



Brand Strategy and Ideas for British Airways

By Geeta Sundaram

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Background

- As air travel recovers strongly from the pandemic years, airlines are flying fully booked flights and reporting the best corporate earnings in years
- British Airways has also [reported](#) a great set of corporate earnings this year and is also adding new destinations and routes to their network
- Most of the boom in air travel is of the leisure kind so far, and BA too has benefitted from it
- From the routes and network of destinations featured on BA's [website](#), it appears that BA serves the European continent the most besides domestic routes in the UK, followed by North America, mainly the US
- It used to be "the world's favourite airline" once in the late 1980s and early 1990s after it was privatised and BA ran brand campaigns for years with this positioning
- That was based on total passenger miles flown, I think, and not only on destinations and routes
- Those were its best years, captured brilliantly by the ["Smile" TV advert](#) created by Saatchi & Saatchi
- From those years, BA seems to have pulled back somewhat to focus on personalized attention to passengers reflected in both ["To Fly, to Serve"](#) and the ["British Original"](#) brand campaigns
- I am not sure what BA's brand strategy is, but it appears to me that the company ought to have built on the world's favourite airline image and positioning and moved ahead from there to even stronger and better brand connections with travellers around the world
- In the intervening years, look how much the world has globalized and become interconnected through business and economic ties as well as culturally
- BA too has grown and evolved into a much larger organization, acquiring Iberia in 2010 as well as Aer Lingus in 2014 and Vueling in 2012, and setting up a parent holding company, International Airline Group (IAG) in 2011
- With all these developments, BA ought to build its brand in a way that reflects the largeness of heart and purpose required in today's world of air travel, growing as it is in leaps and bounds
- I am not sure how much Brexit might have affected British Airways' operations in Europe, but it's good to see the airline maintain its connections with the continent and its travellers

- Keeping all these factors in mind, I think it is time for BA to embark on a new brand strategy that builds on the past and propels the airline forward into this century and beyond

Having worked briefly on the British Airways business in the Delhi office of Ogilvy Advertising in the late 1980s and early 1990s and also having flown on BA to UK and France, I think the airline is poised for much greater days ahead if it takes the right strategic direction. I worked mostly on tactical local communication for the Indian market in those days, which was led by direct marketing, while the “Masterbrand” campaign - as BA used to call it – was created by Saatchi & Saatchi in London and was global.

I had initially put these thoughts down in 2010, but lost them to termites at my aged parents’ place in Goa. I am now recreating the brand strategy and campaign ideas from memory, while also keeping new developments and today’s context in mind.

British Airways’ competition

In today’s highly crowded and competitive environment in the airline industry, let us first consider who British Airways is up against. Because whilst there is huge potential for the global air travel market to grow, a large part of BA’s business is still going to come from fighting for a larger share of the mature markets.

Closer home (UK, Ireland and Europe):

- Easy Jet
- Ryanair
- Virgin Air
- Aer Lingus (BA’s sister airline)
- All the full-service European carriers and other low-cost airlines operating in the continent

Transatlantic (UK, Europe, North America):

- Virgin Air
- Air France/KLM
- Lufthansa
- Swiss Air
- American Airlines, Delta and United Airlines

Rest of the world (Latin America, Africa, Asia):

- Iberia (BA’s sister airline)

- European and American full-service carriers
- Middle-eastern airlines such as Qatar, Emirates and Etihad
- Singapore Airlines
- Cathay Pacific
- Qantas

Good to see BA now connect to five Indian cities; in the days when I worked on it only Mumbai and Delhi were connected and Madras was added later.

India is an important market for British Airways to serve all of South and South-east Asia, as the airline doesn't seem to connect many destinations in the region, barring Singapore.

Target Audience

- Frequent international travellers from around the world, especially those in the UK, Europe and US who travel overseas on business and leisure at least once a month, and those travelling at least once a year
- They would be men and women over 30 years of age and mostly from English-speaking countries, or fluent in English
- Well-travelled individuals who like exploring new countries, cultures and people
- Not a hard and fast rule, but they are likely to be people with a favourable opinion of Britain and travel there often
- As travellers they expect their travel needs to be addressed promptly and efficiently, without too much fuss
- They set high standards for themselves and expect the same from their airline
- They would appreciate BA for its routes and destinations as well as for its high standards of service

British Airways' strengths

There are several strengths that British Airways can use to its advantage, in building its brand

- Global destination network, routes and flights
- Partner arrangements with American Airlines for the US and with Qatar for Asia and the rest of the world
- Operating from aviation hub at Heathrow in London and especially the new Terminal 5, from where American Airlines and Qatar Airways also operate

- Experienced and well-trained airline staff – both ground staff and cabin crew
- Investments in technology and modernizing all aspects of the airline, including in new, more environment-friendly aircraft
- Continuous upgradation of all classes of travel every few years to meet customers' needs
- BA Holidays, an add-on service that allows travellers to explore Britain more fully
- A unified frequent flyer programme across all sister airlines (BA, Iberia, Aer Lingus and Vueling) that I recommend be branded Avios (currently the name for BA's reward points).

