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WITH THOR ACROSS THE HEAVENS

Ben Larson

Consumers are generally affected by packaging and naming of particular products. Take, for example, a product like shampoo. A few years ago, the brand Hälsa was launched. While most people probably saw the label showing the girl with the beautiful hair, they were very likely also influenced by the name Hälsa. Had they understood its meaning [Swedish = health], they would probably have had even more faith in the shampoo, but the enigmatic and unusual-sounding name created a favorable impression in them.

Most air travelers today only want to get to their destination and pay little, if any, attention to the airline whose plane they are on or to the aircraft itself beyond maybe the question of comfort. However, the idea of naming is serious business and a factor that most airlines utilize to increase market share and customer image.

Airlines, like all companies, want to have a good image with the public. Most of them want to give off the impression that they love what they are doing and that they provide a friendly atmosphere. While most, if not all of them, want and try to do this, to set them apart from the competition, many airlines try to portray a certain uniqueness. Zambia Airways many years ago marketed itself as the provider of the “real” Africa, while Thai claims to be the “Window of Asia.” Most airlines try to find an image niche and then capitalize on it. Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) recently re-emphasized its “proud Scandinavian heritage” (Flint). Naming in the airline business, however, goes beyond their slogans. The name given to their business class is indicative of this. There are many names given, e.g., Thai Airways’ “Royal Orchid,” Alitalia’s “Magnifica Club,” Air Frances’ “L’Espace le Club,” etc., but they all want to create an aura of sophistication and luxury.

While slogans and naming of individual aspects of their operations are important and easy to understand, a maybe less familiar aspect of naming is the practice of giving names to individual aircraft. Not all airlines do this, but quite a few of the world’s major airlines practice the policy of giving each of their aircraft a unique name.

There are hundreds of airlines world-wide today, and in this short study an effort was made to contact only major carriers somewhat evenly distributed around the world.

Given below is a geographical distribution of the airlines contacted:

North America

*United Airlines
 *America West
 Canadian Airlines
 *Air Canada
 *Continental

South America

Varig
 Aero Peru
 Aerolinas Argentinas
 *Lan Chile

Africa

*South African Airways
 Kenya Airways
 Air Afrique
 Royal Air Maroc

Europe

*British Airways
 *Iberia
 Alitalia
 *Lot
 *Finnair
 *SAS
 Lufthansa

Asia

*Cathay Pacific
 *Air New Zealand

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- *China Airlines
- *Singapore Airlines
- *Quantas
- Royal Jordanian Airlines
- *=Indicates a response received

An effort was made to contact the carriers via e-mail, but as the responses were few and slow in coming, the airlines that had not yet responded were all sent an individualized letter. However, in spite of all these efforts, only about 17 of the 27 carriers, i.e., 63% responded. Most responsive were airlines in Asia, Europe, and South-East Asia.

Of all the airlines contacted, about 22 percent of them at present practice individual naming of aircraft. Some of them had done this in the past, but the practice had been discontinued, e.g. United Airlines. Even though some of the airlines did not provide the information needed, a few of them, e.g., British Airways, do practice this type of naming.

To obtain a standard for the types of names used, Adrian Room's *An Alphabetical Guide to the Language of name Studies* [London: Scarecrow Press, 1996] was used.

These aeronautonyms (Room 3), aircraft names, are quite interesting. Marketers tend to select names for their products and services that create a certain personality and identity (Piller 97). Often airlines try to select names that are reflective of their base of operations. While there are exceptions, aircraft names often tend to fall into two categories-- geographical features/places or famous people. LOT, the national Polish airline, for example, names only its long-range aircraft and then after major Polish cities such as Gdansk, Warszawa, Krakow, etc. This use of astionyms (Room 54) is also employed by South African Airways(SAA), which has some of its planes with names such as *Cape Town*, *Durban*, and *Bloemfontein*. Swissair, the national airline of Switzerland, follows a similar pattern. It names airplanes after Swiss cantons, e.g., *Zürich*, *Basel*, *Berne*, and cities and municipalities close to airports, e.g., *Kloten*, *Dübendorf*, *Embrach*, etc. By doing this the airline recognizes its close ties with Switzerland but also with these particular places. A note of interest here is that these administrative choronyms (Room 3) are selected by officials, not by Swissair itself, after relevant municipal authorities have made application to have their names put on aircraft (Gutknecht); in this way, a certain fairness is guaranteed.

