

AirSpace Season 4, Episode 8 - Safety Dance

Matt:

Let me tell you though, there were also chickens on that flight. I'm not kidding you. There were chickens riding in the lap of a woman like two seats behind me.

Emily:

Laughs That beats my cat on a leash story.

All laugh

Theme music up and under

Emily:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Emily.

Matt:

I'm Matt.

Nick:

And I'm Nick.

Matt:

Since the 1980s, when in-flight entertainment screens started to show up in airplanes, airlines have used them for the all-important and government-mandated safety briefing.

Emily:

But, for the last 15 years or so, those videos have undergone a revolution, going from a simple video version of the flight attendant briefing, to eye-catching marketing videos full of gimmicks and celebrities.

Nick:

But how did we get to here from there? Fasten your seatbelts by inserting the metal end into the buckle; we're talking about in-flight safety videos. But please remember to enjoy today's episode yourself before assisting other passengers.

Theme music up then out

Nick:

Airplanes have always been safe, right? No. Maybe they're more safe now than they were in previous eras.

Emily:

They are definitely safer now than they were in previous eras. But it was 1965 when the federal aviation administration in the United States started requiring a verbal safety briefing from flight attendants on board.

Nick:

So, I understand that the pointedness of the rule in 1965 was to be sure to tell everyone where the exits are. And that, I mean, apart from fasten your seatbelt, and I'm not sure when seatbelts were first required on airplanes in the United States, like, that's really the thing is, "Here are the exits. Please put on your seatbelt. Listen to instructions." Was air safety for passengers any more complicated than that before 1965?

Emily:

I mean, as we talked about in a previous episode, there wasn't any information about disabling smoke detectors and not smoking on board because that was allowed. So I have to imagine that knowing where the exits were was probably the most important part. But before that, really the only safety information that was provided to passengers was written on a piece of paper. So, for the context of modern air travel right now, I mean, that's the safety card that they tell you to read when you're sitting in the exit row. Before the 1960s, that was all you had was this written safety card that nobody probably even read.

Matt:

Right. And in an emergency, right, a crib sheet might be helpful. But if you think of all the things that you have to do today in an emergency, all those things that you're told about, not just the emergency exits, but the life vest, the exit slides, the masks that come down from the ceiling, right? How are you actually going to use that card in an emergency? It might not be the best way to actually prepare you for this traumatic event.

Nick:

So, something relevant to this conversation that happened in the 1980s were the in-flight entertainment consoles. And this enabled the airlines to kind of supplement the in-person safety briefing with safety videos. And that's how safety videos became a thing. I don't know if there was dramatic music or like light breaking over the horizon or anything, (*dramatic music comes in then is cut off*) or if maybe the airlines just kind of, didn't regard this as that revolutionary at the time.

Emily:

Yeah. And it's these safety videos though, that we're really interested in talking about today, right? It's the videos that play on your individual television on the back of the seat in front of you, where everybody gets their own, that really have kind of taken on a new life of their own. And it's not just the flight attendants standing in the aisle, trying to engage your attention about your personal safety, but it's essentially, airlines trying to use different creative approaches to try and engage your attention.

Nick:

Right. And that's when we get to a part where we're seeing these videos do kind of a dual purpose. They're there to help you understand the material and understand how to stay safe and hopefully do that in a creative way that's engaging. But also, we're talking about commercial airlines. Is there a more regulated consumer experience? And by that, I mean, can you think of a place where companies would have less of an opportunity to kind of flex their creative muscle and differentiate themselves from the pack? Airlines really only have so much play when it comes to getting creative and being clever. And I think in the late aughts is when you saw airlines really start to lean into, "We've got a whole different personality, and we're going to demonstrate that to you through the safety video!"

Matt:

Right. And a lot of the way they've done that is through using celebrities or trying to make the videos humorous.

Nick:

Okay. So, let's take a second and talk about, are these effective? What's required to be in them? What do the experts say about the idea of playful inflight videos?

Matt:

So, before we get into the videos themselves, we were wondering if they even work? It turns out that there are actually people that study this. And we talked to Dr. Brett Molesworth of the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

Dr Brett Molesworth:

Well, my name is Brett Molesworth. I'm a lecturer within the School of Aviation at UNSW. I'm an Associate Professor in the area of Human Factors and Aviation Safety, and hence, I complete research in the area of human performance, including cabin safety.

Matt:

And I got to ask him, "What impact has all of the marketing had on the actual message on the safety that's attempting to be conveyed through these informational videos?" So just like us, Brett and his colleagues were curious about whether all that marketing was getting in the way of the safety information.

Dr Brett Molesworth:

There are two aspects to this. So, if we are focusing solely on the recall of information, there is not much evidence to indicate that they facilitate in recall of information, and it really depends on the type of video that they use.

