

Airline Study Shows Brands Struggle in Downturn

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Firm conducts study of U.S. major airline carriers, finds flaws, opportunities

The current, troubled state of the airline industry is nearly matched by the branding of major U.S. carriers, according to a study conducted by brand strategists at Stealing Share, a brand development and research firm.

The study concludes that airlines have not reacted strongly enough to increased passenger dissatisfaction nor taken advantage of brand opportunities in the market for passengers to create preference. The study adds the problem is magnified by the current situation in which the industry is charging more for basic services and cutting back on others to make up for increased fuel costs.

"The basic problem is that many of the airlines market the same things, usually the basic benefits of flying, and so they are not giving passengers a reason to choose if they have a choice," said Tom Dougherty, CEO of Stealing Share, Inc. "Many of the airlines have created a blur in the minds of travelers, so passengers choose solely on price and convenience. Yet, there is a way out if airlines would focus on the strongest emotional currents running in the market."

The study, posted at <http://www.stealingshare.com/AirlineStudy>, takes a look at six major U.S. airlines -- American, Continental, Delta, Northwest, Southwest and United -- by examining their marketing in 2007 and through first quarter of 2008.

It concludes that most of the industry has failed to capitalize on themes and meanings most important to passengers who are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with airline travel, even if costs were not rising.

It does credit Continental with a recent campaign centered around passenger dissatisfaction, gives kudos to Southwest for having a meaningful, although limited, brand and finds brand opportunity for airlines such as United.

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