving business objectives.

We're sure you'll learn at least a couple of strategies from these airlines' forays into social media that can be applied to your own airline.

Cheers to innovation.

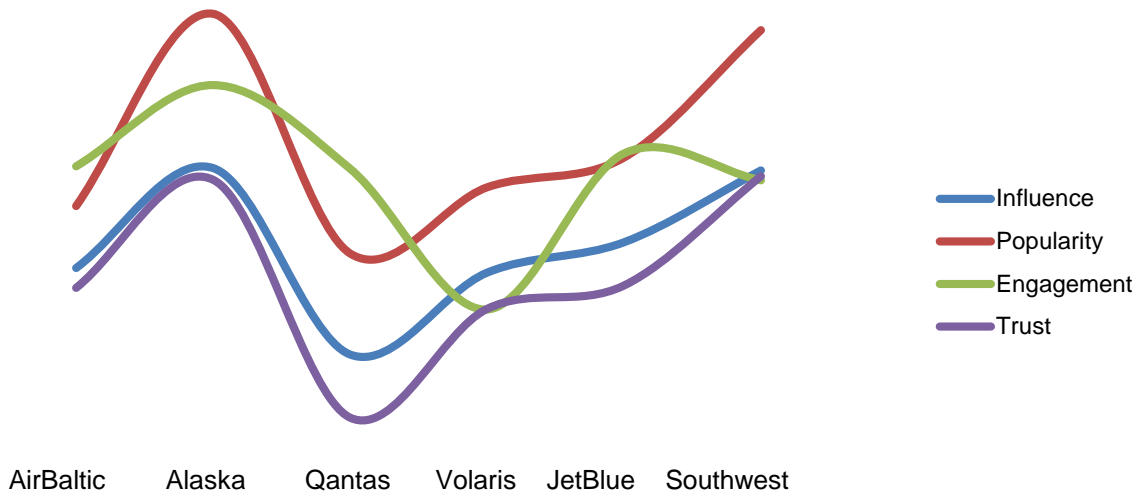
Keep Flying, SimpliFlying.
Shashank Nigam,
shashank@simpliflying.com

Where do the fans of these airlines hang out?



Source: SimpliFlying.com

Tweet Level Score: Measurement of user's importance on Twitter



Source: Tweetlevel.com

AirBaltic in social media

“We’re proud to have a larger presence in social media than we probably have in the real world.”
-Karlis Smiltens

The business objective – building relationships

Like many other airlines, airBaltic chose to participate in social media so they could build better relationships with their customers. They noticed that several other airlines already had social media accounts and saw that they were benefiting from it. Therefore, they decided they would join the fun.

Within airBaltic there was also an evolving strategy, which favored the use of social media. Their business model went from being a point-to-point low-cost carrier to a service minded network carrier. Also, due to the economic recession, travel dramatically declined in Latvia. Social media allowed airBaltic to easily reach customers who lived outside of Latvia, and this ended up in a larger presence online than in the real world.

Platform of choice - Facebook

airBaltic is using social media mainly for product marketing and customer relationship management (e.g updating and responding to customers’ feedback). The airline has held several competitions to engage with their fans. “Help us set lowest fares for specific routes”, was a recent contest they held. It resulted in a 30% discount exclusively for their Facebook fans. This has also generated lots of buzz and increased brand awareness in key markets like Finland.

Challenges to overcome

One of the main challenges airBaltic faces is general inexperience with social media. This can be overcome only through trial and error and requires the help of dedicated employees.

To become a brand differentiator and encourage a stronger following, airBaltic can empower its social media team to inject more personality into the brand by enhancing the “human touch” and responding more efficiently to criticism (e.g. offering rebates or extending lounge invitations).

The current procedure is to investigate until a status quo is reached. While maintaining a stand that different platforms serve different functions (Facebook for CRM, Twitter for information, YouTube for Entertainment) airBaltic can look into integrating the different platforms so that customers can identify better with the airline.

What the future holds

airBaltic realizes that social media will play an ever increasing role in their airline. In the future, they will continue to try and attract new customers and develop relationships with their current customers. They hope to add more content to their social media accounts and want their ‘fans’ to create additional content in order to foster a two-way relationship. Ultimately, it not only wants to drive engagement through social media but loyalty as well.

Alaska Air in social media

“Airlines have turned to social media so that they can establish fruitful relationships with their customers...”
-Elliott Pesut

Alaska Airlines’ social media efforts got a kick start in early 2009 after a volcanic eruption near Anchorage, Alaska, one of the airline’s hubs. The eruption caused unpredictable delays to flights and the airline needed to inform its customers about the changes in real-time as well as sooth nerves. They turned to Twitter, calming nerves by updating passengers of their latest flight status. What started then has now transformed into a full-fledged social-CRM initiative across social media platforms.

The business objective – to listen and respond in real-time

As revealed in an interview with SimpliFlying, Elliott Pesut, who leads social media execution at the airline, shared that Alaska Airlines wants to use social media to listen to what their customers are saying and to respond in real-time. This is clearly an important skill that most airlines would want to adopt since even a slight inkling of dissent could prove costly for the company if left un-tackled.

