



Make Flying Safe Again: An Undelayable Challenge for Aviation

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Abstract: *Flag carriers are a particular part of the aviation industry, now dominated by either privately owned carriers or budget airlines. Their market share is being reduced, they are losing ground, giving it to their counter rivals, low-cost carriers. Based on the assumption that flag carrier airlines are different in their business model from low-cost airlines, both of them have to react in a Covid-19 situation, in case a similar event would occur again. Because it is not a matter of “if”, but a matter of “when”.*

This is modelling and as one it has to be put in the right context.

In this research, we will discuss, also through the use of a study model of an Italian private company, how aviation must have short- and long-term strategies, striving for resilience during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, after the outbreak from Wuhan, China.

Thousands of flights were being cancelled and within weeks the passenger's aviation was still, only cargo planes flew. When the cargo demand rose (45% of the cargo is carried by passenger flights in the belly of the planes), the dedicated global air cargo fleet could not satisfy the demand, airlines arranged passenger planes for emergency cargo flights.

They came to this solution; this is part of an aggressive market strategy that comes in times of crisis as it is during the actual global pandemic.

After analysing examples of strategies to be adopted quickly for survival, the focus of the study will be on those communication strategies towards potential travellers who - now more than ever - while waiting for recovery, need to perceive the flight as much as possible safe for their health.

Thus, it is necessary to reflect on the individual perception of risk but also on what to do to bring the subjective dimension as close as possible to the objective one. Cargo flights were a mere means to curb the tragic effects of the pandemic, however, airlines (both low-cost carriers and flag carriers) need a solution that can lead to a better response.

1. INTRODUCTION

Air travel now poses a risk to ordinary travellers. The perception of risk, therefore, takes on the characteristics of a cognitive process involved in various activities that orient behaviours and opinions in the face of decisions involving potential risks, involving different dimensions such as, for example, both immediate and future consequences and their implications both on a rational and objective level and on a more emotional and subjective level. In this situation, it then becomes primary to offer solutions to communicate safety to passengers.

What airlines have done, as in the mentioned case study, to transform themselves into temporary cargo carriers cannot be a solution in the long term, but it is necessary to find a way to reassure users and make them travel again. All these aspects are being recently evaluated by the airline's communication departments.

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There is, in fact, a problem of risk perception, which is a subjective process that deviates from the objective assessment of risk, based on mathematical and statistical calculations and not on perceptive abilities.

In a nutshell, it happens that people - as happening in this case - sometimes fear activities that are not dangerous and do not fear, instead, activities that could have very dramatic consequences.

2. THE RISK PERCEPTION OF POTENTIAL TRAVELLERS

Consequently, it is necessary not only to act in the way of finding short-term solutions to survive but also to find a way to intervene on the perception of risk by individuals, reassuring them to fly again, through the dissemination of increasingly real and concrete information, bringing the perception of subjective risk closer to the reality of objective risk, in order to mitigate, in the next future, the consequences on aviation and tourism.

Any person can gather information and receive some, this happens through a cognitive process by which each individual elaborates and evaluate the representation of reality. Briefly summarising, people may fear activities that are not completely dangerous, therefore they are not afraid of the activity itself but of the idea of the possible consequences related to that risk. Research has shown that in many cases there is a discrepancy between the subjective perception of risk and the objective assessment. In other words, it happens that sometimes people fear activities that are not dangerous and do not fear, instead, activities that could have very dramatic consequences (Slovic, 2001).

Studies have focused on the difference between real risk - objective - and perceived risk - subjective.

Therefore, we can say that the perception of risk, or subjective risk, differs from the objective, quantifiable risk, which is calculated using mathematical and statistical calculations and not by perceptive abilities.

This scientific calculation is given by the magnitude of the damage and the possibility of occurrence. Therefore, in this case, the objective risk becomes quantifiable, calculating the objective possibility of happening, and the entity, that is the impact of the consequences.

On the contrary, the risk becomes subjective when there are events that are not only classified by objective probability but are instead linked to subjective probability, in the form of individual degree of belief.

