

SAUDIA SPECIAL EDITION

# SOAR

HOW THE WORLD'S BEST AIRLINE  
BRANDS DELIGHT CUSTOMERS  
AND INSPIRE EMPLOYEES



**SHASHANK NIGAM**

**CEO OF SIMPLIFYING**

FOREWORD BY HE DG ENG IBRAHIM AL-OMAR

## PRAISE FOR SOAR

“Copying what the competition is doing doesn’t work in any industry, especially in air travel which most consumers see as a commodity. Shashank takes a deep dive into the fascinating stories of how successful airlines have created their own path.”

— **DAVID MEERMAN SCOTT**

*Bestselling Author of The New Rules of Marketing and PR,  
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“Shashank’s book *SOAR* reads very well, and gives the feeling of a longtime friend dispensing wisdom, sharing advice, and motivating you to do your best. It’s not a dreary lecture, but rather *SOAR* is entertaining storytelling that pushes us to fly higher and stronger with our employees, brands, and customers.”

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& Communication, Azul*

“Shashank Nigam’s vision is fully expressed by his analysis of these powerful connections between these airline brands, their customers, and their employees. He is the leading steward pushing the boundaries of airline marketing, a pioneer to do so.”

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*VP Marketing, Bombardier Commercial Aircraft*

“I’ve learnt a great deal from Shashank, and you will too. His book uncovers the secrets of the best airline brands in the world, which will help your airline stay ahead of competition, for a long time to come.”

— **NICOLA LANGE**

*Director - Premium Services, Lufthansa*

“SOAR brings home the importance of creativity and empowerment in developing a successful airline brand. It’s a great reminder that allowing people to think big can create a strong connection with your customers.”

— **MARY ELLEN JONES**

*VP Americas Sales, Pratt & Whitney,  
President of The Wings Club*

“A classical airline is a commodity business that requires good execution, which many do. The airlines covered in *SOAR* get it that this business is consumer focused, brand-oriented now—it is they who will dominate the 21st-century travel.”

— **MARK LAPIDUS**

*CEO, Amedeo*

“Shashank Nigam gets it: to build a lasting brand, you can’t be following the usual rules of marketing. Like the airlines covered in the book, you need to think beyond the ordinary.”

— **PATRICK MURPHY**

*Former Chairman, Ryanair*

“The airline industry is very unique. Yet, few have been able to distill lessons from the best airline brands for the rest of us, like Shashank does.”

— **HENRI COURPRON**

*Former CEO, ILFC and Airbus North America*

“One of those rare books that’s full of inspiring stories and actionable strategies, which can help you excel in your job as a marketer.”

— **DR. BERND SCHMITT**

*Author, Director - Center on Global Brand Leadership,  
Columbia Business School*

“*SOAR* gives you a powerful blueprint for building an airline brand. It’s a must-read for anyone working with an airline.”

— **ALLEN ADAMSON**

*Former Chairman, North America, Landor*

“When an authority on aviation marketing like Shashank authors a book on the topic, you must read it.”

— **ANGELA GITTENS**

*Director General, Airports Council International (ACI World)*

“Shashank adds 21st-century insight into what can make a difference in what is one of the most competitive and fastest moving sectors there is.”

— **MICHAEL BLUNT**

*Vice President Corporate Communications, Oneworld*

“SOAR is a brilliant investigation of how airline brands that succeed do so. Great inspiration if you’re in an industry that is just as competitive.”

— **ANDRES FABRE**

*CEO, Aeromar, Former COO Volaris*

“Airline brands depend on fantastic customer experience, delivered by engaged, empathetic, and customer-focused employees. SOAR tells the story of seven airlines that have really learned how to do this, and as such, is essential reading for airline executives and those that wish to become airline executives.”

— **DR KEITH MASON**

*Head, Centre for Air Transport Management,  
Cranfield University*

**S O ^ R**

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BRANDS DELIGHT CUSTOMERS  
AND INSPIRE EMPLOYEES



SHASHANK NIGAM  
WITH MATTHEW SHARPE



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*To Don for believing in me when SimpliFlying  
was just a figment of my imagination.*

*To Laird Robin for helping me push the boundaries.*

*To Daddy for always asking the tough questions.*



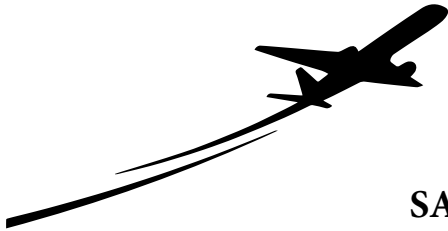
# CONTENTS



Foreword .....	i
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 1 Saudia: Naturally Generous Hospitality .....	9
CHAPTER 2 WestJet Cares .....	27
CHAPTER 3 Southwest: A LUV Story .....	57
CHAPTER 4 Finnair: Designed for You .....	85
CHAPTER 5 AirAsia: Never Say Never.....	101
CHAPTER 6 Turkish Airlines: Delightfully Different.....	119
Photos .....	133
CHAPTER 7 kulula.com: The World's Funniest Airline .....	159
CHAPTER 8 Singapore Airlines: No Detail Too Small.....	177
CHAPTER 9 Vueling: Act like a Startup.....	201
CHAPTER 10 Air New Zealand: A Little Airline from the Corner of the World, No More.....	221
Appendix: The 6X Airline Brand Model .....	239
Acknowledgments.....	247
Bibliography .....	255



# FOREWORD



**SAUDIA:** The Wings of Vision 2030,  
Connecting Saudi Arabia to the World  
and the World to Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has aviation as a long-standing part of its legacy.