In this context, I would like to add a couple of suggestions:

1. British Airways ought to allow travellers who make online travel bookings directly on BA's website to save their travel preferences, so that they and the airline don't have to bother with details every time they make a fresh reservation
2. British Airways ought to devise traveller-friendly flight schedules for each country or region specific to travellers' preferences. For example, I think travellers from southern and western regions of India wouldn't mind early morning departures as they wake early, while those from northern and eastern India would prefer flight departures later in the morning.

From years of flying and collecting data on BA travellers, it should be possible for BA to study these and fine-tune flight schedules as this aspect could also be an important differentiating feature of the British Airways brand.

British Airways strategy going forward

I think British Airways should adopt a three-pronged strategy, each targeted at a region or market.

- In its home market (UK, Ireland and Europe) as defined in the competition section, BA should aim to be the preferred airline, given its strong network, routes and flight options in the region
- In the transatlantic region, BA ought to strengthen and maintain leadership by garnering larger shares of the lucrative transatlantic market
- In the rest of the world, where there is ample room for further growth of air travel, BA ought to build and grow its network of

destinations and customer base. It can do this by strengthening connections with the Africa continent and with South and East Asia as well as APAC, considering how important these regions are going to be in terms of future economic growth

Therefore, while BA will adopt a fight for market share in the mature markets of its home region as well as the transatlantic, it will have to grow the market for air travel in the rest of the world. It can gain a head-start by acting early and connecting important growth centres in Africa as well as Asia better than they are now.

How British Airways can position itself distinctively

British Airways can leverage several strengths as mentioned earlier and certain unique features of its brand in order to differentiate itself from other full-service airlines that also operate globally.

In doing so, it can and must build on the world's favourite airline brand positioning of the past, while taking it forward in ways that reflect today's environment and customer.

I have already mentioned the need to connect and grow the market in many regions of the world. If we also add the following dimensions, we can arrive at a more comprehensive, global positioning for the British Airways brand:

- Britain's pioneering innovations in the history of aviation
- Britain being a country of great world explorers
- British Airways's new, modern fleet of aircraft and upgraded services
- BA's ever-expanding network of destinations and flights
- BA's environment-friendly service standards

By bringing all of this together, British Airways can build a distinctive brand positioning for itself as an airline that is always pushing the boundaries and raising the standards of air travel.

Brand positioning of British Airways

British Airways takes you to new horizons by flying faster, farther and cleaner.

Brand promise

British Airways makes flying to any destination a smooth-sailing exploration.

Tone and manner

- British and international
- An experienced and knowledgeable captain and travel guide

- An exploring and innovative outlook

Creative Idea for British Airways

Following on from the “Smile” TVC of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s which celebrated the joys of travel and of meetings and reunions of people from around the world, we move forward with communication that once again celebrates air travel, but in today’s context and in a typically British way.

Considering that Britain was not merely a nation of explorers and aviation pioneers, but a great sea-faring island nation, the creative idea for British Airways revolves around BA sailing the skies!

This creative idea is executed slightly differently in film and in print.

Main TV advert (BA sailing the skies)

Film opens on a flurry of activity at Heathrow Airport Terminal 5, as travellers arrive and check-in. The pace is busy, even frenetic, yet orderly and smooth. We get to showcase some of BA’s and Terminal 5’s tech in the process.

Dissolve to passengers now ready to board the BA aircraft on the tarmac. Visually we gradually ease in our metaphor of sailing at this stage. The way the boarding scene is shot from a low angle and featuring the entire expanse of the aircraft’s side makes it look like a great big ship.

(Music fades in. The music is western classical but a contemporary composition that evokes an ocean liner voyage, building in anticipation and excitement, along with the mysterious. The soundtrack blends in elements of music from other lands, towards the end of the film).

