

Third Series Vol. VII Part 2

No. 222

Autumn 2011

ISSN 0010-003X

Price £12.00

THE COAT OF ARMS

an heraldic journal published twice yearly by The Heraldry Society



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The journal of the Heraldry Society



Third series

Volume VII

2011

Part 2

Number 222 in the original series started in 1952

The Coat of Arms is published twice a year by The Heraldry Society, whose registered office is 53 High Street, Burnham, Slough SL1 7JX. The Society was registered in England in 1956 as registered charity no. 241456.

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PLATE 4



Left (a), British Airways advertisement, various locations 2011.

See page 84.

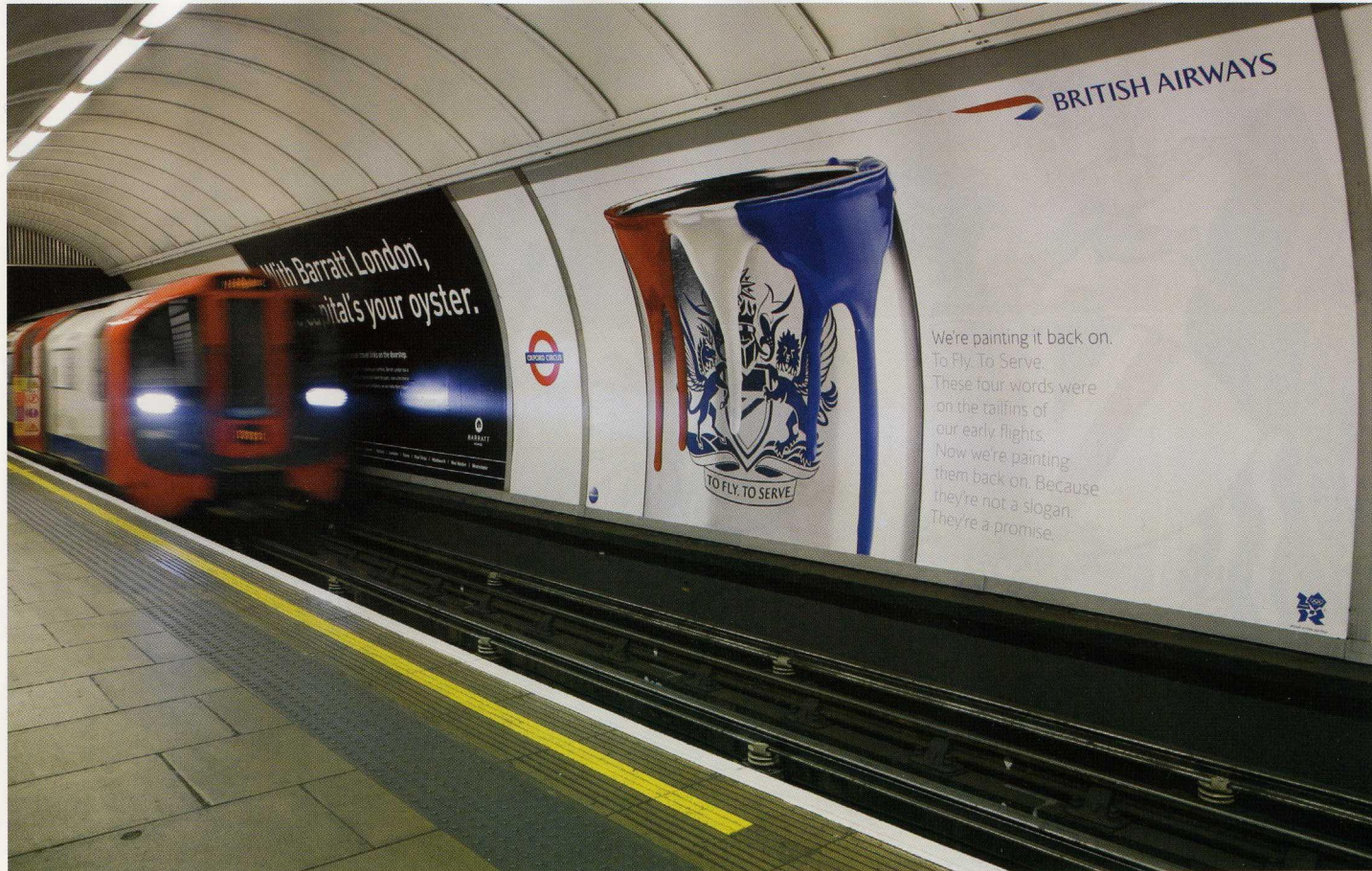
Below (b), arms of British Airways plc, originally granted 1975 to the British Airways Board and transferred by Royal Licence 1985 (CA record Ms Grants 137/62).