The national flag carrier, Saudi Arabian Airlines (Saudia), has been in operation for over 75 years.

While we are expanding our transcontinental reach, we have also taken the time to look within and evaluate where we stand—and improve from the core.

The path we set out on together, as one team, is a transformational one; because to chart the route forward, we had to conclusively turn inward and outline what we needed to change.

Every facet of the business went through a thorough evaluation, with industry best practices applied wherever possible. We are now well into this journey, fully dedicated to Saudia's ongoing enhancement and global footing in the aviation industry.

With steady focus, the airline went from being relatively unknown outside the Kingdom to being considered one of the leading flag carriers in the world.

How things have dramatically taken a change amidst the opening up of the world to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia to the world.

Embracing cultures ushers in new bonds, opportunities, and ways to shine. This is where we see our role as a global connector, and it is what we are focused on today.

Additionally, the airline's network will only continue to grow as our expansion plans take us further into new communities, global capitals, and leisure destinations.

We have embarked on new territory with the global COVID-19 pandemic, which shook our industry to its core. We are now witnessing an ahead-of-schedule surge in travel, which shows that despite it all, this is a resilient industry and air travel is the business of people, talent, and cultural connection.

What becomes evermore apparent as we continue to grow is that our traditions and heritage shine through in the product: from the onboard design, inflight entertainment, cuisine, and personal interaction from our teams on the ground to the service onboard.

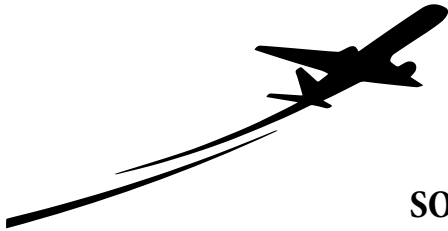
Our culture is important to us, and it is our strength in which we take deep pride in serving others and making safety and comfort the foremost priorities.

We humbly welcome each traveler on board Saudia flights as our guests in our own homes. Thank you for allowing our story to be part of your travel journey.

Sincerely Yours,

Ibrahim Al-Omar, Director General of Saudi Arabian Airlines Corporation (Saudia Group)

# INTRODUCTION



## **SOAR : sôr/ verb**

1. Fly or rise high in the air.
2. Maintain height in the air without flapping wings or using engine power.

In the 15 years since I left my job in Boston to start SimpliFlying, I have flown just over a million miles on 101 airlines. A number of these flights have been on the three major U.S. carriers—American Airlines, United Airlines, and Delta Air Lines. What’s amazing is that while I remember being on these airlines, I don’t quite recall when I was on which. It’s not that I have a failing memory—I do remember most of my flights and destinations quite well—but these three airlines just seemed very similar to one another every time I have flown with them. It is as if all three of the largest U.S. airlines are trying very hard to be unremarkable.

All three have blue and grey interiors. All three have tight seats in economy class—they all call it coach—served by seemingly disinterested flight attendants. When one skews the frequent flier program toward only the top-tier elite, the other two do as well, and the majority of fliers suffer.

Things don’t stand out if you’re flying business class either. Lounges are often just overcrowded rooms with a selection of snacks so unappetizing that they are available in abundance. When



one of the three airlines announces flat beds on cross-continental flights in response to the likes of JetBlue, the other two follow suit soon after. However, scant attention is paid to improving the standard of service. “The big three airlines have dissolved into one big homogeneous blob,” said industry analyst Henry Harteveltdt, founder of Atmosphere Research Group, a travel-industry survey and consulting firm, in a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*. In the airline business, it is easy to follow one another into mediocrity.

On the other hand, there is one domestic flight I distinctly remember. I was on a late-night flight from Chicago to Austin, Texas, to attend a conference. We were landing just before midnight. As the flight attendants took their seats for landing, one of them came on the microphone, and to my surprise, sang a spontaneous lullaby for us as we landed. She explained she was used to singing it every night to her kids, anyway. It was a refreshing end to the day for most of the passengers, who clapped to thank the flight attendant once we landed. That was my first flight with Southwest, back in 2010 and it left an indelible impression.

Most airlines seem to be trying to provide us with an uneventful flight that gets us from point A to B. Yet Southwest stood out, just by being itself, and not trying too hard. For example, most airlines today charge you to check a bag, and charge you even more to check two, following the lead of the likes of United. Southwest has not charged for a bag since it started operations and it has stuck to its guns while the rest of the industry took a big step backward in a blind pursuit of ancillary revenues. It was a little like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, where Charlie ultimately wins because the rest have dug their own graves. Amazingly, it is not just the major U.S. airline brands that are placing a greater burden on passengers, but airlines large and small around the world. That’s why the Southwests of the world stand out.

While most of my flights are a blur, some have been unforgettable.

I'll never forget when the flight attendant on my AirAsia flight from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur was walking down the aisle to do her in-flight safety checks, noticed that I was reading a book, and took the time to turn on my reading light. Or when the Singapore Girl addressed me by name, despite my being the last to board the flight. Or the time when Finnair displayed a custom-designed Northern Lights projection aboard its Airbus A350 upon take off from New York. What do these airlines have in common? How do they become remarkable? Each one has developed a unique formula that enables its brand to leave a lasting, positive impression on its customers—and to attract new customers as well. During my 2,000 hours in the air—and many more on the ground—I've studied the branding successes and failures of the 101 airlines I've flown, and I've developed a model that enables me to analyze the six major elements that will make or break any airline brand. I call it the 6X Airline Brand Model.