Dissolve to the BA flight taking off. Here again, we view it from an unusual angle – front-on, as the huge aircraft taxis towards us before flying over our heads. This is immediately followed by an expansive view as seen from the aircraft cockpit. Clouds drift by.

Dissolve to passengers in economy class. A young couple settle in their seats and help their little daughter fasten her seat belt. She excitedly looks out of the aircraft window. Strangely, what she sees are rows of white-tinged clouds floating by, as if they were light froth on waves rolling in.

Dissolve to an executive in BA Club World (business class) enter his little cubicle and roll his arm desk towards him. His computer is already on and he starts to scroll the screen, when we hear the captain’s voice announce some flight details. He looks out of his window and we get a tilted view of a sea of clouds below, as the flight navigates it.

Dissolve to an older couple travelling BA First. They are lounging in their suite, when an acquaintance fellow passenger stops by and says something to them. We then see all three of them enjoying a drink at the bar on board.

Dissolve to the sky outside. We see all the people we just met, floating in their individual seats, cubicles and suites out at sea. Clouds drift dreamily by.

Camera moves even higher and the entire BA flight turns into a flotilla of little boats sailing down together below.

From the flotilla above, we dissolve to rows of cars driving up to airport terminals on the ground. This is followed by scenes of happy and joyful meetings and reunions at airports. Some travellers get into cars and drive away.

FVO: Under our wing, you'll think of every journey as a great big adventure and exploration worth looking forward to.

The BA flight crew comprising pilots and cabin crew look on and wave goodbye, pleased with the way their journey has gone.

Super: Now flying faster, farther and cleaner.

Super: British Airways

To new horizons

(Note: I thought it might be worth trying something a little cheeky: inserting just a bar or two from the musical refrain of Rule Britannia into the music soundtrack, at the time we see the flotilla. Not sure if it might offend some viewers, even though it is meant in jest).

Shorter-duration TV adverts on BA service

While the TV advert idea I have just shared above is to position the main British Airways brand, it might be a good idea to also support this with shorter duration TVCs that focus on differentiated aspects of BA's service.

These would be on:

- (a) Network and destinations, especially transatlantic
- (b) Better, more personalized service thanks to saved preferences
- (c) More thoughtfully created flight schedules

In all these TV adverts too, we retain the main idea of BA sailing the skies, as you'll discover below.

TV advert (transatlantic network)

Film opens on a young couple engaged in a video chat on their computer with their aged parents in a distant land.

Dissolve to youngsters texting and chatting on their mobiles inside a metro rail.

Through social media and internet graphics, we dissolve to airline graphics depicting routes and destinations on the screen, while a female voice over comes on.

FVO: Long time since you met loved ones?

No one connects you better in person than British Airways, especially across the Atlantic.

We now dissolve to the same aged parents on board a BA flight. They are floating on wave-like clouds while a BA flight attendant serves them their meal.

Super: British Airways

To new horizons

TV advert (Personalised service)

Film opens on a group of people at a restaurant studying the menu and ordering a meal.

The waiter looks a little flustered as guests place their orders and then change their minds.

From the restaurant menu, we dissolve to BA's inflight menu and then the reservation page on BA's website, as a female voice over comes on.

FVO: On British Airways, you can always have your way thanks to a little ingenious feature called saved preferences.

Dissolve to some of the guests at the restaurant now aboard a BA flight and a flight attendant shows them to their seats.

Dissolve to the travellers now floating in their separate seats and sailing across an ocean of clouds. They look relaxed as they sip their refreshing drinks.

Super: British Airways

To new horizons

TV advert (Traveller-friendly flight schedules)

Film opens on a family about to retire for the day. As they wish each other goodnight and children are tucked into their beds, we dissolve to a different scene elsewhere.

Executives working late into the night, burning the midnight oil trying to meet an urgent deadline.

We dissolve to a city at night, with lights going off in several buildings one by one.

These city lights dissolve into an electronic flight information board at an airport, as a female voice over comes on.

FVO: We know the early risers from the night owls.

Having flown millions of travellers across the world for decades, we offer the most traveller-friendly flight schedules.

Dissolve to the business executives on board BA Club World. Their cubicles float on an ocean of clouds while they get a restful night's sleep.

Super: British Airways

To new horizons

British Airways Print Campaign

In the print medium, we treat the creative idea of British Airways sailing the skies a little differently. Here, the horizon where sea and sky meet, becomes a visual leitmotif, creating a sense of exploration and the mysteries of what lies beyond. And the copy speaks of how travelling with British Airways is an exploration worth looking forward to.

