

## When new gets old

On February 11th, 2000, jetBlue Airways took their inaugural flight. There was much fanfare for the new airline. They were to be different. They flew new aircraft equipped with all leather seats with a TV that offered free, live broadcasts to every passenger. This, along with casual, modern uniforms, younger flight attendants and a desire to be different all contributed to their rise.

Differentiating based on features and benefits can be effective...just not for very long. In fact, it's usually a one-trick pony. If it turns out that customers like the features and benefits that one company uses to distinguish itself, then it's no big surprise that the competition will copy or try to offer a little more. And thus begins the features and benefits arms race. It's a game that's usually started by the new kid on the block who offers customers an alternative to the old. The differentiation that catapults the newbie when they first start offering their "new" features is near impossible to repeat a second or third time. Instead, the game becomes a tit-for-tat series of back and forth comparisons, a steady game of one-upmanship Ping-Pong. And, like all arms races, it quickly gets expensive for the players and tiresome and confusing for the customers. Worse, it does little or nothing to create any significant sense of differentiation.

Over a decade after they entered the market, jetBlue is still advertising their leather seats and free, live television thinking it's still new. But it's not. Delta has it. So does Continental. So do many other airlines. And the addition of WiFi on-board is no great differentiator either. Sadly, the more jetBlue talks about these things as new...the more they look...well...old.

Differentiation doesn't happen at the features and benefits level. Differentiation is a perception, not a calculation, that starts with the reason those benefits were developed in the first place. jetBlue was founded as an airline that believed EVERY passenger deserves a little luxury, not just those at the front of the plane. They were to be to the airline industry what Target is to discount retailing - affordable trend and luxury.

jetBlue's decision to offer TV and leather seating, casual, cool uniforms and modern branding wasn't born out of market research and competitive analyses (the root of features and benefits arms races), it came as a way of bringing to

life their vision of what the airline industry should be. Their features were born out of what they believed. This is the root of all real innovation. Innovation is the solutions or ways companies find to bring their vision to life. That it distinguishes them from their competition is a result of innovation, not the reason for it.

For those looking to stand out again, go back in time and understand why the original features and benefits you offered were developed in the first place. What was the original vision that those features and benefits were helping to advance? Ignore what your competition is doing now to one-up you. Stop looking for things that may outdo them and start looking for new ways to outdo yourself. The mere act of doing things to advance a vision of an industry or a world that does not yet exist will ensure that everything you say and do will stand out. Because everything you say and do will indeed be new.