African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, Volume 6 (4) - (2017) ISSN: 2223-814X

Good bye Air Zimbabwe….Hello Zimbabwe Airways: Will re-branding solve Air Zimbabwe's financial woes?

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Abstract

With competition increasing from all corners, airlines have to find new ways to adapt or die. To adapt, Air Zimbabwe has resorted to rebranding to salvage its battered image. The purpose of this study is to assess whether the rebranding of Air Zimbabwe to Zimbabwe Airways will improve the airlines' financial performance. A mixed methods research design and a literature review of challenges facing the airline is performed followed by interviews with key airline personnel in the airline. From the study, it is clear that rebranding alone will not solve Air Zimbabwe's financial woes as the airline is riddled by a multifarious array of challenges key amongst them, poor service, management inefficiency, the use of an aged fleet and a bloated workforce. Although there is logic behind rebranding Air Zimbabwe there is a need for the airline to address the root cause of its financial woes. Only time will tell whether the airline is sending a clear message to passengers, stakeholders and the community-at-large, that change is happening throughout the airline. To this end, the fresh, dynamic look should also be reflected in the new airlines' complete approach to delivering on all areas of operational, commercial and service excellence. Air Zimbabwe has a vital role to play in improving tourism development in Zimbabwe and the SADC region since air transport is a major enabler of tourism.

Keywwords: Air Zimbabwe, Rebranding, challenges, tourism, service excellence

Introduction

With competition increasing from all corners, airlines have to find new ways to adapt or die (Steyn & Mhlanga, 2016). Profiting from a lifestyle association with their passengers and building brand loyalty could well be the missing link in airline evolution (Mhlanga, 2017). Deyes (2008), explains that the growing need and importance for branding in this industry is because all flying experiences are becoming similar, both boring and stressful with flights becoming a commodity and flying losing all its magic. Furthermore, the launch of new budget airlines in the past decade has made it even more crucial for airlines to differentiate themselves in their respective markets and segments (Lim, Mohamed, Ariffin & Guan, 2009). Research confirms the importance of branding as a source of strategic competitive advantage (Blackett, 2004). Keller (2002) avers that strong brands result in the realization of higher long-term and short-term returns for airlines. According to Deyes (2008), 35 per cent of passengers choose an airline on the basis of punctuality, while pricing comes second at around 30 per cent. This implies that the remaining 35 per cent of the decision making is influenced by other factors which undeniably will include branding (Deyes, 2008). Consequently, branding is now a key component in the airline industry (Mhlanga & Steyn, 2017).

Branding plays a key role in the industry as it helps airlines differentiate themselves from the others (Feldwick, 2004). It also helps airlines showcase their strengths beyond the expected basic requirement of taking a person from one point of departure to their destination (Noble, 2006). More importantly, differentiation has become a necessity ever since low-cost airlines entered the market requiring airlines to improve the experience, because if the passenger only made his decision based on price, low-cost airlines with the lowest fares would always be chosen (Deyes, 2008).

Operating airlines in southern Africa has proven to be fraught with challenges resulting in the collapse of carriers such as Zambian Airways, Flitestar, Phoenix, 1Time and Fly Africa while all national carriers including Air Zimbabwe have been struggling with colossal losses (The Herald, 2016). However, as competition heats up, Air Zimbabwe has resorted to rebranding. Various scholars (Chibamu, 2016; Mananavire, 2016; Ndlovu, 2016) have long pondered the enigmatic question of whether rebranding will solve the airlines' financial woes. Given that air transport is a major enabler of tourism, it is therefore necessary to interrogate the wisdom of rebranding the airline to salvage the airlines' financial misfortunes. The findings of this study could inform airline managers of strategic implications which could be useful for marketing endeavours.

