

## CoverStory

# SIA stands the test of time

STRONG BRANDING AND HIGH-QUALITY SERVICE HAVE HELPED CARRIER SET GLOBAL BENCHMARK FOR DECADES

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For decades, Singapore Airlines (SIA) has stood out as one of Asia's most iconic brands.

Admired and respected globally, not many carriers have managed to duplicate its success or come up with a brand as successful as the Singapore Girl.

In many countries, the idea of focusing a brand on something called Singapore Girl would be deemed as being too sexist, but she has come to represent the heart and soul of what Asia is all about.

Martin Roll, one of Asia's leading experts on branding, said Singapore's flag carrier is "almost a perfect combination of all the good things Asia has to offer".

Speaking to *China Daily Asia Weekly*, he said: "Things such as service, hospitality, friendliness — they have rolled it all into a brand that no one has been able to duplicate.

"The airline has managed to be consistent year after year in the quality of service, whether in the air or on the ground."

Singapore Airlines has become known as one of the world's best and most profitable carriers. It has acquired a reputation as a trendsetter and industry challenger, with much of that down to strong branding as well as management and staff driven by quality and excellence.

The brand is also unique as the boardroom takes dedicated leadership of the brand strategy, unlike many other Asian companies.

Roll noted how it has created a very powerful brand equity, a measure of its strength and reputational value.

"Right from the very beginning, the management took a long-term view of what the airline should be and stuck with it ever since," he said. "Even the sarong or *kebaya* — the traditional regional dress worn by Singapore Airlines' stewardesses — has stood the test of time."

Explaining the Singapore Girl branding, Roll referred to it as "a very designated and visual part of the entire brand experience" and "a bold move but one that worked".

Sheldon Hee, Singapore Airlines' vice-president of marketing, communications and development, said the idea for Singapore Girl was created by the airline in 1972 with "our advertising agency at that time, Batey".

That was the same year Singapore Airlines was formed, following the division of the former Malaysia-Singapore Airlines into two carriers



Singapore Airlines takes delivery of its first Airbus A350-900 at Singapore Changi Airport on March 3. The new aircraft will allow the airline to fly non-stop to more long-haul destinations. AFP

— Malaysian Airline System (now Malaysia Airlines) and Singapore Airlines.

"Dressed in her distinct sarong *kebaya* created by renowned French designer Pierre Balmain, the Singapore Girl was created as the symbol of SIA's (Singapore Airlines) inflight services," Hee said.

"Using real stewardesses as the centerpiece of their campaigns, the Singapore Girl has appeared in SIA's advertising efforts for over 40 years," he said.

In that time, it has become a highly recognizable signature of the airline.

Hee said the airline believes the Singapore Girl still helps to sell the product today. "In fact, the essence of the Singapore Girl and her gentle, caring ways remain especially relevant today as we increasingly rely on our top-quality service to distinguish ourselves from our competitors.

"We have evolved our communications accordingly, to keep the customer clearly in mind in all that we do. This customer-centric approach will continue to guide us as we strive to break new ground in years to come."

When Singapore Airlines first began operating, it found itself in a different position from most other airlines.

There were no domestic routes to serve and it was forced to com-

pete with international airlines in getting access to airports, securing flight slots and landing rights, and attracting a new customer base.

Roll noted that unlike most state-owned entities, Singapore Airlines was subject to heavy competition from the onset. This tough start created a driving spirit to compete and also a dedication to branding.

"Singapore has always encouraged competition from foreign airlines which has forced Singapore Airlines to stay nimble, lean and to foster constant innovation as it has never been protected in its home base.

"The airline told the world: 'We are a great way to fly.' It was not an empty promise because Singapore Airlines has delivered year after year."

Roll said branding a product like a car is not as challenging as branding a product that deals with services and people.

"Managing people and ensuring delivery of excellent service in a constrained environment, like an aircraft across the world in different time zones, is a real leadership challenge. Singapore Airlines has cracked that special code."

One of the secrets to the carrier's success, he added, is its ability to think and see through the eyes of the customer.

"Everything about the airline is

focused on the customer and service. Singapore Airlines is very customer-centric and brand driven as an organization."

Roll noted how all levels of employees are highly trained, from the pilots and engineers through to those who check you in and run the website.

"Aspiring Asian brands and anyone else for that matter can learn a great deal from Singapore Airlines."

Throughout the course of its nearly five-decade history, the carrier has remained true to its brand attributes.

It has pioneered many in-flight experiential and entertainment innovations, and was the first to introduce hot meals, free alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, personal entertainment systems, and video-on-demand in all cabins.

When it comes to aircraft, Singapore Airlines still maintains the youngest fleet among all major carriers.

It was among the first in line to take delivery of new aircraft types like Boeing 747 jumbo jets and Boeing 777, and was the first commercial airline to fly the Airbus "superjumbo" A380.

In October 2007, Singapore Airlines entered the Airbus A380 into service between Singapore and Sydney, Australia. Marred by almost a year and a half in delays, the launch

garnered a tremendous amount of publicity worldwide.

It further helped its brand image that all revenue generated by this first flight was donated to charities in a ceremony the following day in Sydney.

Roll said new technology enhances cost efficiency for the carrier, and these launch events are ideal marketing opportunities. Furthermore, the new technology provides less glitches, delays and downtime of aircraft.

In March, the airline took delivery of its first Airbus A350-900, which CEO Goh Choon Phong said would be a "game changer" for the flag carrier.

"The A350 will be a game changer for us, allowing for flights to more long-haul destinations on a non-stop basis, which will help us boost our network competitiveness and further develop the important Singapore hub," said Goh.

Singapore Airlines recognizes that each innovation has a relatively short life span. Once other airlines adopt it, it is no longer considered innovative.

Therefore, the airline continues to invest heavily in research and development, innovation and technology as an integrated part of the business strategy to further differentiate itself, Roll said.

Elison Lim, assistant professor in marketing and international business with the Nanyang Business School in Singapore, said building a successful brand is not easy.

"Singapore Airlines is one of the exceptions in Southeast Asia," she said. "It has succeeded in creating a truly successful brand not only in Asia but globally.

"Singapore Girl has become widely recognized as a symbol of hospitality and excellent service"

The Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, an independent aviation market intelligence organization, said in a report that Singapore Airlines has for years "been at or near the top in premium product rankings" globally.

"Singapore Airlines' brand remains one of the best known — if not the best known — brand in the industry," it said. "Airlines around the world use SIA as the benchmark for product and brand; there cannot be a higher compliment."

Roll said that the carrier is inspiring as it has proven consistency, innovation and service, and has held a long-term focus in a tough industry.

"The airline is very resilient, and will definitely continue to stand the test of time."