Print advert #1

Headline: Under our wing, every journey is an adventure to look forward to.

Copy:

Beyond the horizon is a place in your mind. In your bucket list. In your travel itinerary.

Good, we're already making progress. Now, you need a travel companion who can fly you there with utmost expertise. And the least fuss.

Who else but the airline from the great explorer nation. The great navigator who knows the seven seas like the back of one's hand.

British Airways was once the world's favourite airline for a reason. More international travellers trusted our knowledge, training and experience than anyone else's.

It's time to do one better.

With a modern, fuel-efficient aircraft fleet and more routes and connections than you'll ever need, we're flying higher.

Farther. Faster. Cleaner.

Sign-off: British Airways

To new horizons

Print advert #2:

Headline: Look in any direction and we'll fly you there at the time of your choice.

Copy:

Once you've decided to travel somewhere, finding a convenient flight should be the least of your worries, right?

Hmm... if only the world worked that way.

But, guess what? We at British Airways have created flight schedules that match travellers' preferred timings. From studying travel data of our customers for decades.

What's more, connecting flights through Heathrow Terminal 5 – our home for 15 years – are a breeze. Thanks to our partner airlines, American and Qatar operating from there as well.

On the rare occasion that we don't fly somewhere of your choice, we have airline partners who do. So, you can fly wherever. Whenever.

With a modern, fuel-efficient aircraft fleet and more routes and connections than you'll ever need, we're flying higher.

Just one of the many pleasures of flying British Airways. Once the world's favourite airline. Now upping the ante several notches towards new horizons.

Sign-off: British Airways

To new horizons

Print advert #3:

Headline: No better way to cross the Atlantic, whichever class you fly.

Copy:

Thank geography for it. We are smack in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and as an island nation we have made the most of it.

And so it is, with British Airways flights. With 29 destinations in North America connected with 100 destinations in continental Europe through Terminal 5 at Heathrow, you are spoilt for choice.

Besides, between our sister airline, Iberia, and us, we connect you best to Latin and Central America as well.

And each class on British Airways flights brings you the finest of our flying expertise, network and airline partnerships.

Allow us to share a secret. Most transatlantic travellers on British Airways love to stop over at London. And guess what? They opt for British Airways holidays as well.

Oh, the advantages of being located in the Atlantic are simply too many. But we're always happy to pass them all to you.

Sign-off: British Airways

To new horizons

Print advert #4:

Headline: Your wish is command to all 10,000 British Airways worldwide crew.

Copy:

Now, isn't it marvellous and reassuring to know that when you make a reservation on a British Airways flight, you have an option to save your flight preferences for future?

From preferred seat and inflight baggage, meals and drinks preferences to special requests such as unaccompanied young and aged traveller assistance, wheelchair assistance as well as airport transfers are all stored and saved once and for all.

No matter where you travel, your flight preferences are already known to our crew and every aspect is taken care of.

And if you are a British Airways Avios Flier, you can even make last minute changes in your bookings and they will be accorded the highest priority.

That's because we continue to invest in technology upgradation to keep step with your requirements. All systems on deck.

Just one more way British Airways brings years of flying expertise to raising standards whenever needed.

Sign-off: British Airways

To new horizons

Print advert #5:

Headline: We'll continue to connect East and West, proving Kipling wrong.

Copy:

As the flag carrier of a great explorer and seafaring nation, we know it makes sense to connect the whole wide world.

Recognising that Asia and the east have so much to offer the world in terms of economic growth as well as cultural exchanges, we are always expanding our network in the region.

By partnering with Qatar Airways and operating direct and non-stop flights from 5 Indian cities, we are keen to expand our horizons even further.

We are adding more destinations and routes each year and look forward to serving the APAC region more comprehensively in the near future.

The Global South deserves better and Iberia is our best link yet to several destinations in Latin America.

We're forever expanding our horizons. So, watch the skies.

Sign-off: British Airways

To new horizons

British Airways on digital media

Considering how much people use the internet to browse, research and then make their travel reservations online these days, it is necessary for British Airways to use the digital medium.

However, they ought not to advertise on social media except perhaps in a limited way on Twitter and Instagram for economy and premium economy classes of travel. These should be planned bursts of communication, whenever there is a new upgraded service or a new advertising campaign running on traditional media such as TV and print. These digital adverts ought to lead the

reader/viewer to British Airways' website, where more information is imparted and an effort is also made to include the person in BA's database as a potential customer, with the individual's consent, of course.