Air Zimbabwe: Background

Air Zimbabwe is a national flag carrier of Zimbabwe. As such it is taken as one of the three visible symbols that encapsulate sovereignty and self-determination, along with a national flag and national anthem (Chattopadhyay, 2015). It is also taken as a grand gesture that asserts the country's status symbol. The history of Air Zimbabwe dates back to September 1967 when the airline commenced operations and was named Air Rhodesia. In 1979 Air Rhodesia was rebranded to Air Zimbabwe Rhodesia. However, after independence in 1980 Air Zimbabwe Rhodesia was rebranded to Air Zimbabwe by introducing national colours (Shoko, 2011).

During rebranding in 1980 Air Zimbabwe introduced Shona and Ndebele for in-flight announcements in addition to English. Before Independence, Air Zimbabwe only used English for in-flight announcements. At Independence in 1980, Air Zimbabwe had 18 aircraft and was a major player on the regional and international scene (Mutambirwa & Turton, 2000). However, today (in 2017), Air Zimbabwe has 10 aircraft with only four of these in use while the remaining six aircraft are on care and maintenance. According to Malaba (2016) Air Zimbabwe has been in a downward spiral since 2003. Various factors have contributed to the airlines' financial woes, key amongst them, is poor service quality (Steyn & Mhlanga, 2016). Negative media reports have further tainted the airlines' image after it was reported in March 2017 that the airline was issuing handwritten boarding passes to passengers. Consequently, this has damaged the airlines' image resulting in passenger numbers dwindling from 1 million in 1999 to less than 20 000 in 2016 (Mhlanga, 2017). In June 2017, to salvage its battered image, Air Zimbabwe was rebranded to Zimbabwe Airways (Figure 2). The former Air Zimbabwe logo (Figure 1) was removed and replaced by a black tale featuring the Zimbabwe bird and red star. It was accompanied by green, yellow, red and black rings near the tail, symbolising the country's flag. Figures 1 and 2 below show the old Air Zimbabwe and the new rebranded Zimbabwe Airways.

Figure 1: Old Air Zimbabwe (Source: The Zimbabwean, 2017)

Figure 2: The new rebranded Zimbabwe Airways (Source: The Zimbabwean, 2017)

Methodology

In accordance with the objectives of the study a mixed-methods research design (qualitative and quantitative) was followed and an extensive literature search of the challenges affecting airlines in southern Africa. This was followed by in-depth interviews (qualitative) conducted with key airline personnel to explore their views on the topic. They were given the opportunity to raise their expectations and concerns about the study.

Although two standard surveys, namely the Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) (proposed by Charnes, Cooper & Rhodes, 1978, based on the earlier work of Farrell, 1957) and the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) (developed by Saaty in 1980) have been applied in previous airline research, they were deemed unsuitable for this study for the following reasons. The Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) was not able to address the objectives of this study since it is a non-parametric method that is used to estimate the production frontier of Decision Making Units (DMUs) with multiple inputs and multiple outputs (Rai, 2013). Although the AHP questionnaire could address the objectives of the study, it required subjective data on airlines based on experience, knowledge and judgment of the researcher (Yusuff & Poh Yee, 2001) and hence it had an element of bias resulting from subjective data. Consequently, a self-administered questionnaire was customised to address the objectives and setting of the study. To identify challenges facing the airline a five-point Likert scale was used. The five response alternatives for identifying challenges which affect airline performances ranged from 'not challenging - (1)', 'less challenging - (2)', 'indifferent - (3)', 'challenging - (4)' to 'and very challenging - (5)'. The five-point Likert-type scales to identify challenges were drawn from DeVellis (1991).

In order to select respondents purposive sampling, which is a non-probability based sampling technique (Babbie, 2010), was used. Choosing respondents with a specific objective in mind is termed purposive sampling (Tustin, Ligthelm, Martins & Van Wyk, 2010). Purposive sampling was used to choose respondents that were deemed to have sufficient relevant knowledge to participate in the interview sessions. Only key airline personnel were interviewed. This criterion was used to ensure that selected respondents provided insightful answers to the questions which were asked (Wiid & Diggines, 2009).