### **The 6X Airline Brand Model**

My consulting firm, SimpliFlying, began its journey when I realized that marketing an airline is distinctly different from marketing any other product or service. For example, our brand engagement with a can of Coke lasts about 10 minutes. With a cup of Starbucks coffee, perhaps an hour. But with an airline, our brand engagement can last anywhere from 2 to 24 hours, depending on how long the flight is. Add in the online booking process and other pre-travel phases, and we realize that aviation brands have many times the number of touchpoints of brands in other sectors. Moreover, if there is a snowstorm and we are in Starbucks, the coffee tastes just as good. But if we are at an airport and our flight is canceled due to the storm, we are mad at the airline. At that moment, the airline brand cannot brush off the responsibility and say that they are not the cause of the inconvenience. While this may be technically true, an airline that can rise to the occasion will send a strong signal to its customers.

Despite these unique features of airline brand engagement, most airline marketers tend to apply the same generic marketing principles as marketers of other consumer products. Aviation marketing ought to be as distinct from other kinds of marketing as airlines are from other brands. How many times have you seen a beautiful advertisement with a passenger lounging on a flat bed, being served gourmet food? This is far from the reality for a large majority of passengers, who end up at the back of the cabin, packed like sardines and trying to get work done on a laptop, their arms crunched in like a T-rex's. There is seldom a svelte flight attendant putting a duvet over them. Right there, the brand promise fails. Like the major U.S. carriers mentioned earlier, airlines almost always over-promise and under-deliver.

The airline industry is truly like no other. It is cyclical in nature, incurs high fixed costs, faces uncertainties due to heavy dependency on fluctuating factors like weather and oil prices, and has a length of engagement with the customer that is rare in other industries. Hence, a distinctive approach is needed for airline branding that takes into account all these factors unique to the industry.

An ideal branding model for the airlines would account for both the realities of business and the unique nature of the industry. The 6X model helps guide an airline's branding approach by focusing on six key levers:

1. **Brand eXpectation:** how accurately and successfully an airline lets customers know what it has to offer.
2. **Brand eXperience:** what it feels like to interact with the airline during travel, across all touchpoints, at the airport and in flight.
3. **Brand eXpression:** how well the airline communicates with customers and staff

4. **Brand eXternalities:** anything that affects customers that is not in the control of the airline (weather, oil prices, regulations, etc.).
5. **Brand eXecution:** how an airline delivers on its promises.
6. **Brand X-Factor:** the special sauce possessed exclusively by the airline in question that is hard to duplicate for competition.

In the past 15 years, as SimpliFlying has worked with more than 100 airlines and airports around the world, time and again we have seen that airlines that successfully apply these principles create remarkable brands.

The first three levers of the 6X model—eXpectation, eXperience, and eXpression—focus on engagement, internal and external, which is very much in the airline’s control. This is the process from brand awareness, to preference and purchase, to the post-purchase brand interactions. The second three levers—eXternalities, eXecution, X-factor—deal with aspects unique to the airlines, which often have a deep impact on the brand. The 6X model specifically avoids a purely quantitative derivation of an airline’s brand value, since the brand is an intangible asset and qualitative factors play a major role in building this asset.

If an airline delivers what it promises, interacts with its customers consistently and responsibly over time, and continues to innovate, people will continue to vote for it with their wallets, their respect, and their affection. Today more than ever, as global competition becomes increasingly fierce among commercial carriers, a model like 6X is critical to guide airline executives and help them decide how to build a distinctive and sustainable brand advantage. After all, the last thing they would want is to follow the leader of the pack and do more of the same.

## **How This Book Works**

Every airline featured in *SOAR* is remarkable in one way or another. Each chapter focuses only on one airline and dives deep into how the airline stands out from the crowd. Some are remarkable because of the product offering they have created, like Singapore Airlines or Air New Zealand. Others are remarkable because of a culture that values and empowers employees, like Southwest or AirAsia. Yet others soar above the rest simply by doing things that are unexpected, like Turkish Airlines having a chef serve the meals in business class, or kulula having jokes on its safety cards. At the end of each chapter, I have distilled the key 6X factors the airline excels in. It is important to note that no airline in the book tries to excel on all 6X factors, but instead focuses on achieving standout success in a few of them. That keeps them out of reach of competition, and keeps the passengers coming back.

It is also important to note what *SOAR* is not. It is not a book that provides an exhaustive analysis of each airline's operations or business plans. It is not meant to be an authoritative tome on any one airline. Rather, it is the culmination of detailed conversations with both top executives and customer-facing staff at each of the airlines. As such, *SOAR* focuses on the best practices in marketing from each airline, having learned about them from the people who led them and executed them.