Thus, in this case, the risk expresses a perception, since individuals do not have access to complete information and they should develop hypotheses and associate each of them with a probability of occurrence, using probability theory (Howarth, 1988).

Subjective risk coincides with the perception of a possible danger, which does not correspond to something mathematically calculable, but it is based on other parameters, linked to the characteristics, experiences and environment of individuals. Subjective risk is therefore different, in fact, one individual can perceive the same risk as negligible, or as acceptable, tolerable, or completely unacceptable.

Working therefore on perception on Covid-19 and flying safety becomes the undelayable challenge for the revitalization of the aviation market.

3. NEW WAYS TO CONSIDER AIR TRANSPORT

National flag carriers have helped nations to partially recover from the tremendous year that 2020 has been. Thanks to national carriers it has been possible to keep the streamline of medical equipment. These airlines did everything possible in a survival optic, consequently solutions concerning the adaptation to safer standards, and higher number of controls to make passengers' flights safer. Both, national flag carriers and privately owned airlines are fundamental in this period.

On the one hand, national flag carriers have national interests as the main purpose in their operations, trying to be a strategic asset for nations, on the other hand, privately-owned carriers have been requested to operate emergency flights, as it was the case, in Italy, of Neos Air.

The latter has been contracted to operate flights from Italy to China and vice versa. China was, and still is nowadays, the major Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) producer, therefore, it was crucial to establish a supply bridge between the two countries.

Neos was back then the first Italian airline to operate these flights, switching from passenger to cargo airline for emergency purposes.

Neos was selected due to its already extended network which, in addition, its overfly rights and slots at the arrival and departure airports, have eased and accelerated the supplying process, since no more permission was needed.

Moreover, the Coronavirus is extremely infectious and for this reason, keeping both a constant supply chain alive and safe flights for passengers is vital.



Picture 1. A Neos B787 used as cargo

Source: www.turismoitalianews.it

The personal protective equipment (PPE), used to fight Covid-19, are mostly manufactured in clustered production areas, far away from the demanding market. The world's air cargo capacity was insufficient to meet the demand, for this reason, airlines started flying passenger aircraft filled with emergency goods (Skare et. al., 2020).

In the next future, passenger travelling habits might change in multiple ways.

On the one hand, the market will lead to a recession, the number of passengers, especially business travellers, is estimated to plummet. During the pandemic, the world has discovered, or to better say the world understood, that it is not always necessary to travel for business, in particular when it is possible to have a meeting on virtual meeting platforms.

On the other hand, this lack of freedom in travelling will cause the number of passengers to skyrocket. Supposedly after this pandemic, charter flights will return to their standards as it was in the 80s and 90s. For this reason, passengers should be pampered through a series of arrangements that would allow them to feel safer, therefore, even more, willing to travel.



Picture 2. Neos B787 cargo loading
Source: <https://www.aviation-report.com/>

4. APPLIED STRATEGIES

4.1. Marketing in the Aviation Industry in Covid Times

It is possible to notice that the constant pursuit of resilience and robustness by the airlines, is being proved by marketing operations.

This is the first time a pandemic hit so badly the aviation industry; indeed, it is the first time after more than a century from the first flight and 70 years from the beginning of commercial aviation, that airlines face such a situation.

What airlines try to face is out of their control, there can be marketing campaigns. Indeed, airlines need to fly to survive.

From a managerial perspective, the core business of an airline is not just flying. The amenities related to flying are the core business of air carriers. Besides airlines with a cargo section in their organisation (e.g., Lufthansa, Korean Air, Qatar, Emirates) other airlines tend to sell the cargo capacity in their holds, it is a common approach in order to maximise the profit. Especially in these disruptive times, relying on amenities or ancillary services can save from bankruptcy. Many airlines, as mentioned above, have relied on cargo in two ways, offering a service to the community but also, most importantly, compensating for the steep reduction of income from normal passenger activities. For this reason, the above-mentioned charter flights are expected to go to attractive destinations (Skare et.al., 2020).