The platform of choice - Twitter

Alaska Airlines’ strength is the fact that they have focused on one platform. Almost 70% of the airline’s “fans” are on this platform. They have clearly identified the value that social media provides and are prepared to respond to customers with respectful, prompt, and accurate answers. Twitter has aided them immensely in building a strong customer-oriented image.

Alaska Airlines maintains a high popularity level on Twitter and retains a high level of influence and engagement with its followers. According to the TweetLevel report, Alaska Airlines scores

higher in engagement level than in popularity. Even though there is only a slight difference between these scores, it is clear that the airline has worked hard on making Twitter an active engagement channel for its followers. This implies that Alaska Airlines focuses not only on disseminating information but on conversing with its followers as well.

Challenges to overcome

One of the challenges Alaska Airlines faces is an inconsistent style of tweeting. This is due to the lack of any standards that guide tweeting. When asked how they balance organizationally focused tweets with more casual conversations Elliott responded, “depends on the day.” In the long run, it is better to offer a more consistent image so people will know what to expect. This is especially true online, since many of the interactions happen with people who are not even customers yet.

What the future holds

In the future Alaska Airlines would like to become more conversational. This seems to be a great idea because it leverages on the main strength of Twitter, the airline’s platform of choice. Moreover, it is easier to develop relationships with people when you talk casually, as opposed to broadcasting marketing messages. It helps forge close bonds with the audience, some of whom may go on to become brand ambassadors.

Qantas in social media

“Social media can help Qantas greatly in creating a sense of community”

-Karla Courtney

Compared to airlines such as JetBlue and Southwest, Qantas exhibits a lower level of influence and engagement on Twitter (according to Edelman's Tweet Level measurement). This is despite its high popularity, especially among Asian followers. This means that in order to engage the audience better, Qantas needs to make itself more accessible to everyone. This can be done by making information easier to find: hashtags can be used to get a greater bang for buck. A slightly worrying aspect Qantas might want to address is the unusually low “trust” score. This can be achieved by ensuring more transparency in its operations and consistency in operations by interacting with customers online.

The business objective

Essentially, Qantas uses social media for three reasons: to drive traffic, facilitate engagement with its customers, and to increase awareness about the brand. With the rapid growth of social media, most airlines have now realized that staying offline would be a huge competitive disadvantage. In an industry where there is a race to get more customers, engagement online is seen as an important way to create value for more customers. Qantas's executives, who wish to create a sense of community between the company and its customers, understand that social media can help the company greatly towards achieving this end.

Platform of choice - Twitter

An area Qantas excels at in social media is keeping their tweets consistent with their

premium image. The airline knows that it is important to uphold its brand image because eventually, all companies benefit from the perception their customers have of them. Qantas is also able to inspire travel by using well-known Australian personalities to promote their airline.

Challenges to overcome

A particular challenge Qantas faces is differentiating their separate Twitter accounts from one another. To the customer, something with the Qantas name is the same as any other with the same name. But, in reality, each Qantas Twitter account serves a unique function. A certain amount of clarity is required when operating online. Due to the proliferation of information online, companies run the risk of alienating customers by providing information that is unclear or haphazard in its presentation. Customers have certain expectations when they follow a Qantas Twitter account and when these expectations are not met they are sure to unfollow that account.

What the future holds

It's quite apparent that Qantas is still getting used to the social media landscape. The current focus is to keep learning and to develop strategies for the future. The airline plans to continue promoting Qantas on social media through their newsletter. A Twitter stream on the Qantas Travel Insider Site is another addition to Qantas' social media ambitions.

Volaris in social media

“It is a unique opportunity to have a ‘voice’ and interact ‘live’ with our customers.”

-Jose Calderoni

The business objective – greater interaction with customers

Mr Jose Calderoni, Director of Product & Customer Experience at Volaris, in an exclusive interview with SimpliFlying, shared that social media has been crucial as a tool of engagement for one of the most successful budget airlines in Central America. It allows the airline to respond to many customer requests and complaints speedily. Most of the time, customers simply want someone to listen to them. Social media provides the perfect platform towards that end since it not only reduces the cost of operating other communication platforms, but it also allows customers to take advantage of special promotions offered only on these channels.

Platform of choice - Facebook

At the moment, Volaris is focusing its efforts on Facebook, even though it has a respectable following on Twitter. However, Facebook is clearly a larger engagement channel for the company as it has almost 30,000 followers there compared to around 15,000 on Twitter. The company understands that Facebook provides a number of advantages over Twitter such as the ability to visually attract people by posting rich content like pictures and videos. However, they agree that in terms of response time, Twitter is faster since retweeted content can spread extremely quickly through the platform.

Challenges to overcome

There are primarily three challenges the

airline wants to tackle. First, it wants to manage a continuous online presence. Essentially, its presence on the internet is now based on its working hours. However, the internet never sleeps; to maintain a continuous dialogue with customers it seeks to remain open for a larger number of hours. Second, continuing from the first challenge, as Volaris seeks to engage more customers and provide more insight into the company, it wishes to cultivate more brand ambassadors through social media. The final challenge, which again focuses on the customers, is to develop more videos and interactive content which customers find useful and interesting.