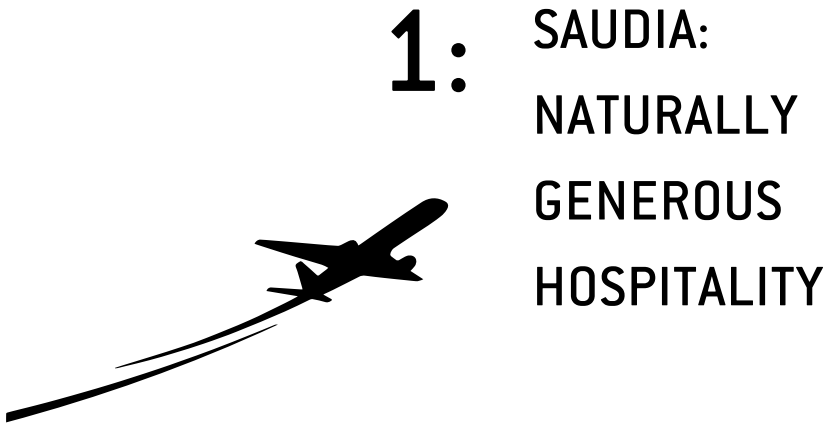
When choosing the airlines to be featured in *SOAR*, we worked hard to ensure a wide global spread of the case studies. Whether you are a student of marketing at a university or a seasoned airline manager eyeing that executive position, I am sure you will be stimulated and inspired by these stories of creativity at airlines around the world. You can choose to read this book cover to cover, or just dive into any chapter at random. At the end of the book, a chapter summarizes the 6X model, which you can re-visit any time. And of course, if you are looking to enhance customer engagement

at your airline, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me via our website, [simpliflying.com](http://simpliflying.com), or email me directly. More resources from the book like, interview transcripts and videos, can be found on [www.simplisoar.com](http://www.simplisoar.com).

One of the greatest rewards of working on *SOAR* in the last 12 months has been traveling to different airline headquarters, hearing some very interesting stories and meeting people so passionate about the industry. After almost a hundred interviews, I was heartened to see the 6X model being validated time and again. Airline brands featured in this book truly *soar*—they effortlessly glide above the competition, while the rest flap their wings tirelessly to gain altitude below. I hope you enjoy the read.

— Shashank Nigam  
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### **No Ordinary Day**

It was no ordinary day. Mohammed was among the first 120 cabin crew graduating from the Top5 training course at Saudia. While he had worked with the airline as cabin crew for several years, this was a special moment. Walking into the opulent lobby of the Ritz-Carlton Jeddah, a smiling doorman welcomed Mohammed. He was then ushered to the grand ballroom, where he felt like royalty walking in.

He took his seat among the other 120 graduates of this program, who had just spent 12 full days mastering the art of delivering authentic in-flight service to guests. Service that focused on the signature natural hospitality unique to Saudi Arabia. On the stage were not just his trainers. The airline CEO had joined personally along with the General Manager of Product. It was not common for Mohammed to see top executives present at cabin crew graduation ceremonies. He felt special. He felt like a proper custodian of the Saudia brand.

Becoming a proud ambassador of the Saudia brand was indeed the purpose of holding the graduation ceremony at the Ritz-Carlton. The crew needed to be treated like royalty if they were to treat



Saudia's guests like royalty. It wasn't just the trainers but the top executives who addressed the graduating class, sharing their vision that the airline would be rated among the top five best airlines globally—the essence of the Top5 program.

It was the dawn of a new era for Saudia, the national airline of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for over 75 years. In a world of anonymous “McBrands,” the airline would be offering a warm touch of realness and authenticity in the hospitality and travel industries—and even beyond. While ambitious, this was the path Saudia had to take to become the Wings of Vision 2030 truly.

### **The Wings of Vision 2030**

Vision 2030 is a strategic framework to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. Specifically, Vision 2030 envisions the Kingdom becoming not just a religious but a cultural hub and tourist destination, attracting more than 100 million visits a year. For comparison, Saudia carried 35 million passengers in 2019, before COVID-19 hit. The Vision 2030 target is nearly triple this number—a massive leap by 2030. The country has a high GDP—a high propensity to travel at 1.2 trips per capita and a billion people of Islamic faith who aim to visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medina at least once in their lifetime. Saudia is well positioned to take advantage of these trends as the national flag carrier of the Kingdom. The airline's CEO, Captain Ibrahim S. Koshy, shared:

Over the next decade, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is destined to become one of the world's most exciting tourism destinations. The Kingdom will be an example of how to build a completely new tourism infrastructure from the ground up and attract large numbers of visitors while keeping

environmental impact as a prime consideration. With our 77-year history as the national flag carrier of the Kingdom, we are perfectly positioned to be a critical enabler in helping our country realize this vision.

To achieve this goal, Saudia has an internal motto that drives all of its transformation efforts: that the airline will become the *Wings of Vision 2030*. That translates into the airline bringing the Kingdom to the world and the world to the Kingdom. To most airlines in the region, which have been connecting millions of travelers through their mega hubs for decades, this may seem like business as usual. But for Saudia, achieving this vision requires changes in mindset, product, and service delivery in every interaction with its guests. These are fundamental changes too, which are transforming the airline from its core. To gain perspective, we need to revisit how things were in the past.

### **Night and Day**

The first time I flew with Saudia was in 2012. After takeoff, a male flight attendant came and sat beside me in business class, had a full meal, and then watched movies for the rest of the long flight.

I assumed he was off duty, but no, he was working; he got up just before we were about to land to go through the final pre-arrival procedures and safety checks before buckling himself in the cabin crew jump seat facing the passengers!

I still recall multiple trips through Jeddah airport, which I did not look forward to. Upon landing, it would take me two and a half hours to get out of this tiny little airport. Buses would bring me to the overcrowded terminal in the summer heat. Immigration line-ups were long and arduous, and the officers—primarily young men at the time—often seemed more interested in chatting amongst themselves than processing us through. Then, after all of that, I remember waiting at the baggage carousel for what seemed like

forever. It was unpleasant.

