



Marketing Messages

MARY CHARLESON

Former high-flying Air Canada hits new market low

I've never met **Robert Milton**, *CEO* of **Air Canada**. But if I do, I know what I would tell him. Air Canada's marketing misses the mark. To be more direct, they just don't seem to get it. There is something to be learned, albeit in a backhanded way, from the Air Canada example. Their latest lame attempt at marketing to lure me, as a customer is so bad I just had to write about it.

I can imagine the banter in the Air Canada boardroom discussing ideas for the latest campaign: "Everyone needs food. We all buy groceries. So let's sell airfares like groceries and everyone will want to buy from us." The headline ATTENTION SHOPPERS harkens back to the old K-Mart days when a tacky voice over would inform you that there was a special on toilet paper in aisle nine. The print ad, appearing in the Vancouver Sun, goes on to inform us that we buy options on cars and software, so why not airfares? The poor guy pictured in the ad remarks, "Options? I love options." NO HE DOESN'T! Air Canada just thinks he loves options. The ad proceeds to outline in painful and complicated detail all the options: Tango, Tango Plus, Latitude, Latitude Plus and Executive Class. It outlines how they will nickel and dime you for Aeroplan miles, or not, and Status miles, whatever those are, as well as priority treatment, or not, of you as a customer. When I first heard the radio spot for this campaign, I honestly thought it was a joke. I thought it was actors doing a spoof on Air Canada. I waited for the punch line and it never came. It would all be laughable if it weren't so painfully obvious what was wrong.

1. All people want to be treated well. They want to be more than satisfied. They want to be delighted. That's what good brands do. Customers don't want to be given a choice of being treated as first or second class, and worse they don't want to have to pay extra for the privilege of being treated well.

2. Nobody but a bunch of navel gazing executive's cares about the options and details advertised. It's similar to the cell phone companies fighting tooth and claw over the number of minutes and when and where customers can use them. We simply don't care. Make a simple offer. Meet OUR needs, not the companies needs. Exceed our expectations. And convey it all in an easy to understand manner.

3. And just what is Air Canada's brand promise? I have no idea. And as a potential customer, that's a huge problem. Are they a premium brand or are they a discount commodity? This latest campaign makes them look like both. Absolutely no brand loyalty, and I would argue limited sales, could result from this campaign. Their promise, whatever it is, should be to put the emphasis on the customer experience. More important that what they sell is the identification of how they will make their customers feel. A brand should feel like a friend. Right now Air Canada feels like a distant acquaintance.

In marked contrast, and coincidentally on the back of the same ad page in the **Vancouver Sun**, was a smaller and more effective ad for **Westjet**. The headline read, "Go ahead, pick any seat you want, except the pilots." The ad is funny, irreverent, and offers a simple message about web check in. The ad reinforces cheap airfares, but not cheap treatment. The positioning statement below their logo says it all. Westjet. It's nicer up here. Their brand promise is clear. We know what they stand for. The experience promises to be fun. If you have ever flown with them, you know they have employee buy in. Everyone feels like an important customer at Westjet, because they are. Even though they paid rock bottom prices for their fare. And that's the point. Too bad Air Canada just doesn't seem to get it. The announcement at Air Canada should go like this: "Attention shoppers, you can buy an authentic first class seat in aisle nine where we promise to gouge you pocketbook and treat you well, but you may want to consider the discounted seat, also in aisle nine, to the same destination where we promise to treat you poorly. Oh, and remember, if you want a smile and respect, we'll be glad to charge you extra". This campaign is a new marketing low for a company flying high in our skies.

Mary Charleson, MBA is president of Charleson Communications, a company specializing in market research, strategy and advertising development. She writes monthly and can be reached at mary@charleson.ca