See page 82.



Image by courtesy of the Kings, Heralds, and Pursuivants of Arms.

PLATE 5



British Airways advertisement, London Underground, 2011. See page 84.

BRITISH AIRWAYS' UNBREAKABLE PROMISE

Andrew Marsden

The branding of property to show ownership goes back into the mists of time, but in modern usage 'branding' invariably refers to that mix of art and science applied by the marketing profession in creating those commercial assets so beloved of consumers, retailers, shareholders and investors.

Indeed, in the developed world, business is so in love with brands that a very significant portion of both our private and institutional wealth resides in the shares of those companies that own 'strong' brands. For consumers, brands provide a promise of quality and performance; for retailers, guaranteed sales and marketing support; for shareholders, economies of scale, better prices, more predictable demand and therefore reduced investment risks. Brands are woven into the very fabric of modern life.

So when the International Airlines Group (IAG), owner of the British Airways and Iberia brands, announces a £5bn mid-term investment in both hardware and software on a major re-launch of the damaged British Airways brand, it is interesting to look at why and how this repositioning is to take place, and what it is spending its £400m annual marketing budget on.

The competitive stance now announced by British Airways is to some counter-intuitive. In today's extremely competitive and apparently price-based environment, to give an 'unbreakable promise' of excellent customer service seems exceptionally brave – some might say foolhardy.

A little background first. Ticket pricing in the airline industry used to be on the basis that the earlier you booked the more you paid; last minute bargains were often to be had as companies attempted to fill their flights. The arrival of low cost airlines and yield pricing changed all that. The new companies gave their discounts for booking *early*. Now passengers who book late pay full whack. These operators have 'disaggregated' what they offer – or, put simply, cut the 'frills' of customer service. We are now used to paying separately and incrementally for almost all the different elements of what used to be expected good service. As a result the industry, and consumers' relationship with it, have changed beyond all recognition. For many, flying has become a commodity brokered in web-based deals that constitute a distinct aspect of the holiday or weekend trip. The active avoidance of paying for comfort, ease and service on short-haul flights seems to have become a new kind of sport for the middle classes. 'We don't need all the frills' is their battle cry. With rising fuel prices and the relatively high level of tax the traveller has to pay in the U.K. compared with other parts of Europe, almost any cost reduction initiative is greeted enthusiastically.

British Airways itself has enjoyed a chequered recent past. The British used to be proud to fly the flag; indeed the tail planes with their distinctive Union Flag livery

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came to stand for the excellent passenger service BA was justly famous for. Then Virgin started giving out choc-ices with the on-board film and all hell broke out.

Subsequently there was the debacle of BA moving from flying the flag to 'flying the flags', with all those strange representations of destination-based tail designs. The marketing logic is all too easy to imagine: let's modernise the brand, redirect it so it faces outwards, embody a sense of excitement and adventure in the brand by visually incorporating the elements of colour and design typical of the countries we fly to... Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher possibly summed up the feelings of a grateful nation when she placed a handkerchief over a liveried model plane at the launch.

More recent times have seen BA in both a war on price with the cheap airlines and a war of words over competitive fairness with Virgin. Customers feel standards have been lowered. Strike action, and the continued rumblings of it, together with the publicity surrounding the less-than-successful opening of Terminal 5 at Heathrow, have damaged the brand's reputation. Something had to be done to restore faith in the national airline. They needed to market themselves to success. Heraldry seems to have provided the answer.

In brand management everything is organised around the brand's 'essence' – the encapsulation of the consumer promise, the brand's reason for being. This essence is then applied throughout every aspect of the brand and its communications, often exemplified in the advertising 'strapline'. For Tesco it is 'every little helps'; for Persil it is 'Persil washes whiter'; for BMW, 'the ultimate driving machine'.

But it needn't be words. The marketing world well knows the power of symbols. Heraldry provides some of the most powerful examples. Could this capability be applied to a modern commercial enterprise?

British Airways is a relatively young brand. It traces its origins back to the Aircraft and Travel Company Limited of 1919 which then transmogrified through the various incarnations and company acronyms of Imperial, BEA and BOAC before finally becoming (in 1974) BA, adapting and adopting throughout this period the range of cultures, history, loyalties, and terms of employment these changes demanded. Somewhere along the way however, it lost the brand's competitive positioning, its reason for being.

Recently however someone at BA has clearly had the audacious idea of going back to the basics of the brand's promise. Hence the strategic choice 'world class consumer service' as the basis of its new competitive market position.