If I were to rewind and take myself back in time to revisit that 2012 experience, there's no comparison to the Saudia experience today. I wouldn't recognize Saudia or its newly transformed Jeddah hub a decade later.

Fast-forward 10 years later, during my recent trip to the Kingdom, this time with my wife and daughters, I was pleasantly shocked. When I arrived at the new Jeddah hub this time, it looked like any other modern airport—in fact, it is now in the league of mega hubs like Singapore Changi or Dubai. The new Jeddah airport operates 24/7, features global brands, and is home to the world's largest Sky-Team lounge, the flagship Alfursan lounge. And on a heartwarming note, instead of long wait times, my family and I were greeted with over 50 immigration counters, all staffed with Saudi women who greeted and processed people through the queues in an orderly manner. It was clear that they had been trained well, exchanging pleasantries with my wife and children and ushering us through with genuine smiles. My wife was very impressed.

When we walked off the baggage belt, we were greeted by a four-story aquarium teeming with sharks and marine life—something my daughters loved.

Upon further investigation, I learned that the aquarium installed at the new Jeddah hub airport stands 14 meters tall and houses over 2,000 rare fish. We also learned that it is the world's largest in-airport aquarium. The new airport can handle more than 30 million passengers annually in its first phase, with additional phases planned for the future. The airport comes equipped with a driverless electric train and an 18,000 sqm indoor park, along with a fish pool that contains several kinds of coral reefs transplanted from the Red Sea shores of Saudi Arabia. The Jeddah airport is also home to an interfaith prayer room for all passengers to visit.

On my Saudia flight earlier, the difference in the food and service

standards was enormous. Their in-flight Arabic mezze platter rivaled the best I had tasted across the Middle East, with an amazing hummus infused with saffron. When I asked about the dish, the in-flight Saudi stewardess told me it was from a particular region of Saudi Arabia. Again—the attention to detail here was subtle yet powerful.

It was apparent why Saudia was recognized as the world's most improved airline by Skytrax for the second time in four years. That's what the ambitious transformation program Mohammed took part in was setting out to achieve—Top5.

### **Behind the Transformation**

The journey that Saudia has undergone has been the people, the faces behind the brand. I had the opportunity to talk at length to several members of the Saudia team at different levels of the organization. The insights that I gained from these interviews show how Saudia's human capital has been instrumental in bringing about change.

#### ***The leadership team thinks big***

When I talked to Ibraheem Sheerah, Saudia's Chief Transformation Officer, it was apparent that I was speaking to someone with a vision formed through experience in undertaking major transformational projects.

After earning multiple academic qualifications at American universities, including a PhD and an MBA, Ibraheem helped establish the Saudi Arabia Railways company, including a 2,600 km North-South Railway and the Kingdom's first high-speed train between Mecca and Jeddah. Invited to be part of the country's 2030 vision, he joined the Ministry of Economy and Planning, where he was one of the founders of the national center of privatization. That track record then set him up for his next challenge.

He was asked to be part of the leadership team that would

transform Saudia from the ground up, with a complete look at every aspect of the operation, including the finances, processes, governance, and human resources. The ultimate aim was to bring Saudia to a position where it could go toe-to-toe with the other top Gulf carriers, which regularly rank highly in airline league tables.

Ibraheem said, “I did not have a magic wand. I came here with a program and a clear roadmap of where to land on my first destination.”

And as we will see later in this chapter, that destination involved changing the internal culture and empowering Saudia’s staff.

To make Vision 2030 a reality, the Kingdom sees massive infrastructure and tourism projects being built and completed in record time with one hallmark: a commitment to sustainable tourism.

The result will be a unique tourism destination that marries heritage and modernity.

One reason why this big thinking is needed came through in my conversations with Ali Hussain Bondagjy, who is currently the Head of Customer Experience at Flyadeal, Saudia’s low-cost subsidiary airline.

However, as Ali pointed out, one billion Muslims worldwide still need to visit Saudi Arabia at least once in their lives. This is in addition to the increase in leisure traffic that the Kingdom is aiming for.

These are very bold ideas, and as the national flag carrier, Saudia is the gateway to the Kingdom and has a vital role in bringing those ideas to life.

As a result, the leadership team recognized that big thinking was required. In looking at it through that lens, the airline of 2030 would look nothing like the airline of 2010.

That includes breaking existing taboos in company culture and questioning why things are done the same way they have always been done.

Omar Alzubaidi, who is one of the directors of the Top5 program,

told me that there had been a backlash in the past from people who might have been too comfortable with things being done in a certain way and were resistant to amending the service ethos the airline is introducing.

However, the feeling was that transformation needed to happen, even though not everyone would be pleased with the changes. Why wouldn't they be pleased with improving? That is because the new style of service requires a unique skill set, a particular focus on the details and delivering a refined level of service. For instance, Saudia's Top5 butlers onboard are trained by the Savoy Hotel in London. This is the caliber of service the airline is working on implementing—along the lines of a five-star hotel.

That's refreshing, as questioning everything is the only way to transform an organization truly, and you have to be willing to ruffle some feathers. It would help if you created a culture where effort and talent are rewarded, but you don't allow people to coast.

After all, as Steve Jobs famously said, if you want to make everyone happy, you should be selling ice cream. And not in his case, making computers, or in Saudia's case, building one of the most innovative airline brands in the world.

