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AirlineBusiness

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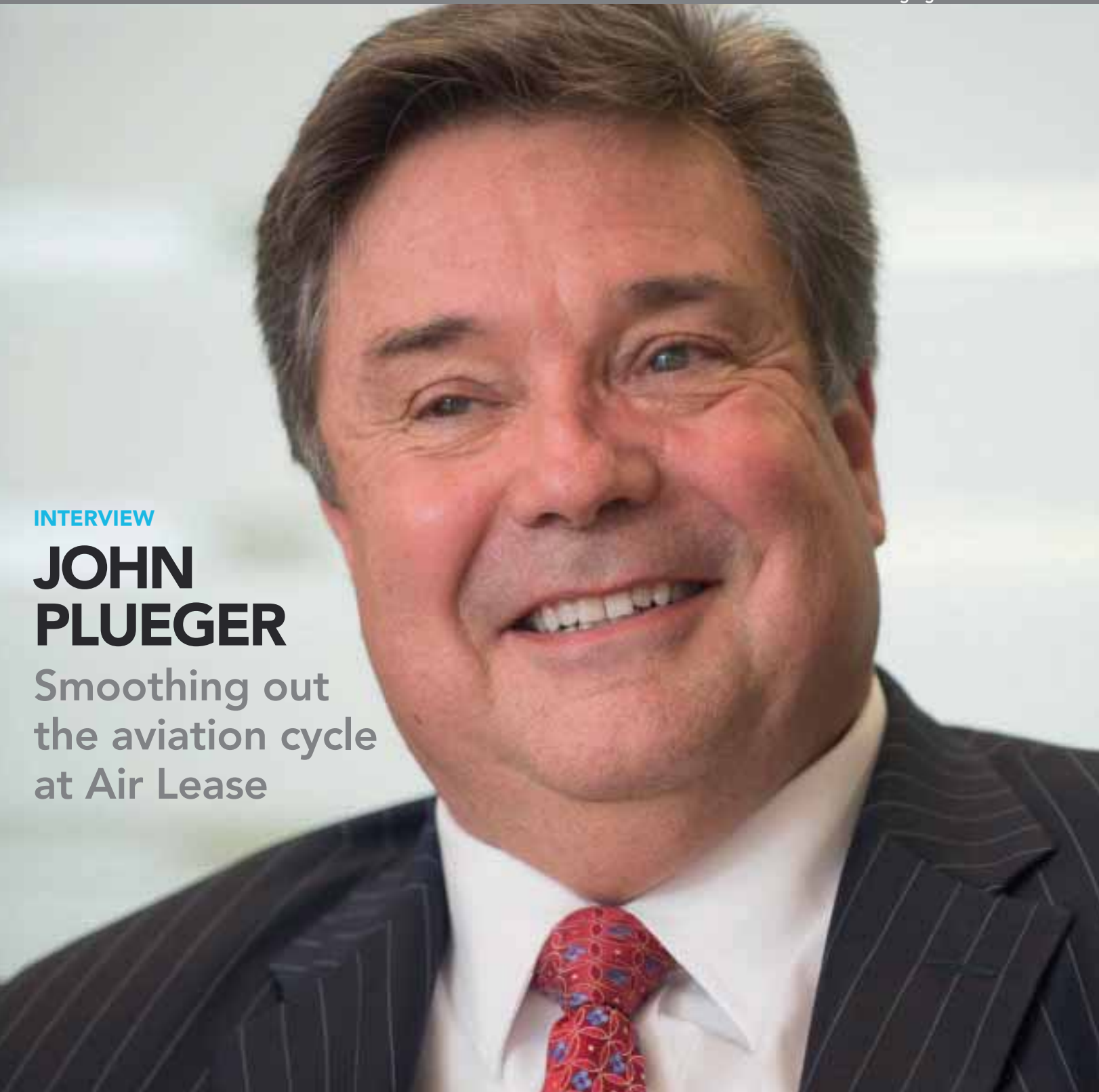
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Southwest has embraced storytelling to establish a strong culture among its staff

Southwest

Sell a strong story

Customers and staff alike can be inspired by true-life tales that are often overlooked by airline sales and marketing teams, says Shashank Nigam, chief executive of SimpliFlying

When United Airlines broke Dave Carroll's guitar and his music video of the incident went viral, the carrier issued a press release that talked about how it transported 99.6% of bags without incident. The message unintentionally implied that United did not care much about the individuals whose bags were actually lost or damaged.