Other geographical features used in naming include such choronyms as foreign countries where an airline flies to

[Iberia: *Argentina*, *Venezuela*, *Cuba*, etc.]; national parks and particular areas or places of tourist interest in the airline's home country[Iberia: *Teide*, *Islas Cies*, *Lago de Sanabria*, etc.; Air India: *Konark*, *Tanjore*, etc.]; or mountains or rivers (Oronyms and potamonyms, respectively; Room 54)[Air India: *Ganga* (river), *Yamuna* (river), etc.; South African Airways: *Tugela* (river), *Marico* (river), etc.].

Commemorative names are also quite common (Room 24). Generally, these are names of historically famous people, which are often well known in the nation of a particular airline. Iberia, for example, names its 747s after Spanish writers, e.g., *Cervantes*, *Lope de Vega*, etc. and its Airbus 340s after famous Spanish women such as *Agustina de Aragon* [Heroine of War of Independence, 1808] and *Concha Espina*. [Spanish novelist, 1869-1955]. Air India has named two of its 747s after emperors of Indian dynasties and given them the names of *Akbar* and *Samudra Gupta*. KLM, the Dutch airline, while not formally included in this survey, follows a similar pattern but goes beyond its national borders; one of its 747s, for example, is named *R. E. Byrd* after the famous polar explorer. A similar but maybe a little bit more self-centered approach is that of naming some of its aircraft after famous people within that particular company; this has been the practice with a few of Continental Airlines' aircraft with names such as *Sam Ashmore* and *Robert Six*.

An approach reminiscent of that of Air India has been the one used by Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). Instead of naming the fleet after famous kings or geographical features, it has gone back to Viking history using mythonyms (Room 66). Thus, all of its aircraft, not just ones used on international routes or more prominent ones, are given a real Viking/Scandinavian name from Icelandic sagas with a last name of *Viking*. For example, one of its 767-300ER is named *Helga Viking*, while a particular MD-90 is *Isrid Viking* (Johansen). This is probably done as to draw attention to nordic qualities, associations to both ancient and modern ones. A note of interest here is that while the Viking forefathers of the present-day owners of SAS-- the governments of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden-- populated Iceland, present-day Iceland with its Viking sagas does not have ownership of SAS but has its own airline-- Icelandair, an airline that omits any Viking naming.

While the majority of the world's airlines do not practice naming of individual aircraft, quite a few do or have done so in the past, e.g., United Airlines. Naming of aircraft can become quite a political issue due to ownership [private vs. government], constituents served, and destinations flown. A private airline theoretically has the power to name a plane whatever it wants it to be called. Government owned airlines such as Iberia and South African Airways(SAA), however, need to consider issues beyond company image; for example, they often have to consider things like historical facts, ethnic issues, and the general wishes of the people served. SAA initially selected names that read equally well in both English and Afrikaans but then shifted to mainly English ones. After political changes in South Africa in the 1990s, SAA's naming practice has shifted to one that tries to use names that accommodate all languages

spoken in South Africa, e.g., Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Zulu, etc.(Ferreirinho). The network served also has an impact on naming. KLM, for instance, based in a relatively small country, but which serves major destinations around the world, needs to create an image of global presence.

Overall, the use of aeronautonyms by an airline is an effective way to create a certain image and give a traveller a sense of identification. Flying into Johannesburg on the aircraft *Bloemfontein* versus just a "regular" 747-400, tends to give associations of the South African Afrikaaner culture and history. Likewise, flying into Oslo, Norway on SAS 767-383ER *Tor Viking* over any unnamed 767, brings with it images of Tor [Thor], one of the old viking gods, being pulled across the heavens by his faithful goats, Tanngrisnir and Tanngrjóst!□

Ben Larson holds a Ph.D. in English from Northern Illinois University. He is a professor at York College, York, Nebraska and teaches a variety of classes within the department, but his specialty and interests are within the field of applied linguistics.

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