Ibraheem said that one of the following goals is digitalization. As an airline, he recognizes that this is crucial and can't be on a wish list, but it needs to happen (and is happening) right now.

### ***Management leads by example***

If you have a big vision, you need your people to be on board with it. They need to be aware of it; they need to make it happen. Crucially, they need to internalize and believe in it.

That has meant completely changing the internal culture of Saudia, with an emphasis on developing staff and empowering them.

One of the things that impressed me the most was that management is now committed to leading by example.

As Ibraheem told me, “If I want a certain behavior from you, I have to show this behavior in myself.”

Omar told me that in the “old” Saudia, the cabin crew would never see the executive team, except maybe on flights.

Now, at least one C-suite executive is present at every graduation ceremony. Omar arranges a dinner with graduates and the executive at a five-star hotel, such as the Ritz-Carlton. This shows them that they are valued and that their work is critical.

### ***A culture of empowerment***

According to Ibraheem, empowerment has meant giving staff autonomy in their day-to-day jobs and recognizing that sometimes they will make mistakes (obviously with no compromise when it comes to mission-critical areas such as safety).

“We want to develop our team members to be role models and leaders in their positions for the sake of Saudi Arabia.”

As well as promoting empowerment, the airline’s management team has pushed for a unified culture and ethos.

According to Ibraheem, the airline translates this into a slogan called “Shine,” which means “We will shine together.”

“We are taking this journey as one team, one body. We can, and we may sometimes have different opinions. But we also have a heart that beats the same. We love what we do, and we do what we love.”

In line with the new Saudi Arabia and many of the societal changes, there are also increasing opportunities for female staff. For example, Omar told me that Saudia now has twelve Saudi female cabin managers. This would have been a rarity in the Saudia of yesteryears.

### ***A customer-centric approach***

With the management team being committed to transformation, thinking big to support the Kingdom’s 2030 Vision and

empowering the team, the next stage has been to adopt a customer-centric approach.

That has meant listening to what the customer wants and gearing staff training to meet and surpass customer expectations.

Saudia articulates this externally through a slogan called “Naturally Generous Hospitality,” which means graciously delivering Saudi hospitality to guests.

Saudia traditionally won accolades for its premium class. For example, in 2014, it won the “Best First-Class Amenity Kit” from Skytrax. But the same service levels didn’t previously filter down to other cabins.

According to Rafat Omar, a Cabin Guest Director at the airline:

Before, we may only focus on first class, but this doesn’t work if you are trying to become a top-five airline. There needs to be consistency. As a result, we introduced a philosophy that even though the actual onboard product will differ by class, all guests are equal. So if you are flying guest (economy) class, the overall ethos will be the same as business and first class.

Rafat made the point that the hospitality from the staff is what guests will remember—the human interaction. And, of course, good customer experiences drive word of mouth.

Word-of-mouth endorsements are in turn the most powerful form of advertising, something that’s reinforced every year by Nielsen’s *Global Trust in Advertising* study, carried out among 40,000 consumers worldwide.

The most recent (2021) study showed that 88 percent of people trust recommendations from people they know.

Thirty-seven percent trust word-of-mouth recommendations “completely,” 26 percent completely trust branded websites, and 20 percent “completely” trust consumer opinions posted online.



That might sound low, except that only 5 percent don't trust consumer opinions (down from 7 percent in 2015).

The result is that if you are an airline, what people say about you to their friends and family and what they post about you will directly impact sales, which is something Saudia has internalized.

Of course, this customer-centric approach needs to be matched in investment in staff training.

The airline has introduced a "Top5" training program, which at its core, has a foundation based on the cultural practice of being "naturally generous" from the heart.

All new customer-facing staff are given a chance to develop new skills through the Top5 training program, and existing staff have slowly been provided with the opportunity to complete it.

Added to that is coaching and evaluation, something Rafat has been taking the lead on, where he evaluates individual flights and gives goals on where things should be improved.

Listening to customers and examining customer data is, of course, also crucial.

As Ibraheem told me, "We need to know our customers. If we are saying that we are customer-centric, we need to hear from them, the customers."

### **Conclusion—A Commitment to Continuous Transformation**

Together, all these initiatives are impressive and were key to Saudia winning the many industry accolades it has won recently.

And one of the most inspiring stories for me and an example of how Saudia now empowers and gives opportunities to its staff was what Ali shared with me.

In 1996, he served coffee to the Director General (DG) at a meeting while interning with Saudia Catering. He told himself that he would also be in that room but as an executive. More than 25 years later, he achieved his dream when he was invited to meet with

the DG to represent Flyadeal in a meeting with other top executives from various departments.

However, a final question from myself was this.

What's to stop things from slipping? Who is to say that the airline won't have gone backward in 10 years?

The key, according to Ali, is continuous transformation. Just like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia itself, you can never stand still. You continuously have to improve and evolve.

And here, Saudia has an ace up its sleeve—the new generation of Saudis. The recent crop of graduates in this (demographically) young nation is keen to be a part of Vision 2030.

As Ibraheem told me, “They have hope. I like this hope in their eyes. I like the trust, the commitment. This is what makes me come to my office every day.”

As a result, the Saudia journey is one I will almost certainly be revisiting in future years. This is a chapter that is still very much open.