Airline marketing teams often focus on sharing facts and figures. However, we as human beings live through stories, not statistics. Airline executives who hope to build an endearing brand need to know the difference between the two and should focus on storytelling. Airlines are full of stories that need to be told but seldom are. Stories of passengers, of long-serving staff, of children, of people with jet fuel in their veins and of the magic of flight. Smart airlines will appoint a chief storyteller in 2017 to share these stories.

Airlines have traditionally appointed a head of communications and a head of marketing, both tasked with creating a positive brand image. There are the sales, e-commerce and digital departments that often use the collateral created by the marketing and communications functions for their work as well. While that is how most airlines are organised, it may not be the most efficient method.

The departments are often too siloed to be well aligned. They may be sending out different messages in different markets. Moreover, they are regularly duplicating each other's

work. Instead of inspiring, this may even be confusing prospective customers.

For example, the in-flight magazine team regularly puts out destination marketing material. At the same time, the social media teams may be designing different material about the same destinations to share on their platforms. The same content should ideally have been used across channels to project a coherent airline brand image.

In addition to external customers, airlines also need to constantly communicate with employees spread across multiple cities, if not countries. An internal communications team often leads this. In most of the airlines SimpliFlying has worked with, these teams are often short-staffed. They are tasked to inspire out-station country managers, often by sending monthly newsletters and policy updates. It is hard work that is hardly effective.

The airline's staff need stories to be

Stories keep passengers more loyal than any frequent flyer programme ever will

inspired by. The price-sensitive customers need stories to act as a hook. A chief storyteller would act as a unifying force for the multiple departments within an airline, ensuring a coherent message is delivered. The Silicon Valley technology startup Box famously appointed its head of sales as chief storyteller. Few airlines have followed suit.

While statistics are eye-catching, humans are emotional beings. Sharing stories is a much more compelling way to get new passengers on board and employees to stay. Stories keep passengers more loyal than any frequent flyer programme ever will. Stories keep employees happy and motivated. So, what should the chief storyteller at an airline do?

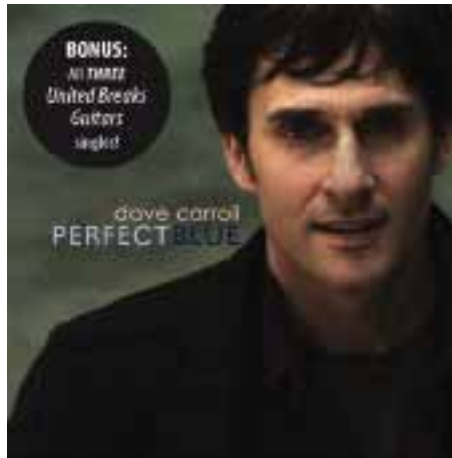
PASSIONATE PLATFORM

To be able to tell great stories, the chief storyteller first needs to gather them. He or she can spend time with employees in different departments to learn about their passions. Listening platforms can be used to monitor social media chatter among passengers. Putting out stories in a manner that gets them shared will make the chief storyteller successful. There are five rules to follow.

Keep them concise – Stories that stick are short. Most people do not have long attention spans, especially in today's world of distractions. During research for my book *Soar*, former Turkish Airlines chief executive Temel Kotil told me: "I have 20,000 CEOs working for me!" He was replying to a question about empowering young staff within the company. By sharing the story of how he trusts his team to do the job, make mistakes, learn from them and carry on, he left a strong impression on me.

Every story must have a hero – At AirAsia, staff can follow a career lattice rather than a career ladder. This means they can switch between departments to progress within the airline. No one demonstrates this better than Kugan Tangiisuran, who joined AirAsia in 2005 as a 17-year-old dispatch boy in the human resources department.

