

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Student Work

Student Scholarship

2009

Ride a Plane, or Ride a Cowboy

Andrew Hayworth

Rochester Institute of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/student>

Recommended Citation

Hayworth, Andrew, "Ride a Plane, or Ride a Cowboy" (2009). Accessed from <https://repository.rit.edu/student/9>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

Ride a Plane, or Ride a Cowboy

Andrew Hayworth

Air travel may not be an extremely lucrative business in today's economic climate, but while profits may be down, they can at least take comfort knowing that their advertising work has been done for them. It's difficult to improve upon the subtle link in the American consumer's mind between air travel and exotic vacation ads. A successful ad campaign for a major airline could very well simply be a picture of a beautiful island getaway, and the name of the airline – nothing more. How could this possibly be improved upon?

Simple: Sex! One doesn't have to think for too long to conjure up images of brief, cramped encounters in the airline bathrooms. Airlines have been capitalizing on the use of sex in their business for years – images of flight attendants in the late 1970's reveal uniforms that might as well be replaced with bathing suits. However, as working conditions for women improved with time, those uniforms disappeared. Airlines, however, still know that sex sells. They've simply shifted the sex appeal from in-flight to print ads.

Take, for example, the print ad that I've included with this essay. Canadian Airlines directed this at somewhat of a niche market – LGBT travelers, and likely intended it primarily for gay men. It doesn't take a microscopic inspection of the ad to find the sex appeal. The nose end of a jetliner is depicted as a phallic symbol in the middle of the page, pointing straight north. The background is a rather unassuming cloud pattern, and in the upper right hand corner we see the widely recognized rainbow symbol for gay pride, and the logo for Canadian Airlines along with the text “Enjoy the Ride.” But what about this ad makes the consumer want to jump on a plane and head north? Where are the appeals to *pathos*, *ethos* or *logos*? Or the attempts at the subtle manipulations of the subconscious mind, in the areas of our most basic wants and needs? I

feel that this ad primarily attempts to sell its service through subtle appeals both to *pathos* and *ethos*, and attempts to use the basic drives of sex, safety, and the need to escape to create a desire for a visit to our friends in the North.

This advertisement takes a large stab at *pathos* primarily through the human need for sex. Nothing about this ad outright states “Canada equals sex,” but that is part of the simplistic beauty that it possesses. We don't see an image of a couple in the throes of passion, and this is probably wise. Fowles states in his essay “Advertising's Fifteen Basic Appeals,” “The reason this appeal is so little used is that it is too blaring and tends to obliterate the product information.”(20). So, Air Canada has taken a much more sly (but not subtle) approach: they've managed to turn an airplane into a large phallic symbol. Is this ad implying that you will have sex on the plane? That by flying Air Canada, sex will likely be a part of your trip? That sexy people fly American Airlines, and that to be sexy, you should fly too? It is an extremely open-ended visual statement. In addition to the blatant visual appeal to sex, there is something to be said about the only “ad copy,” if you will, on the page. It simply states, “Enjoy the ride.” Without being overly inappropriate, one can see the link. Think, “Save a horse, ride a cowboy.” One might argue that it is simply referring to the quality of service that Air Canada delivers, and that connotation is easily seen. However, given the large phallus in the center of the page, the sexual link doesn't seem too big a stretch. No matter how vague it is, the appeal is there. And sometimes, simply being present is enough. Consider a celebrity's endorsement of a product. There is no logical reason that because a celebrity drinks a certain product, that you should too – but the ads work. In a similar fashion, it doesn't necessarily matter how sex and airlines are logically linked, the fact that they are linked on an emotional level is more than enough.

Behind the drive for sex, this ad takes another shot at *pathos* by appealing to a reader's desire to escape. As I alluded to earlier, this is not an explicit link: most of the hard work has been done here. However, Air Canada has attempted to help the process along slightly with their inclusion of a blue sky. While it certainly helps to direct the attention of the reader toward the airplane-phallus in the center, it also serves a more subtle role in that it attempts to evoke imagery of vacation. Think about it for a few moments: When you think of a vacation in the Bahamas, what color are the skies? Have you ever seen a picture of a tropical resort with gray skies? Logic certainly dictates that there must be overcast days in the tropics, but they are usually not portrayed pictorially. This is a slightly deceptive move on Air Canada's part as well. Canada is well, simply NOT a tropical destination. I've visited Canada many times. Most often, the skies were gray. But, Air Canada doesn't want that portrayed. So, they are trying to evoke the tropical images in the mind of the American Consumer, in hopes that they will assume that Canada is also a beautiful travel destination.

Finally, the ad attempts to appeal through *ethos* to the reader's need for safety. At first glance, this doesn't appear to be the case. Consider, though, the symbol of LGBT pride in the upper right hand corner of the page. It is from this small part of the ad that Air Canada appeals to the need for safety, through *ethos*. What this is saying, is that "We support LGBT people. We treat them as equals. It is OK to be yourself around us. There will be no negative repercussions." Speaking from personal experience, when I see that symbol, or something similar to that in a retailer's window, or on their literature, it increases their credibility in my mind. I am much more likely to give my business to one that is supportive of who I am. So, for Air Canada, this symbol serves both the purpose of making its customers feel safe, and immediately identifying the target audience. Simply identifying the target audience additionally increases the *ethos* of the

organization. From the perspective of a group that has been treated as second class (or even as mentally ill), to see advertising specifically addressed in a positive light towards your group is encouraging, and that group is much more likely to support that organization.

But, is this advertising in a positive light? On first glance, it seems to be simply a tongue-in-cheek advertisement, meant to both link the desire for sex to air travel, and possibly to poke good-natured fun at the stereotypes associated with the readers (ie, the stereotype that the LGBT population is sex-obsessed). However, one must consider the fact that the LGBT community has fought for years to simply be treated as equals. They have fought long and hard against simply being portrayed in the media according to their respective stereotypes. In the hands of the wrong people, this would simply reinforce those stereotypes and undo the work that the LGBT community has fought to achieve. So, while this ad may have accomplished its purpose in a light-hearted fashion, on a deeper level it is ever so slightly unsettling. Should this type of advertising be encouraged, or discouraged? I am not so sure that I like what I see.

Works Cited

Fowles, Jib. "Advertisings Fifteen Basic Appeals." Mercury Reader. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2008. 14-34.