What the future holds

As the social media sphere further evolves, there are two aspects the airline wants to target. First, it wishes to develop Twitter and Facebook accounts for its English-speaking customers. This would help it reach out to a much larger audience than its current pages, which are in Spanish, allow. Second, it will further focus its social media efforts around its customers. This implies more sensitivity to customers’ concerns, opinions or even misgivings about the airline. Based on this, information provided on social media channels will be further refined; at the same time, richer content will be developed to grab the attention of more users. Moving ahead, the airline seeks to create more awareness about its brand and eventually build its own applications around these platforms.

JetBlue in social media

“Social media gives you the ability to observe what people are saying about your airline in real time.”

- Morgan Johnston

The business objective – customer engagement

The 2007 ice storms really put a damper on JetBlue's operations and it was this incident that prompted, and encouraged, the use of social media. JetBlue uses social media because it allows a close conversation between the airline and its passengers who can conveniently receive information about events on time.

JetBlue is a leader among airlines using social media and has the most number of followers compared to its peers. According to Edelman's Tweet level score, in addition to popularity, JetBlue also has displays a very high level of engagement with its followers. This probably explains JetBlue's ability to build a high level of trust with its people.

Platform of choice - Twitter

For its social media strategy, JetBlue interacts with more fans on Twitter than on Facebook. The airline's chief strengths are the loyalty of its followers and its high engagement with them. Its ability to adapt to changes in the social media environment is another key strength. Since social media is here to stay, this ability to go with the flow and adapt to any changes is very important.

JetBlue's presence on Twitter is consistent with its image as an innovator: Since social media is a relatively new and innovative medium to connect with passengers, it makes sense that JetBlue uses it. Social media also

enables the airline to observe what people are saying about it and clear any misconception or false rumours.

Challenges to overcome

One of the challenges JetBlue faces is learning how to respond effectively to criticism. JetBlue feels that the best way to deal with criticism is to adopt a case-by-case approach. Sometimes passengers just need a vent for their feelings and JetBlue believes that if they insert themselves into this discussion it could be counterproductive. Another challenge JetBlue has run into is customers believing they should be given preferential treatment just because they have a lot of followers. A final challenge is managing the expectation that engagement in social media is a permanent fall-back when, customers aren't happy with the response they might receive through traditional channels.

What the future holds

The future looks bright for JetBlue. Their innovative company culture combined with over one million (and growing) followers on Twitter will lead to even more success on social media. As far as their future social media strategy is concerned, JetBlue will go where the people go. If a new Twitter or Facebook becomes popular you can be sure that JetBlue will be a part of it. Also, JetBlue will continue using their crew members to help humanize their airline.

Southwest in social media

“You need to be where your customers are if you want to create relationships with them.”

- Christi Day

The business objective – transparency in operations

Southwest uses social media primarily because it allows them to be transparent. For instance, the show ‘Airline’, which was Southwest’s first adventure with social media, gave viewers backstage access to see how the airline was operated. Southwest knows that many of its customers use social media, and have hence decided to be where the customers are.

Southwest is able to manage their social media strategy well because it reflects their business strategy: the social media team is not excluded from the other teams and is well aware of their overall operations. The fact that JetBlue is active on all mediums shows that they value and respect customers’ feedback. It tries to always think from the customers’ point of view to assist them in optimizing the use of social media.

Platform of choice - Twitter

On Twitter, Southwest Airlines is ranked second in terms of airlines with the highest number of followers. Not only is it a popular airline, it has a high level of influence and engagement with its followers as well. Since Southwest believes in using social media not just a marketing tool but also as a public relations and brand expression tool, they authorize the social media team to explore ways to better reach their goals e.g. personalizing their responses with warmth and compassion. This authenticity has differentiated Southwest’s brand from that of other airlines. Plus, the airline chooses not

to “control” the online conversations except to provide facts.

Challenges to overcome

A challenge that Southwest faces is keeping up with the rapid changes in the social media landscape. Keeping things simple is also a challenge: Just because someone has a Facebook profile or tweets doesn’t mean they have technical knowledge. Some people believe that gimmicks on Facebook pages attract people and will lead to either increased revenue or more ‘fans’. It is hard to say whether this is true. Many oppose gimmicks and say it just creates additional clutter and is a waste of time and effort. Southwest must be careful in managing their online presence.

What the future holds

Southwest has a solid social media strategy in place, so their goal for the future is to keep doing everything they are currently doing, but look to improve in the long run. As Southwest attracts more ‘fans’ and ‘followers’ they will begin to devote more time and resources to social media. Southwest believes that social media will become more important in the future, and are planning accordingly.

The lessons learnt from these six airlines can be applied to almost any airline. These case studies were based on interviews which can be viewed in full (along with more interviews like these), at <http://bit.ly/airlineinterviews>.

You are welcome to email interviews@simplify.com if you wish to share your airline’s story.

About SimpliFlying

SimpliFlying is a leading airline branding consultancy, which works with airlines, airports and hotels worldwide to build a brand strategy that drives engagement, loyalty and revenues through social media.

To find out more, please visit
www.SimpliFlying.com

