

# Business Standard

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## Connecting India, connecting with India

*IndiGo also understands the Indian psyche very well, and has shown how the Indian mentality of wanting the moon for six pence can be tackled*



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It is the holiday season and one third of Consumer India is on an aircraft. Most likely seven of 10 travellers are taking an IndiGo flight. This column is a year-end salute to an Indian brand that is amazing at so many levels -- even though it does sometimes feel like it is in the hostility business, making us stand caged in buses while they finish cleaning their aircraft.

Real brands like IndiGo exist beyond the narrow confines of their industry boundaries and shape the larger world they live in. For starters, IndiGo has actually managed to discipline an undisciplined, argumentative, queue-cutting people into a compliant, rule-obeying lot. And they have done it, not with force and muscle but with staff that is mostly mild, young, and largely female.

Queues are orderly and rule-abiding. No amount of pleading can waive excess baggage fees. “*Jaante hain hum kaun hain*” doesn’t cut any ice. Passengers in emergency exit rows are calmly harangued and disciplined by a young crew

member to look up from their gadgets until the briefing is done, and verbally answer (nodding won't do) questions on language for the briefing and willingness to help in an emergency and comprehension. I dread that one day a quiz may follow.

What gives the brand such power distance? (Power distance, a concept articulated by Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede, being the extent to which those without power accept the right of those with power to have it.) It is the "efficiency contract" that users make with it, voluntarily handing over to them the power to enforce our good behaviour in exchange for the benefits of efficiency we get in return. IndiGo has consistently been an island of high efficiency in a world of exhausting and challenging logistics. Even getting to the airport through city traffic and navigating the entry and security check queues is harrowing. DigiYatra is great until it randomly refuses to recognise you. Will this "efficiency contract" we make with IndiGo hold if they start flying late or signalling "we don't know" behaviour like announcing endless creeping delays in half an hour slots (as experienced last week)? In all probability we will revolt. IndiGo also understands the Indian psyche very well, and has shown how the Indian mentality of wanting the moon for six pence can be tackled. Deal making is in the DNA of both Brand IndiGo and Indian consumers. We love the presumed bargaining power that comes with deal making. Excess baggage booked in advance gets a much lower rate than at the check-in counter. They provide price-benefit (performance) options galore and we feel empowered and spoilt for choice. Extras like leg space, shorter queues, out-of-turn boarding, and guaranteed meal choices come with individual price tags. It is a "no frills" airline offering frills to those who want frills. But knowing what a frill is and what a functionality is is their speciality, unlike many multinationals that consequently burnt their fingers. We witnessed a passenger asking for a "fragile" sticker to be put on his bag. The young lady behind the counter looked him in the eye and seriously explained that they did not do fragile stickers any more because "we treat every bag as fragile and handle it with care". A co-traveller wryly observed that not printing fragile stickers was their latest cost-saving ploy. Probably true, but they deserve an A+ for such a brand-reinforcing story and for training the troops in storytelling. Is there some secret sauce in their training, the magic of which is so widely visible in all parts of the airline; or can we attribute it to what the button on their uniform says: "girl power"?

IndiGo experiments all the time, titrating services offered as if it's all one giant laboratory experiment. For example, till recently, "fast forward" fees made your luggage come first. But after too many malfunctions in different airports, it got replaced with the benefit of "anytime boarding". In the old days,

consumers lauded consistency and saw frequent changes as an irritant but now we are an action-craving culture and see it as a sign of constant effort at forward movement. On a recent delayed flight, they experimented with food *thalis* served to each passenger where they were seated. Forgoing on-board sales and offering free food were a first for IndiGo! When asked how come, the staff replied “of course we had to, Mumbai air traffic delayed you so much”. Uncle Scrooge adds a heart at Christmas time to his brand image, while being teflon!

We teach MBA students the brand laddering framework of “attributes laddering into consequences laddering into values”. Lower-order brands stop at attributes or consequences. The old favourite example used to be Nirma -- cleans well and economically (attribute), balances my budget and makes me a sensible housewife (consequence), is messiah of the masses (value). Today it is IndiGo. Gets you there efficiently/cheaply flies from even small places (attributes) -- makes me more productive to earn more/now even I can fly (respective consequences) -- is messiah of aspiring India (value). Hopefully, like many Indian brands, the complexity of scaling and the speed at which they are doing it do not make them lose their centering.