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Sky High

The antidote is selling air travel as a destination

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Sometime back in the '80s, when things were simpler and the only major worries were the Ruskies, the Deficit and the Bomb, travel advertising was different.

Back then, Martin Puris came up with what has to be the most brilliant destination tagline ever, for Ammirati & Puris client Club Med: "The antidote to civilization." Unfortunately, this deathless thought suffered the same fate as most of advertising's rare gems—an oblivious client.

Since Sept. 11—and with the recent tragedy of Flight 587—I've been thinking about that campaign a lot. As I study travel advertising for clues about what to do post-Sept. 11, there are encouraging signs about what I like to call "escape travel."

People want this antidote enough that they are willing to brave the unfriendly skies to get away. This is good news. But the airlines, hotels and business destinations have a bigger problem. While travel to escape is doing just fine, travel as a lifestyle (i.e., business travel) is hurting.

Another way to think of this is that travel *to* a destination is strong

while travel *as* a destination is weak.

Today, the strongest advertising for airlines actually begins to sell the travel experience as a destination. The United Air Lines campaign from Fallon is a good example, following on Southwest's similar campaign. Both are saying, "Meet our people. If the people are OK up here, then maybe it's OK up here."

This is a good beginning. But the airlines must make sure it's just the beginning of a campaign to swaddle the passenger in a reassuring experience. This is beyond "advertising" in the traditional sense; this is the architecture of experience.

Consider JetBlue. Today, when every detail of the air travel experience looms large not merely as an annoyance or a perquisite but as an omen, JetBlue is reaping the benefits of having rethought many of these details. From the leather seats to the reinforced cockpit doors, the details are different, and the difference is reassuring. For example, the pilots and crew don't merely read scripts; they actually seem to have real personalities, complete with

genuine senses of humor. If JetBlue can successfully extend this experience to its advertising, is there any doubt it will continue to connect?

There's no doubt that it will, in my opinion, unless its much larger competitors take these hints: The airline is the destination. The experience is the advertising. The details are the promise. The promise is not exactly an antidote to civilization, but an antidote to air travel as we've come to know it. If airlines get it—and there is evidence that they are beginning to—then we can truly look forward to something special in the air.

We in advertising, both agencies and clients, can help. We can start by insisting that every aspect of the passenger experience is the advertising. We can use our special connection to the traveler and our vast stores of creativity to lead the process of reimagining that experience.

And we can take a page from Martin Puris' book, too. We can inspire and lead ourselves and each other with a simple idea encapsulated in one brilliant line. ■