

Flying the colors

JOHN GILLIE; The News Tribune

If an extreme makeover - freshened colors, new logos, designer uniforms, clever slogans - could ensure airlines a happily-ever-after existence, many once-familiar companies would still be flying.

But the corporate graveyard is stacked with tombstones of airlines that chose plastic surgery and liposuction over a better lifestyle and exercise - and didn't survive.

Braniff, TWA and Western Pacific - to name just a few - all underwent cosmetic transformations but fell victim to systemic business shortcomings.

Though some airlines such as perennially profitable Southwest clung to their paint schemes for three decades without noticeable damage to their bottom lines, a fresh paint scheme remains an irresistible marketing tool for airlines hoping to give their business new snap.

"Moving billboards" is what William Postl calls them. He is a design manager for Teague, a Seattle design company. "They want to take best advantage of them."

Design professionals say a change in an airline's look is a quick way to give customers and investors the impression the airline is no longer the same old unexciting and unprofitable carrier they've known and loathed.

Last month, the nation's largest carrier, United Airlines, rolled out a new paint scheme - airlines call such a scheme a "livery" - that replaces the airline's somber gray-and-midnight-blue business suit with a brighter blue-and-white look.

United said it wants the new livery and an accompanying ad campaign to forge "an emotional connection" with its loyal business customers. The airline is working to emerge from a bankruptcy reorganization.

"There is literally no bigger symbol for the company than our planes," said John Tague, United executive vice president. "This livery moves us away from the gray, sending an important signal about where this company is headed - with a focus on improving and on providing our customers with the service and the product that they deserve."

It's the second new paint scheme United has put into service this year. The airline's new low-fare carrier, "Ted," debuted in January with its own livery.

The color of money

While United's new livery is designed primarily to let customers know the airline has changed for the better, Northwest Airlines said its paint scheme has an additional purpose: saving money.

The new colors will cut Northwest's future painting costs by 20 percent. Its unique off-white base coat looks gray in some lights, bright white at times and a warm beige under other conditions. It's more durable and easier to apply.

The new paint scheme will last longer because it has fewer dark colors that fade, said Northwest spokesman Kurt Ebenhoch. It also benefits from a protective clear coat.

A design with fewer lines and stripes mean less labor-intensive taping and masking. Having fewer colors - one fuselage color versus four in the previous livery - shortens the time a plane spends in the paint hangar. Airline painting contractors apply one color at a time, with a six-to-eight-hour drying time between different colors.

"This new livery design is part of our ongoing program of cost reduction in every area of the company," said Northwest President Doug Steenland.

Though painting is expensive - \$85,000 to \$100,000 for a twin-engine Boeing 737 - changing liveries doesn't incur much more expense than keeping an old scheme.

Airlines typically repaint only when an aircraft is due for heavy maintenance. Newly delivered planes, of course, come with the new color scheme.

For long-established airlines, repainting an entire fleet can take as long as five to seven years.

Southwest, for instance, introduced its new livery on its 30th anniversary in 2001. But it does not expect to have all of its planes wearing that canyon blue, red and orange paint until 2007, said Southwest spokeswoman Angela Vargo.

Northwest's new livery won't adorn all of its aircraft until 2008. United expects to have only 72 planes in its 500-plus aircraft fleet painted in the new livery this year.

Subtleties of a makeover

Sometimes a livery change is a new management's way of announcing its presence.

Delta Airlines, for example, kept its classic "widget" paint scheme from 1959 through 1997. When Leo Mullin became Delta CEO in 1997, the airline moved to a modernized version of the scheme that still had basic red and blue stripes and Delta's triangular widget symbol.

Before that color scheme could be implemented on all of Delta's fleet, the airline went back to the same design firm, Landor Associates, for another livery overhaul in 2000.

The new look moved further from the classic scheme, substituting "Delta" for "Delta Air Lines" on the fuselage, which was painted white without any of the blue and red stripes. The tail has a red and blue "flowing fabric" color scheme without any symbols or lettering.

Richard Ford, who headed the team that handled both Delta redesigns, said the latest livery gives the airline a softer, more active image.

Eliminating the "air lines" part of the livery gave Delta a more graphically compact and flexible image that could be readily adapted to a variety of other uses. "Delta Air Lines" was relatively inflexible, he said.

Delta put its full name in its 1997 livery because it was opening European routes then, Ford said.

"There were a number of companies in Europe called Delta. The airline didn't want there to be any confusion," he said.

Delta, like most major U.S. airlines in the post-Sept. 11 world, is still struggling to regain its financial footing, new livery or not.

But some industry observers say that without substantial changes in an airline's procedures or business plan, a new livery is just new paint on an old jalopy.

Passengers who posted comments on Delta's new paint scheme on an Internet message board complained that they'd rather have better meals and additional leg room.

"Why aren't they spending money on something useful or practical?" asked Delta frequent flier Robert D. Frank. "How about removing a few seats and improving customer service?"

"This is completely impractical and says to me that they prefer pretty planes to happy customers."

Greg Latimer, Alaska Airlines' director of advertising and marketing, said that in the end splash is no substitute for substance. The airline last changed its paint scheme in 1990.

"A new livery doesn't make a new airline unless there's something there to back it up."

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