### **Saudia's Leaders and Their Vision**

In addition to interviewing four Saudia managers at different levels of the organization, I discussed with both Eng. Ibrahim Al-Omar, Director General of Saudia, and Captain Ibrahim S Koshy, the airline's CEO, to gain further insights into their vision of the company.

### **Saudia's Transformation Is an Essential Part of the Vision 2030**

In isolation, the strides made by Saudia in transforming itself into a world-class global carrier are hugely impressive.

However, as Ibrahim Al-Omar pointed out, Saudia's journey isn't taking place in a vacuum. Instead, it is part of a bigger picture, that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

As Director General Al-Omar said, Saudia is the national flag

carrier, making it the “Wings of Vision 2030.”

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is witnessing an unprecedented social, cultural, and economic transformation impacting the various phases of life and trade and industry sectors.

The Saudi aviation sector has been experiencing a positive growth momentum with increased travel across the domestic/international, Hajj/Umrah, and leisure sectors.

As a result, Saudia “aims to play a vital role in bringing the world to Saudi Arabia,” showcasing the Kingdom’s rich cultural heritage and its unique giga-projects.

This means that the airline will continue to contribute to Saudi Arabia’s strategic sectors, including tourism and logistics, in line with our commitment to supporting the Kingdom’s efforts to attract 100 million visits and 30 million Umrah pilgrims annually.

This is one reason why Saudia decided on the brand proposition of “Naturally Generous.” “We are proud of our growing role in showcasing the Kingdom’s rich culture and history and its ambitious future to an international audience.”

This pride in the new Saudia Arabia came through in conversations I had with the staff at all airline levels. It was even raised spontaneously in casual discussions outside of the formal interviews.

As a result, showing that Saudia’s journey is happening in tandem with Vision 2030 is sensible from a business point of view. It is also very motivating for Saudia staff.

Staff motivation is an area that Captain Koshy brought up when talking about Saudia’s recent track record of winning industry awards.

## **Industry Recognition Leads to Real Business Benefits**

Saudia has clocked up an impressive array of awards over the past year.

Do they matter? This is a topic debated quite a lot and isn't limited to just the airline industry.

Captain Koshy told me that for Saudia, they do matter and result in three tangible business benefits for the airline.

First of all, it's validation from the public that the airline is moving in the right direction: "The Skytrax Award is a vote of confidence from passengers in the traveling public. In addition, we are also proud of our APEX Health Safety powered by SimpliFlying Award because that's a vote of confidence from the industry as well."

Then it builds confidence among stakeholders and investors: "We've even had a vote of confidence from the financial sector, with six banks putting together the largest financing deal [in the history of Saudia Arabia's aviation industry] so we can expand our fleet."

Finally, it motivates staff because "it shows them that [the airline] is on the right track."

The airline industry in the GCC region is quite a competitive market for attracting staff, so the last point is often overlooked, but it is pretty essential.

To attract the best staff, you want to show momentum, and being recognized as best in class by the traveling public and the wider industry is a way to do that.

## **If You Take Care of Your People, the Business Will Take Care of Itself**

I was again hugely impressed by both the Director General's and the CEO's commitment to creating a supportive work environment, reflective of the new Saudi Arabia, which rewards talent.

Director General Al-Omar told me, “Saudia’s reputation as a caring employer drives our journey of excellence, helping us deliver the highest levels of safety, efficiency, and customer satisfaction as recognized by various international organizations and regulatory bodies.”

In other words, if you look after your team, they will look after the business.

### **Saudia Continues on an Upward Trajectory.**

While there’s no doubt that the carrier is excelling at present, Captain Koshy told me that he is keen for Saudia not to rest on its laurels.

He views the second Skytrax win as an acknowledgment of its “upward trajectory,” which began five years before its 2017 win and is still in progress today.

For example, Saudia is currently focused on becoming one of the top global players in the airline industry under its internal transformation program, which aims to improve the customer experience across every touchpoint along the passenger journey, whether physical or digital. The goal is to embrace and celebrate its “naturally generous” Saudi hospitality.

To this end, Saudia has been introducing new service elements on the ground and in the air.

One such improvement is the introduction of a Saudia ambassador, who greets first and business-class passengers and escorts them to the airline’s lounges at King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah and King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, as well as provides information on available upgrades and flight times.

Onboard, simple measures like hygiene kits for all and warm towel service for economy-class guests elevate the customer experience.

Moving forward, Saudia is also heavily focused on sustainability like many other airlines. Captain Koshy is keenly aware of reducing the airline's carbon footprint, especially as Saudi Arabia is becoming a leader in sustainable tourism.

Not only is the airline currently known for having one of the world's youngest aircraft fleets under the aforementioned financing deal—consisting of 20 A321neos, 15 A321XLRs, and 8 Boeing 787-10s (30 A320neos will also go to its low-cost subsidiary Flyadeal—it is working on a variety of projects covering recycling, low carbon and sustainable aviation fuels, and more.

Participating in SkyTeam's Sustainable Flight Challenge, Saudia partnered with SimpliFlying to operate the world's first in-flight sustainability lab. This involved guests on a Jeddah to Madrid flight submitting ideas on how air travel could become greener. Passengers onboard flight SV 227 were invited to submit ideas on greener air travel, covering the flight itself, time spent at the airport, and arriving at the destination.

After the meal service, each passenger was given three Post-it Notes (printed on recycled paper), where they wrote down their suggestions before handing the notes back to the cabin crew. The notes were then displayed on the bulkhead for all passengers to interact with.

