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by Mike Capizzi

Founding Partner

Insulating the Brand

One Woman's Story of How Loyalty Trumped the Trip from Hell

My sister Barb, a high-powered PR consultant based in Atlanta, recently headed to Chicago for a two-day business meeting. She was running late when she finally arrived at Hartsfield. Delta's skycap line was a madhouse, so Barb lugged her suitcase inside to the Medallion line—where she was greeted by the most unpleasant customer service agent since Steve Martin's nightmare encounter at the car rental desk in Planes, Trains and Automobiles.

"First she insisted that I wasn't on the upgrade list," Barb told me later. "Then she tells me that she can't do anything about it because her computer is locked up, and that I'll have to try to upgrade at the gate. Plus she's rude, not very sociable and keeps telling me what a bad day she's having and how much she hates her job."

Unbowed, Barb headed for the jammed security line. The broach on her suit set off the metal detector alarm, which prompted the security guard to pull her aside and do everything except take her into the back room for a body cavity search. Finally Barb escaped security, caught the train and power-walked her way to her gate—where she was told that she couldn't upgrade. So she found herself in coach, in a center seat between a teenager holding a colicky baby and a smelly Marlon Brando wannabe whose body parts were oozing out of his seat and spilling over into hers.

The plane took off late. All Barb wanted was a cup of coffee and a safe landing in Chicago. But when the flight attendant finally got to her row, the baby was screaming. Marlon tried to help by leaning over Barb to pass a cup of coffee to the distressed mom—and promptly spilled the whole cup all over Barb's new suit.

The plane landed in Chicago an hour late. Already late for her meeting, Barb had to claim her luggage pronto so she could change suits in the airport bathroom and then catch a cab downtown. Of course Delta lost her luggage. After 30 minutes of sweating the carousel, Barb trudged to the baggage counter, where the Delta agent told her that the airline "didn't have enough time" to load her bag in Atlanta.

The agent didn't care that Barb's suit was ruined, that she had missed her meeting and that she was courting a nasty migraine. She was simply out of luck.

"Mike, I haven't had an airline experience that bad in 20 years," Barb told me.

"So I guess you'll never fly Delta again," I said.

"Oh no," Barb said. "I flew them a week later to New York."

"Why?" I asked.

"For the SkyMiles."

SkyMiles is a nice program, but it's largely no different than any other major airline program you could name. While Atlanta is a Delta hub, Barb isn't without choices. But despite the Trip from Hell, she chose to stay with Delta. Why give them a second chance?

The answer lies in the ability of a well-designed loyalty program to shield the core brand from a negative experience. SkyMiles is itself an affinity brand that insulates and protects Delta from consumer wrath. Although the customer satisfaction score in this case was intolerably low, the added dimension of the affinity brand kept Barb's loyalty high.

How many trips from Hell can Barb stand before the SkyMiles insulation wears thin and she defects from the brand? Does the strength of the loyalty program correlate to the number of shocks the core brand can sustain? Does the past experience of redeeming awards, or the goal of future awards, define the degree of protection? What role do soft benefits—the special check-in lines, the upgrades, etc.—play in strengthening the insulation?

I can't answer all of those questions; neither can Barb. But I do know that without the SkyMiles program, my sister would certainly be flying on another airline.

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Marketing Strategists is an independent consulting practice focused on the responsible design and enablement of your best customer and loyalty marketing strategies. We specialize in creative, customer-focused, data-driven marketing solutions. Founding partners Mike Capizzi and Terri Gaughan collectively bring over 50 years of experience and the passion for best customer initiatives to deliver proven insights and results.

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