He told me he had only one reason for getting a job at the airline: to become a pilot. Dispatch boy, a clerical job, was what was available at the time he applied, so he took it. The airline had a policy of not allowing new employees to change departments for the first two years, but as soon as his two years were up, he took the exam to qualify for training as a pilot. And he failed. The exam has maths, English and physics portions, and Kugan's knowledge of physics at the time was not sufficient to get him through the test. He tried the exams two more times and failed again both times.



United Breaks Guitars was a hit for Carroll

By 2009, Kugan was working as a dispatch boy in the chief executive's office and saw Tony Fernandes frequently. He told Fernandes about his aspirations and his failures. Fernandes told him it would probably be a good idea to get some physics tuition and encouraged him not to give up.

In 2011, Kugan had still not succeeded in getting into the cadet shift, the programme for training pilots, and was still in his clerical job. One of his bosses said to him: "Why do you still want to be a dispatch boy?" and offered him a job as a flight attendant. He turned it down, because despite his failures thus far, he was still gunning to be in the cockpit. In 2013, one of the field captains offered Kugan a tour of the cockpit, and Kugan even turned that down, "because I wanted to go in as a pilot".

Finally, in 2014, after 11 tries, Kugan passed the pilots' exam, aced the subsequent interviews, and was admitted to cadet pilot training. In May 2015 he made his first non-simulator flight, and in August of that year, he piloted his first commercial flight with passengers on board.

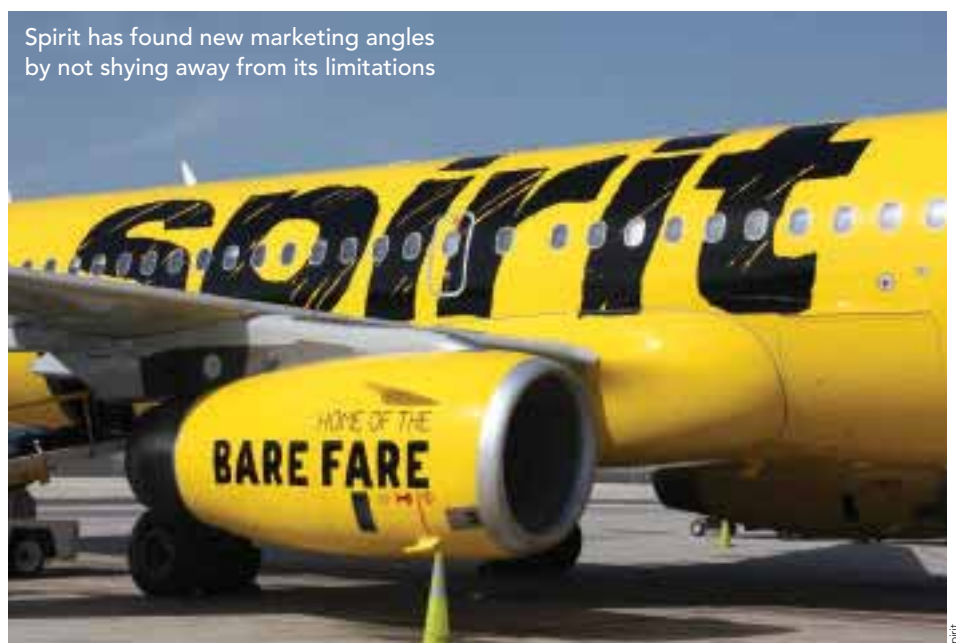
Kugan has become a legend within AirAsia, personifying the airline's "never say never" attitude. Fernandes came to Kugan's graduation ceremony, beaming like a proud father. He gave a speech making a special note of his new pilot's extraordinary accomplishment. "In my 15 years, I've had so many fantastic stories, but nothing makes me prouder than to see a young man like Kugan, who never gave up."

Kugan's story continues to inspire new hires at AirAsia. The hero in a story inspires. People can relate to heroes.