For British Airways First and Club World, BA ought to use social media channels like Twitter and Instagram as PR tools, sharing corporate news and important updates.

From what I see on Twitter, I notice that British Airways is currently using the platform only to share important news and updates.

Direct Marketing for British Airways

The reason I suggested collecting a database of potential BA customers through the digital medium campaign for BA Economy classes is to be able to communicate with them one-to-one later through direct marketing.

An airline's frequent flier programme is an important part of this direct marketing effort that helps to build and grow the brand's relationship with customers, while rewarding them at the same time.

British Airways has a frequent flier programme called the Executive Club, from what I saw on [BA's website](#). This can be easily confused with British Airways' business class which has been called Club World for many decades now. I also noticed that travellers collect something called Avios as reward points (which is described as currency that travellers use to redeem air miles on the website).

I would urge BA to refrain from calling it currency, or anything else, when it is merely a reward point that the traveller earns on every air trip made. The same reward points are redeemed by the traveller towards a free journey.

Rather than brand the reward point, it makes more sense to brand the frequent flier programme. My suggestion is to change BA Club to Avios or any other appropriate brand name. I would also recommend that the frequent flier programme is common across sister airlines such as Iberia, Aer Lingus and Vueling, as it would encourage travellers to fly those airlines as well, with the advantage of being able to redeem reward points with any of them.

At the time that British Airways launches any new communication or advertising campaign, the same brand promise and positioning ought to be communicated in direct marketing, ensuring synergy of messaging and maximum impact. On the other hand, there might be occasions when a direct marketing campaign needs to run independently, and the team must ensure that it is in sync with the overall brand positioning and brand imagery of the airline being communicated in other media.

British Airways could also incorporate British Airways Holidays into its direct marketing exercise and calendar, especially during summer and other holidays. I am not sure if British Airways has any partner agreement with a hospitality company globally or even just within Britain, though I think it would be a good way of extending the benefits of the frequent flier programme.

Public relations for British Airways

Operating in an industry that is a service industry based on people and relationships, British Airways is bound to need good public relations at all times. Not only does the company need to maintain good relations with all its employees, it also needs to build relationships with businesses and with media.

Industrial action is common in the airline industry, and I think BA ought to have a well-thought through internal communications programme designed to bring out the best in its employees. In addition, BA ought to be engaged actively in recruiting and training the best candidates regularly and this too would form an important part of BA's public relations exercise.

I see these as important ways to avoid or at least mitigate crises and the need for crisis management, which is usually when PR steps in.

When it comes to customers, British Airways ought to look beyond individual travellers to the corporate world and their frequent travellers. BA must engage with corporations (using direct marketing) for corporate accounts, as well as engage with companies at an industry level. I would suggest British Airways tie up with the Confederation of British Industry and partner them for all business and industry-related events and conferences.

This is important, as a flag-carrier airline speaks so much about a country and its way of doing business. In fact, I do have thoughts on how Britain can position itself better for business and investment, but that is a discussion for another day and time.

British Airways must also engage regularly with local British media, especially business media, as well as international news channels and publications, especially business channels, newspapers and magazines. This can take the form of media interactions with the company's leadership team, press conferences to announce important corporate news, media visits to new airport terminal openings, new aircraft purchases, and the like. They can also get the media to report on their environment-friendly airline policies, new destinations and routes added worldwide. The idea is to communicate the new brand positioning of British Airways adequately through editorial coverage.

Considering that British Airways operates globally as an airline, it is key that certain PR practices and guidelines are laid down for every market to follow. These would set the minimum level for internal and external communications and the outcomes to be achieved.

Conclusion

It is time British Airways raised its sights and aimed to be one of the world's greatest airline brands, all over again. To do this, it needs to follow a new brand strategy as I have recommended in this document. One which maintains links with BA's legendary past, and is at the same time more relevant and suited to today's globalized and interconnected world.

The airline must also build a distinctive positioning for itself through communication that is different, relevant and compelling. The idea of British Airways sailing the skies is an apt one, and brings back the sense of adventure and exploration to air travel.

Here's hoping BA will soon feel the wind in its sails!

This brand strategy document for British Airways and the ideas it contains have been conceptualized and written by Geeta Sundaram, advertising professional and blogger at www.peripateticperch.com who can be reached at geetasundaram08@gmail.com or via <https://www.linkedin.com/in/geeta-sundaram-aka-wise-owl>