In purposive sampling the researcher chooses the sample based on who is thought would be appropriate for the study (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). This method is useful in situations when there is a limited number of people who have expertise in the area being researched (Maree, 2005). The office of the CEO from the airline was approached for permission to conduct interviews. This was supported by a letter of introduction to the study. Interviews were conducted in June and July 2016.

Findings

Employee profile of the respondents from Air Zimbabwe

The profile of airline managers could influence the financial performance of the airline (Newcomer, Marion & Earnhardt, 2014). As such, when trying to identify challenges facing an airline it is important to be familiar with the profile of airline managers in order to identify possible causes of failure or losses (Haase, 2009). Table 1 below reflects the employee profiles of the respondents.

Table 1: Employee profile of the respondents from Air Zimbabwe
(Source: Researchers' construct)

EMPLOYEE PROFILE	N	%
Position held in the airline		
Junior management	16	42
Middle management	13	34
Senior management	9	24
Years of service in the position		
< 1 year	21	55
2-4 years	10	26
5-7 years	5	13
8-10 years	1	3
>10 years	1	3
Years of service in the airline		
0-5 years	29	76
6-10 years	7	18
11-15 years	1	3
16-20 years	1	3
>20 years	0	0
Level of education		
No schooling	2	5
Primary school	9	24
High school	16	42
Tertiary Diploma/Degree	7	18
Other postgraduate qualification,	4	11
All	**38**	**100**

Table 1 depicts that, of the 38 respondents, 42% (n=16) held junior management positions, whilst 55% (n=21) had 0 to 1 years of service in their current positions. Of the total respondents, 76% (n=29) had between 0 to 5 years of service in the airline, whilst 42% (n=16) had high school qualifications.

The fact that 55% of the managers had less than one year of service in their current positions is indicative of less experienced managers in the airline. Airlines require people with credible management experience, preferably from within the industry, to be successful and compete in this cutthroat sector (CAPA, 2013). Therefore, at the helm of the airline there should be managers with proven track records in their fields of specific expertise (Wong & Chen, 2005).

Table 1 further reveals that there were no managers in the airline with more than 20 years of service in the airline, whilst only 1 manager had 16 to 20 years of experience. This is indicative of management instability or turnover in the airline. According to Sheehan (2003), an airline cannot be successful without a stable leadership. When new management comes to the helm of an airline they give it a different direction, not allowing the existing strategies time to reach their objectives (Gernetzky, 2016). Air Zimbabwe lacks stable management at Board and top management level (Chibamu, 2016). For three years (from 2013 to 2016) there had been an acting CEO without any substantive experience to provide strategic leadership and direction. The airline has had five different Board chairpersons in seven years (from 2010 to 2016)

(Mananavire, 2016). Consequently, because of high turnover of executives Air Zimbabwe has had many (failed) rescue operations to try to restore profitability and stability.

Table 1 also reveals that some managers at Air Zimbabwe had no schooling or primary education, which is indicative of ill-qualified managers in the airline. In order to make the shrewd decisions that can help it outperform its peers, an airline must have qualified management so that it can maximise opportunities to boost revenue and contain costs (Barros & Peypoch, 2009). Without qualified management, an airline cannot attain its goals (CAPA, 2013).

According to Chibamu (2016) Air Zimbabwe's financial problems are compounded by the appointment of inefficient managers. Most of the Board members were incompetent political appointees without any aviation knowledge and experience. An airline with a Board of Directors consisting of professionals has a greater chance of being managed prudently than an airline whose board of directors does not have professional management competencies (Zhou, 2012). Therefore, Ndlovu (2016) warns that an overhaul of the management and operations structures and systems at Air Zimbabwe is desperately needed. In the same vein, Bhebhe (2016), also attributes Air Zimbabwe's financial problems to the appointment of inefficient managers who lack aviation experience and knowledge. According to Chibamu (2016), most of the Board members at Air Zimbabwe are incompetent political appointees without aviation knowledge and experience. A typical example in Air Zimbabwe is the appointment of an inexperienced chief operating officer in October 2016. Muzulu (2016) claims he was appointed simply because he is President Robert Mugabe's son-in-law and this happened at a critical time when the airline needed an experienced individual to turn the airline around.