Stories should have contrast – Stories should demonstrate, via analogies or metaphors, the impact your airline had on a passenger's life, how working with your airline changed an employee's life for the better, or even how the marketing team adapted its messages after feedback from the market.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

At Finnair, which targets Asian travellers, there is a famous story about campaigns being run in Japan and China. Finnair's advertisements in Asia often had European cities superimposed on Asian travellers, to reflect their desire to travel to the West. They would also have the tagline, "Your shortcut to Europe". While it makes perfect sense in >>



Spirit has found new marketing angles by not shying away from its limitations

» English, Finnair did not realise the message would not resonate with the locals in the markets they were targeting.

Finnair received feedback from its local offices in Asia that the superimposed cities on humans reminded the locals of ghosts. Moreover, many Asian languages did not have a direct translation for the word “shortcut”. Hence, Finnair updated the images to reflect Asian symbols such as chopsticks and updated the tagline to “the fastest way to Europe”. It was simple and it worked.

This before-and-after story is often told at Finnair to ensure that the staff at headquarters always stay on top of ground realities. Stories with contrast are memorable.

Stories should reflect your values – Many offices feature a mission or vision statement plastered over the reception desk, but not many achieve genuine engagement. Stories that reflect your airline’s values and why your airline exists will truly inspire people to work with you. They will inspire passengers to fly with you. Southwest is an airline that has built a strong culture based on stories.

In 1999, Southwest employee Mike Hafner was diagnosed with a brain tumour and underwent an operation the following year. He remembers receiving handwritten notes and cards from people in the organisation, many of whom had never even met him. Mike says Southwest understands that every employee has a story. The job of leaders is to learn those stories and, through them, connect on a human level with their teams. Mike recovered well and came back to rise up to an executive position at the airline. Mike’s story and the response he



Finnair offers food from chef Steven Liu with the slogan “every meal tells a unique story”

received from his team reflects the Southwest value of treating others as you would want to be treated.

Stories should state what you are not – In airline marketing, it is just as important to show what you are not, rather than only focusing on what you are. This allows anyone who does not relate to your values to count themselves out. That is necessary so the airline can focus its efforts on the people who self-select. Those who try to be everything to everyone rarely make it far.

TRANSPARENCY WINS

Spirit Airlines is a good example. It is an ultra-low-cost airline and is transparent about that. It clearly states on its website what the airline offers. It has even run advertisements about Spirit being the most complained about airline. It remains one of the more profitable airlines in the USA because its customers know that they are getting a cheap fare. Moreover, they also know that they get what they pay for it.

While the role of a chief storyteller seems well suited for airline marketing, perhaps it is even more important for B2B aviation firms. SimpliFlying has worked with the likes of Engine Alliance, Airbus, Boeing and Bombardier – businesses that do not necessarily need to market to the flying passengers at all. Yet it is here that the need to tell stories is greater.

Very often, marketing teams in B2B firms focus on the technical aspects of an aircraft or a particular part. They tend to mostly support the sales staff. But if the vice-president of sales at a

manufacturer brings in its chief storyteller on a pitch to share stories of contrast, that has a very different impact on the prospect than staring at a Powerpoint slide full of data.

The chief storyteller at B2B aviation firms would also seek out stories that inspire the staff. They are often on their own and need a strong emotional pull to lift their spirits, as jobs can be mechanical and hours can be long. The chief storyteller would be the perfect antidote.

United Airlines recently appointed a chief storyteller – someone who comes from outside the industry. If United had appointed one in 2008, perhaps its response would not have been to issue a press release. Instead, it may have launched a video response to “United Breaks Guitars” or invited Dave Carroll to its next new hire briefing to share his story. Then, United’s reaction would have become a story in itself and potentially prevented a slide in the stock price by almost 10% when Carroll’s video went viral.

Storytelling is an art. It is far too important in the airline industry to be left to multiple departments to strike gold. Appointing a chief storyteller can weave magic for customers and lift the spirit of the airline staff. Have you started drafting your job posting yet? ■

Shashank Nigam is the chief executive of SimpliFlying and the author of *Soar*, a study of airline marketing that has dedicated chapters on Southwest, AirAsia, Finnair and more simplisoar.com



A multi-channel approach is more efficient