BA's coat of arms, originally granted to the British Airways Board in 1975, was transferred to the airline in 1985 (see **Plate 4b**).¹ The shield bears a segment of the Union Flag. It is supported on the left by a winged Pegasus carrying an olive branch of peace signifying peaceful flight, and on the right by a winged golden lion symbolizing Britain. They stand on a grassy mound with a heraldic sea alongside

¹ CA record Ms Grants 149/30: exemplification of arms, crest, supporters and badge, 18 Dec. 1985, as transferred by Royal Licence dated 20 Oct. 1984 (CA record Ms I.84/194-7) from the grant of the same to the British Airways Board of 20 Jan. 1975 (Grants 137/62). Arms had been granted to BOAC in 1941 (Grants 106/203) and to BEA in 1948 (Grants 110/231).

BRITISH AIRWAYS' UNBREAKABLE PROMISE

Figure 1: the arms of British Airways plc as 'recrafted' by For People Designs for the current advertizing campaign.



signalling mastery over land and sea. Interestingly, below is the motto 'To fly, to serve'.

Could this coat of arms and motto become the embodiment of the consumer promise of the BA Brand? Is it capable of being used in all its marketing communications? Would it just be seen as old fashioned? What is absolutely clear is that if such a promise were made to deliver this publically stated high standard of excellence the consequences of failing to achieve this would be dire. It would be an act of public commercial suicide.

It is very difficult to explain to anyone who has not been involved in a corporate repositioning both the sheer complexity and the gargantuan proportions of the task. It begins with the design and physically correct application of a new corporate identity across all the company's assets; producing all the necessary internal and external communication collateral; briefing all company employees and agents about the change and, critically, achieving their active support for all that will be required of them at the re-launch; and finally, even more critically (in these sceptical times), achieving the staff's long term emotional 'buy-in' to the long-term vision of exceptional customer service.

In BA's case the external manifestation of all this internal marketing activity will be a new version of the coat of arms applied to all the company's livery and an extensive advertising and public relations campaign. Richard Stevens of design consultants For People Designs says the arms have been re-crafted to 'bring it back to life' and make it capable of being used in 3D (see **Figure 1**). These revised arms will shortly be applied to all the company's aeroplanes and uniforms.

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The publicity campaign is made up of various television commercials and a range of outdoor and newspaper advertisements (see for instance **Plates 4a** and **5**). On television it was launched with a 90-second film, starting in black and white and slowly changing into colour, offering period vignettes with planes, crew and passengers in the clothing of the time, to tell the story of the development of the brand from its beginnings in 1919 to today.² The message is of an 'unbreakable promise' ever uniting the company, made explicit by the motto under the arms – a promise 'stitched into every uniform of every captain who takes command'. The adverts are lavish and epic productions with big budgets, swelling background music and plenty of filmic quality, designed to project a history of public service. They are dramatic in nature; perhaps also slightly pretentious? They are certainly produced, I feel, at least as much for the internal audience as the external ones.

Of all the marketing material produced my personal favourite is a poster of a tin of paint dripping with paint in BA's colours of red, white and blue (**Plate 5**). On the white tin are the arms and motto. The implication is crystal-clear: we do 'what it says on the tin'. A simple concept, succinctly conveyed.

The ultimate judges of this brand re-launch will of course be the passengers ... and the City. If BA's management have anything to do with making all this work they certainly seem up for it. They have promised the investment, with 25 new aircraft by 2015 and a claim that these new jets, the A380 double-decker superjumbo and the super-efficient Boeing 787 'Dreamliners', will take the standard of international travel to new levels. Indeed they are so confident in the success of their efforts that they have promised the City a threefold increase in profits by 2015, to £1.3 billion. Yet another 'unbreakable promise'.

This is a generational change to a brand, a true attempt at placing the consumer at the centre of the corporate view, while standing out from the crowd. It is fascinating that the marketers have drawn upon one of the most ancient of symbol forms to achieve both an internal and external reappraisal of a modern brand. Perhaps, if it works, we will all be proud to fly the flag once again.³

² See www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4JdQi60an0 for the launch commercial, and www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_G4MV_GD2Q for a video about its making, complete with a view of the 1985 patent, an account of the coat of arms by the company's head of heritage, dating it to January 1975 (actually the date of the grant to the British Airways Board), and discussion of how they were 'recrafted' for the campaign. All also available at www.facebook.com/britishairways.

³ Andrew Marsden is a brand consultant and Immediate Past President of the Marketing Society. He was himself recently granted arms.