Therefore, some research endeavours (Haase, 2009; Paraschivescu & Radu, 2011; Walsemann, Bell & Hummer, 2012; Robinson, 2013) argue that there is a positive correlation between the qualification of managers and the performance of airlines, whilst Swartz (2008) found that stability and earned value among aviation managers was of high importance. It is therefore not surprising that Air Zimbabwe which has a history of ill-qualified and inefficient individuals holding key positions at Board and executive level has been struggling financially (Mhlanga, 2017).

Table 2: Profile of Air Zimbabwe

OWNER	AIRCRAFT			EMPLOYEES		FINANCIAL RESULTS		
	Number	Types	Average age	Total	Per aircraft	2013	2014	2015
State	10	4	25	799	200	(R585m)	(R346m)	(R200m)

(Figures in brackets represent a loss) (Source: Researcher's construct)

From Table 2 above it is clear that Air Zimbabwe had a staff/plane ratio of 200 which is high compared to the global average, which according to Saranga and Nagpal (2016) is 150:1. The ratio is high when compared to other competitors, for example, Ethiopian Airlines had 126 employees per aircraft, Qantas in Australia had 109, American Airlines had 86.7 and United Airlines had 71 (Saranga & Nagpal, 2016). According to Bhebhe (2016), with a staff/plane ratio of 200:1, higher than the global average of 150:1, labour costs have consequently negatively affected Air Zimbabwe's financial performance. There is a relationship between the staff/plane ratio and the profitability of airlines–the higher the staff/plane ratio the lower the profitability, and the lower the ratio the higher the profitability (Saranga & Nagpal, 2016). Therefore, it is not surprising that Air Zimbabwe had a higher staff/plane ratio since most state-owned airlines are used as a generator for labour by their respective governments (Mananavire, 2016).
According to Mananavire (2016) a cause of Air Zimbabwe's financial woes is the lack of effective labour cost and control mechanisms (labour efficiency). Air Zimbabwe has a monthly

wage bill of US$1.2 million with more than 700 employees. Although the airline concedes that it is overstaffed it is struggling to lay off a planned 234 workers as it does not have funds to pay them out (New Zimbabwe, 2016). Similarly, government interference at Air Zimbabwe has continuously affected the implementation of the airlines' turnaround plans thereby negatively affecting the airlines 'performances (Maqutu, 2015). The Zanu PF government continues to interfere in Air Zimbabwe's operations hindering the financial sustainability of the airline (Malaba, 2016). For example, on commercial routes, scheduled flights are often cancelled at short notice to accommodate the wishes of the political leadership (Muzulu, 2016).

Table 2 reveals that Air Zimbabwe has an aged fleet of aircraft averaging over 25 years and this has greatly affected the airlines' performance negatively. Air Zimbabwe operates an antiquated fleet with an average age of 25 years and this has greatly compromised quality and increased costs, rendering the airline uncompetitive (New Zimbabwe, 2016). The average age of these fleets is old compared to its major regional competitors such as SAA, Kenya, Ethiopian Airlines and BA Comair have young aircraft fleet sizes of at least 10 years (Mhlanga & Steyn, 2017).

There is a direct relationship between the age of aircraft and the maintenance costs–the older the aircraft the higher the maintenance costs to (Ndlovu, 2016). An aged fleet also increases the ground time required for maintenance, thereby affecting the airline's on-time performance and reliability. According to Malaba (2016) the airline spends between 15 and 25% of its budget on maintenance. Consequently, in May 2017 the European Commission (EC) banned Air Zimbabwe from its airspace over safety concerns due to its aged aircraft (eNCA, 2017).

Furthermore, the airline suffered huge losses brought about by declining passenger numbers and mounting debt (Zhou, 2012). After the controversial Zimbabwean land reform policies many European countries issued travel warnings about Zimbabwe and this slowed down the number of tourists travelling to that country. Consequently, passenger numbers dwindled as tourist numbers declined (Malaba, 2016).