The sudden plummet in the passengers' flow by 80% has pushed airlines to find a safe yet innovative way to maintain the traffic flow high enough to cover costs and incentivise people to fly. Various creative solutions have been analysed but we decided to focus on the marketing campaign that now, not only airlines, have been used.

4.2. Marketing campaign

At the actual situation, the situation when we started analysing and studying the events (November 2020) we can see that the constant pursuit of resilience and robustness by the airlines, has to be seen by marketing the air travel (people scared to travel, how to make planes flying again).

The Covid-19 pandemic is challenging air transportation, as it faced the difficult and still unpredictable effects of an unprecedented crisis. Many instruments have been put in place to curb the risk of contagion, such as the flow control of passengers boarding and disembarking, swab test, organisational measures to reduce the risk of crowding, mandatory replacement of masks, thermal scanners, introduction of procedures of continuous sanitation. Despite this, travelling by plane is feared by tourists, even when there are no travel bans. The risk, or rather the perception of it, plays a key role. In fact, when the anxiety of limitations does arise, airlines are faced with the problem of individuals' ticket cancellations, and therefore travel reduction volumes.

5. NEW CONCEPT OF SAFETY

During this aviation bleak times unpredictable consequences and effects will be seen in the next future. Measures have been taken to limit the contagion risk, and airlines want to keep flying safe so that passengers are encouraged to fly.

This can be done by controlling the passengers during the boarding procedures, swab tests before departure, organisational measures to reduce the risk of crowding, mandatory replacement of masks, thermal scanners, introduction of procedures of continuous sanitation. All of this is done with one main purpose, make flying safe again, or better, saying that *flying must be perceived as safe again*.

This fear is enhanced by the limitations and travel bans put in place by countries. The perception of the risk plays a key role.

In fact, when limitations do not arise (in case nations will ban airlines from landing and bringing passengers from other countries), airlines face the problem of individuals' ticket cancellations and therefore travel reduction volumes.

6. CASE STUDY

6.1. Innovative solutions: An Italian case

On November 26th, 2020, Neos made the very first international Covid-free flight, creating a passenger bridge between Italy and China. Also, the national Italian flag carrier started its first Covid-free flight connecting national destinations. This trend with new health standards widespread around the world, helping airlines to recover and keeping people flying safely.

6.2. The procedure

When flying with Neos two tests are required by international agreements to be a passenger of the flight, however, a third test is added by Neos to the molecular swab test and the serological test, required by Chinese regulations and it has to be carried out within 48 hours before departure. This is the perfect representation of new tools that airlines can use in order to restore the air transport market and foster a renewed willingness to travel. Therefore, when international agreements are put in place, passengers could avoid the quarantine at their arrival destination, thanks to the double swab test and the guarantee that no one on that flight is tested positive. Operating in this way would be fundamental for airlines since perceived safety is an added value to the aviation industry which recently has suffered many disruptions. Finding innovative ways to mitigate resilience can be the linchpin to achieve success and incentive passengers to travel.



Picture 3. Boarding gate a Delta Covid-free flight

Source: <https://www.travelagentcentral.com/>

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Airlines have demonstrated resilience, but many have filed for bankruptcy and how many will? What can be done to prevent such a disruptive event to undermine airlines operations?

Here we posit a further suggestion for future research concerning marketing campaigns to incentive travelling under the point of view of safety:

- Increase the percentage of Covid-free flights,
- Repatriation flights in any case, whether a positive or negative result, for citizens returning to their homes. Hence, the passenger would not fear being locked abroad, with the necessity to look for accommodation and a place to stay for quarantine.

8. CONCLUSION

What an airline generally does is to fly planes and move passengers, and this is not an easy task, different core businesses are varying from an airline to another. Different brands and models of planes are available to the consumer.

However, in these disruptive times, it is difficult for airlines to “reinvent” an entire market.

For this reason, passengers need to be pampered and give them the impression that with flying, in addition to the usual standards (of safety and security), there is an added factor that is crucial in Covid times. Moreover, tickets should be sold with the swab test included in the price. Airlines must either offer this as an added value keeping their tariffs low or as a service that has to be paid separately. In both cases, the plane ticket should not become more expensive.

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