

SPECIAL REPORT



Executive
travel



High society

BY DAVID CARROLL

AIRLINES ARE DETERMINED TO GET TO KNOW YOU BETTER – AND THEY'RE USING FACEBOOK, TWITTER AND LINKEDIN TO DO IT.

Generally, airlines aren't big on gambling. But in the quicksilver world of social media, where fortune tends to favour the brave, carriers are conducting some clever and entertaining experiments. And travellers are reaping the rewards.

It's hard to imagine any airline has had a more fun "social life" than Air New Zealand. In 2009, the airline scored a YouTube hit with a cheeky in-flight safety video featuring staff members covered only in body paint. Since then, it has entertained viewers with clips featuring flamboyant US exercise guru Richard Simmons and a controversial puppet called Rico, who had his own Twitter and Facebook accounts and met celebrities such as Snoop Dogg and David Hasselhoff, before the airline got rid of him. Air New Zealand claims its creative endeavours have garnered almost 30 million YouTube views.

The airline has engaged in plenty of other stunts using social networks. Last November, it organised a "tweet-up", in which 18 frequent flyers were invited to travel on the Boeing 787 Dreamliner and share the experience on Twitter. The initiative generated hundreds of tweets and photos, as well as a marriage proposal in the cockpit of the aircraft.

Perhaps Air New Zealand's most endearing social media creation is the Airpoints Fairy. For the past few years, the airline's customers have used Twitter and Facebook to ask the fairy to grant them a wish – such as a retro cabin bag, lounge access or extra loyalty points – and every day she has obliged one believer.

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However, it hasn't all been light-hearted fun. Air New Zealand's Christchurch Quake Support Facebook page attracted more than two million views and became a vital hub for connecting friends, families and businesses.

Jo Brothers, Air New Zealand's communications manager for digital and social media, says social media activities have helped the airline inject "a lot of personality" into its brand. "We realise that we need to be creative, edgy and first to market with social media," she says. "There is no doubt that it helps differentiate Air New Zealand from competitors."

Airlines are using social media to find new ways of adding value for passengers, and particularly frequent flyers. "It's a time of opportunity, when new ideas can come to the fore, when people can try new things. But [our efforts] are still very much in their infancy."



Plenty of other airlines are exploring ideas of their own. Between January and March this year, for instance, New York-based JetBlue Airways allowed members of its TrueBlue loyalty program to earn points and special discounts when they used a Facebook application to tell friends they were at a JetBlue terminal.

Lufthansa has also been busy creating some clever smartphone apps that mean members of its Miles and More frequent-flyer program can ask other members for travel ideas and assistance. Users can arrange to meet or share a taxi and they can access location-based offers.

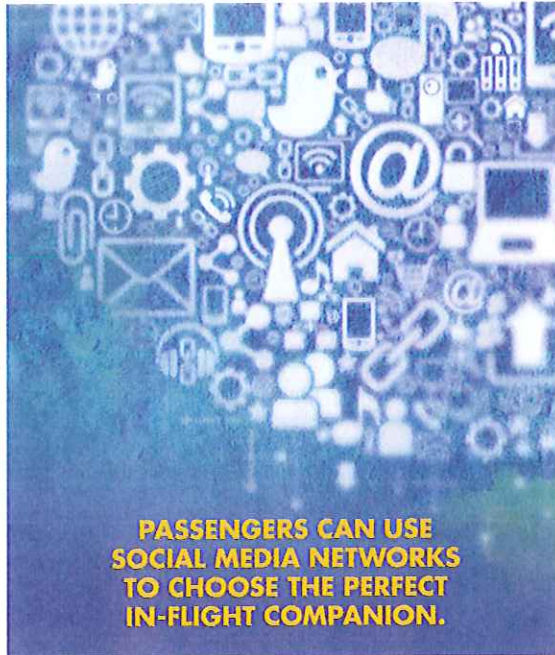
Latvian carrier airBaltic is using crowd-sourcing to help create a new tier for its BalticMiles loyalty program. The carrier has asked its Facebook followers to suggest partners for the tier and to nominate member benefits. Other followers can then vote for their favourite ideas through Facebook "likes" and contributors of the most popular concepts will receive points. The BalticMiles Facebook fan count increased by 20 per cent on the campaign's launch day and the initiative has generated more than 400 ideas.