Accusations of mismanagement and corruption have long been associated with Air Zimbabwe, resulting in its placement under judicial management in 2012. A forensic audit in 2016 pointed to alleged fraudulent activity by the airline's management. Findings released revealed that between 2009 and 2013, five executives prejudiced the airline to the amount of €5895 695.49 or not and US$1 298 827.88 each, totalling approximately US$10 million (Chibamu, 2016). The fraud contributed to the financial problems the airline is facing (Malaba, 2016).

The world economic crisis caused and compounded foreign currency shortages, and the lack of fuel increased the operational difficulties of Air Zimbabwe. Therefore, Air Zimbabwe's financial problems were also attributed to the volatile economic environment which was characterised by the shortage of foreign currency as well as hyperinflation which was above 100% in 2010 (Zhou, 2012).

Furthermore, Air Zimbabwe aircraft are often used as private ambulances for Robert Mugabe and his family's medical trips overseas (News Day, 2014). In state carriers political processes supersede airline operating interests in a market of substantial government influence (government airline or monopolistic market) (Chattopadhyay, 2015). A volatile political environment in Zimbabwe was the cause of dwindling tourist arrivals to Zimbabwe, which has significantly affected the load factors for the national carrier (Bhebhe, 2016). Consequently, political interference has significantly affected the performance of airlines (Mananavire, 2016).

Not using new technology is also affecting Air Zimbabwe's financial performance. According to Ndlovu (2016), Air Zimbabwe is operating with old and outdated technology in comparison to other airlines. Its equipment is so old and unattractive that customers doubt the safety of the aircraft, leading to them board other aircraft and to shun Air Zimbabwe. Lack of implementation of new technology is due to their inability to meet the costs of procuring the technology. This lack of adaptation to new technology has caused the airline to be uncompetitive in the market (New Zimbabwe, 2016). As a result, in May 2017 the European Commission (EC) banned Air Zimbabwe from its airspace (its most lucrative route) over safety concerns due to its aged aircraft (eNCA, 2017). Air Zimbabwe also faces intense rivalry after the Zimbabwean government opened the skies. According to Chipunza (2013), three South African airlines, namely SAA, Comair and Airlink, now control over 90% of the market share on the Harare to Johannesburg, Johannesburg to Victoria Falls and Johannesburg to Bulawayo routes, against Air Zimbabwe's 10% and this has significantly affected Air Zimbabwe's performance.

Managerial Implications

Based on the data presented above, the researchers urge the airline to reduce its staff/plane ratio and to adopt employee productivity improvement strategies. With a staff-aircraft ratio of 200:1, Air Zimbabwe is clearly oversized. Accordingly, there is a clear case for staff redundancy. However, in the process of doing so, there is need to safeguard potential loss of critical mass of skilled staff either through voluntary or non-voluntary retrenchment. The airline can reduce its labour costs and increase employee productivity by adopting strategies to schedule reasonable flight hours for flight crew, reduce cabin crew overtime, dispatch maintenance staff efficiently during direct working hours, and encourage employees to provide cost-control strategies.

It is further obvious that the airline reduce labour costs by keeping staffing as lean as possible and avoiding unionisation or limiting union influence if or when employees organise. Another option is to focus on achieving low total costs by increasing employee and aircraft productivity as well as the productivity of other costly assets, such as airport gates, for example, by speeding up the turnaround time of aircraft at the gate. Since the age of fleet significantly affected the performance of the airline, the researchers are strongly of the opinion that the airline replace its obsolete fleet with modern aircraft. Operating new generation aircraft would reduce operating costs, increase reliability and reduce ground time (for servicing) (Taumoepeau & Kissling, 2008). This would positively affect the balance sheet in the long term.

However, since management inefficiency significantly affects the performance of the airline, the research strongly urge the airline to hire efficient managers with aviation experience. Although it is not vital for the senior executives to know how to run an airline or fly the aircraft in detail as such experience can be hired, but it is important to have someone well-schooled in the industry at the helm so as to understand the operational issues and the needs of the front-line staff when they need assistance or have to make decisions affecting the company.