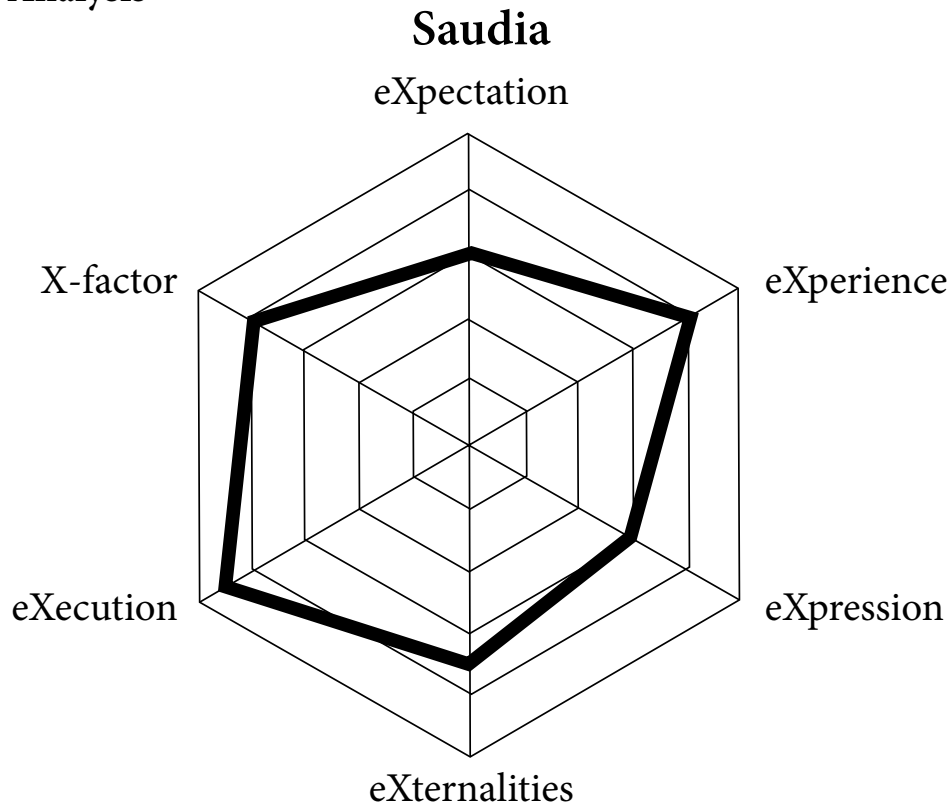
The in-flight lab mirrored a similar *ideas initiative* at Saudia's headquarters in Jeddah, involving the airline's employees. In total, 150 unique ideas were submitted by guests onboard the flight and Saudia team members.

If it remains on this upward trajectory, it may be just a matter of time before Saudia is recognized as one of the world's best airlines. That will be a testament to the efforts of the entire transformation team at the airline, who have not rested on their laurels in the past five years.

Saudia's crowning as the "world's most improved airline" for a second time in four years shows that it takes consistent effort and relentless focus (in good times and bad) to continue upward.

There's undoubtedly much to learn from Saudia, and there will be even more lessons in the years to come.

## 6X Analysis



Saudia has done a phenomenal job over the past few years in transforming its passenger experience. The Top5 training is showing results and leading to multiple industry awards, as well as happier customers. Saudia staff now comprises local female staff, who are well trained to deliver the natural hospitality you'd experience in a trip deep within the Kingdom. Hence, Saudia scores the highest on the 6X model for **Brand eXperience** and **Brand eXecution**. It also helps that the airline now has a brand new airport at its Jeddah hub.

Together with the world's largest SkyTeam lounge, that elevates the entire customer journey. If the airline continues to deliver its top-notch service across cabin classes and across destinations, in that case, it has a chance to truly build “natural hospitality” as a **Brand X-Factor** as well.

As I learned from my conversations with Saudia staff, the communication between team members and across departments has dramatically improved over the years. There are WhatsApp groups of project managers discussing implementations. There are invite-only Facebook groups where cabin crew discuss ways to improve the service. Such transparent employee communication gives the airline high scores in **Brand eXpression**. Though, communication with customers has room for improvement—from flight delay notifications to an updated mobile application. All of these will allow Saudia staff to communicate seamlessly with their customers.

This brings to fore the weak link in Saudia's brand analysis—that of **Brand eXternalities**. When things go wrong, beyond the airline's control, it can do better for its passengers. When the Jeddah airport had a meltdown due to high passenger volumes after the pandemic, there was little that Saudia could do. The brand suffered. These instances would have been even harder to deal with at the airline's outstations. Hence, this is an area of improvement.

In 2021, Saudia was chosen as the fastest-growing airline brand in the Middle East by Brand Finance®. It was already the top consumer brand in Saudi Arabia across sectors, as selected by YouGov. This clearly shows that the brand is well known in its domestic market and is becoming better known in the region. However, the **Brand eXpectation** needs to be built up further at a global level if the airline achieves its ambition to grow significantly leading up to 2030. Saudia is expected to carry soccer fans to the FIFA World Cup 2022 on over 500 daily shuttle flights. That will further bolster brand awareness.



Overall, the Saudia brand is on an upward trajectory. There has been a lot of progress made in the past few years, especially in delivering a superior customer experience. This will allow the airline to reap significant benefits as a brand in the next decade and beyond as it emerges as the Wings of Vision 2030 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.