Rival Estonian Air is also engaging with Facebook aficionados through AirScore, a social media-based loyalty program that lets participants earn points without taking a flight. Once someone signs up to the app in Facebook, they earn points by contributing flight-related stories, getting friends to join or simply sharing information about Estonian Air on their Facebook wall. Points can be redeemed for prizes.

SimpliFlying, a consulting firm that has advised more than 25 airlines and airports on customer engagement, says programs such as AirScore encourage customers to become brand advocates.

In July last year, the company partnered with Cranfield University in Britain to survey 200 frequent flyers and found that more than 70 per cent of them were attracted to a social loyalty scheme. What respondents found particularly attractive was the possibility of earning rewards by promoting an airline and contributing feedback. They were also eager to generate points by using location-based social networking websites such as Foursquare or Gowalla to "check in" at airport lounges or in key destinations, something Air New Zealand and British-based bmibaby have already explored.

"Social loyalty schemes reward all brand advocates,



PASSENGERS CAN USE SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS TO CHOOSE THE PERFECT IN-FLIGHT COMPANION.

regardless of how often they fly or even if they do not fly with the airline," Shubhdeep Pal, senior innovation officer at SimpliFlying, says. "In addition to providing an opportunity for the airline to activate 'sleeping' frequent flyers, who may not travel enough to earn points, it also encourages non-flyers to redeem these points by converting to fly with the airline, as seen in the case of Estonian Air's AirScore."

Pal sees the growing introduction of in-flight connectivity as offering "a multitude of opportunities" for airlines to engage passengers in-flight. "For example, a passenger who uploads photos of their in-flight meal can be rewarded instantly for advocacy. And if someone tweets about bad service, the cabin crew can immediately address this problem."

From a customer service perspective, social media networks have already radically changed how airlines deal with disgruntled passengers. Just last month, Alaska Airlines was forced into damage control when a passenger took to Facebook to complain that she had seen a man with Parkinson's disease miss his flight because staff had offered him no assistance. The airline's initial claim that staff had not reacted because they smelled alcohol caused such an online ruckus that the airline was forced to apologise and announce it was working with a disability advocacy group to learn from the experience.

If there is one social media concept that makes even

some of the more adventurous airline marketers a little uncomfortable, it's "social seating", in which passengers use social media networks to find the perfect in-flight companion.

The Malaysia Airlines program MHbuddy is a Facebook application that lets users search for a flight, book a seat and then see if any of their Facebook friends are heading to the same destination or are on the same departure. If they are, the passenger can then notify their mates of their trip plans and select a seat beside them.

KLM and airBaltic have gone further. In February, the Dutch carrier started its "Meet & Seat" service – now on all intercontinental flights to and from Amsterdam – which lets participants see where fellow passengers are sitting and check out their Facebook or LinkedIn profiles before selecting a seat. Before the flight departs, passengers can even get in touch, meet for a coffee or arrange shared transport.

If that sounds frightening, you'll be pleased to know the program is entirely voluntary. And even when passengers choose to take part, if they don't like their assigned neighbour, they can switch seats before departure and withdraw their profile.

KLM says the service has been most popular with business travellers who want to network or connect with people travelling to the same conference or event.

In June, airBaltic teamed up with Hong Kong-based Satisfly to offer its own social seating system, SeatBuddy. Passengers create their profile and select one of four flight moods – work, relax, business talk and easy chat. They also describe their ideal neighbour. The airline uses all three elements to find the best in-flight buddy and assigns the seat before check-in.

Satisfly founder Sergio Mello, who developed SeatBuddy after too many uninspiring in-flight neighbours, says the system could be rolled out to rail operators, cruise lines and coach tour companies.

At this stage, that's a prospect unlikely to excite Air New Zealand's Brothers. "There is something to be said for the mystery of not knowing who you'll sit next to," she says. Nevertheless, Brothers is confident that the innovation and creativity sparked by social media has been a positive development for airlines and passengers. "There has been some great engagement. People feel a lot closer to the brand and in some cases we have become intimate with people's lives and businesses. I think that's a good thing." ■