An airline requires people with credible management experience, preferably from within the industry, to be successful and compete in this cut-throat sector. As Eric Venter brutally puts it:

> The airline industry takes no prisoners and is highly competitive, everywhere in the world. To enter it thinking it will be a pleasant, affable place in which you can call on the finer aspects of human nature as you learn the ropes or when your own lack of acumen throws you a curved ball, is not only naive but immature (Venter, 2016).

To improve the airlines' performance the research advocate the airline to form alliances, which are strong and likely to survive, with other international airlines (Njoya, 2013). In most parts of the world, airlines have entered into alliance agreements to strengthen and extend the scope of their business and enhance their competitive position. Nearly all the regional competing airlines are in different forms of strategic alliance or belong to global alliance. For example, BA Comair and SAA are members of Skyworld and Star Alliance respectively, whilst Kenya Airways has a strategic alliance with KLM. Global alliances enable airlines to reach all corners of the world, a case being SAA which is now able to connect to more than 600 destinations in the world. Hence there is a strong case for Air Zimbabwe courting potential strategic partners or joining global alliances once pertinent issues including debt restructuring and recapitalisation have been attended to first. To increase load factors in an increasingly competitive environment the research also advocates the airline to improve the experience and value it delivers to passengers. The airline can identify customer needs and develop products and services that satisfy those needs while also providing a profitable return on investment. The researchers recommend the airline to identify key areas of importance to flyers. One approach does not fit all. Various customer segments, ranging from senior executives to budget-minded leisure travellers, have different ideas about what constitutes a satisfying flying experience. By studying the individual needs of flyer segments, the airline will be able to rank product and service features and identify additional opportunities for improvement and growth.

There is need to review the current organisational structure as well as instil a new culture in the airline which will not only build trust between management, staff and workers' unions but also encourage the entire organisation to give customer value priority attention. A service culture would help in positive positioning of the airline on the market place.

Finally, marketing at Air Zimbabwe should be part of the national tourism strategy. Air Zimbabwe should not operate in isolation and should be assisted to overcome its current financial problems by stakeholders across Zimbabwe's broad spectrum. Questions on whether the airline should be a profit making airline or a break-even airline should be central to every strategy adopted.

Conclusions

Although there is logic behind rebranding Air Zimbabwe, particularly after its battered image, there is a need for the airline to address the root problems identified above. Failure to which will be tantamount to addressing the symptoms rather than the root cause of the airlines' financial woes. Therefore, there is a compelling need for the airline to develop value promise after rebranding. A rebranded Air Zimbabwe needs to rise to its value promise or brand equity if it has to reclaim its market share lost to competing regional airlines namely, SAA, Ethiopian Airways, Kenya Airways and BA Comair. For the airline to convince passengers that it has changed for the better it must first improve its performance on key parameters like punctuality, service quality and air fares and should not introduce points of differences which increase the air fare of Air Zimbabwe. Once these concerns are addressed, passengers are likely to stick to the airline. The airline should focus on bridging its 'points-of-parity' before enhancing its points of differences. Re-branding might make all the difference between Air Zimbabwe and Zimbabwe Airways but it requires a company-wide initiative. The most formidable challenge for the airline now is to translate the positioning and qualities into tangible or service-centered experiences.

Nonetheless, only time will tell that rebranding the airline is more than just a superficial renovation meant to send a clear message to passengers, stakeholders and the community-at-large, that change is happening across and throughout the whole organisation of the airline. An airline cannot be a brand if the people delivering the product on the front lines are not in sync with the people in marketing and social media, for example. This includes cabin crew, airport staff, engineering and call center staff. To this end, the fresh, dynamic look should also be reflected in Zimbabwe Airways' complete approach to delivering on all areas of "operational, commercial and service excellence" for the airline to improve its financial performance. Air Zimbabwe has a vital role to play in improving tourism development in Zimbabwe since air transport is a major enabler of tourism.

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