Matt:

One of the most memorable ones I've seen was just from a few years ago when I flew on KLM to the Netherlands, and I would describe their safety video as artisanal.

Emily:

Artisanal? *laughs*

Matt:

It was. They have those white tiles with the blue paint in the Netherlands.

KLM Video Clip

Flight Attendant/Narrator: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome onboard of this flight. While we are in the middle of this authentic Royal Delft pottery, we would like to explain the safety information on board of your KLM flight, through the fine art of Delft blue.

Matt:

What they had done is made the whole video with hand-painted tiles. Just running the tiles together, like a stop motion animation of the safety video. And I could not look away from this video. It was the, like, coolest thing I'd ever seen and a really deep b-side, deep cultural cut that they had sort of gotten into the groove of for that particular video. Not funny at all, just beautiful and incredibly well done.

Nick:

So, Matt set a high bar there, starting out, talking about a safety briefing video that is art. But let's rewind and talk about when airlines first tried to stamp their safety videos, instead of just having people in uniform. And I think that that kind of originated with Virgin Airlines, where they had this whole idea that they were going to revolutionize the experience of flying, and it was going to be this fun, hip... it was too late to really call it MTV generation kind of make-over, but that kind of zest, right?

Emily:

Right, and it was an animated safety video. And essentially, it was animated in a way that sort of looks a lot like hand drawn doodles, right? This wasn't Disney quality animation.

Virgin America Video Clip:

Narrator: For the 0.0001% of you who have never operated a seatbelt before, it works like this. Just insert the metal end into the buckle until it clicks. And-

Emily:

It was really meant to capture Virgin's sort of playful brand identity. And so, it was really different from just having a video of a person telling you what to do, but rather sort of leaning into creativity that they kind of had available to them, because they had the whole medium of video at their disposal.

Nick:

Right. And this kind of started a mandatory race, where I think all the big carriers tried to show their personality, and you've got carriers like United, that their first playful video showcased their global reach.

United Airlines Video Clip:

Flight Attendant 1: Hello!

Flight Attendant 2: Hello!

Flight Attendant 3: Konnichi wa!

Flight Attendant 4: Chiao!

Flight Attendant 5: Mabuhay!

Nick:

So that's a very straightforward way of characterizing your global air carrier, but that felt like a daring response to the Virgin video. And the underlying premise there is, "Sure, but how many places can you fly with the Virgin compared to how many places you can fly with the United?"

Emily:

So, are there rules about what can be in the video or what can't be in the video or how far is too far?

Matt:

So there's actually not a lot of rules about how these videos can be made, like the types of subject matters they can cover. All that's really regulated is that they present certain information.

Emily:

But I think it's really an interesting point, right? There's so much about the airline industry. There's so much about flying, especially flying with us, commercial passengers. There's so many regulations that it's kind of surprising to me that there are no regulations with respect to these safety videos, other than making sure that you cover the bulleted list of content that needs to be covered.

Nick:

So, Air New Zealand gets into this game, and they start to flex a lot of Hollywood muscle that we'll talk about in a second, but the place that they started was edgy and the kind of the mold of where Virgin was maybe trying to head, but maybe honestly, even a little bit too edgy.

Emily:

Yeah. So the first video, the first safety video that Air New Zealand put out actually had flight attendants and other safety personnel, rather than wearing their uniforms, they were wearing body paint, painted on them to look like their uniforms, to then perform the safety briefing.

Air New Zealand Video Clip:

Music: got you under my skin

Flight Attendant 1: Kia ora and welcome aboard our Boeing 737-300. Shortly, we'll be winging our way to our next port of call.

Flight Attendant 2: But before we lift off, we'd like to give you what we call the bare essentials of safety aboard this flight.

Emily:

And that was kind of what they did, before they started to capitalize on some of the other film industry fame that they had found with the Lord of the Rings movies.

Matt: (in Gandalf voice)

You shall not pass.

Nick:

That's right. So the thing that Air New Zealand-

Matt:

Buckle your seatbelt.

Nick:

Quickly figured out they had going for them was the fact that the biggest movie trilogy of the aughts, sorry, Star Wars prequels, was filmed in New Zealand and had become kind of a national cottage tourism industry. And they leaned heavily into, not just humor, which a couple of videos were attempting before, but also deep celebrity.

Air New Zealand Video Clip

Elijah Wood:

Thank you for embarking upon your journey with Air New Zealand. May your path always be guided by the light of the stars, and may the future bestow upon you all the happiness and adventure our Middle Earth has to offer.

Peter Jackson:

That's a wrap, everyone. I hope you enjoyed it.

Nick:

So Matt and I are having a lot of fun, and could make this an hour and a half long episode if we would just want it to riff off Lord of the Rings. But somebody has got to ask the question at some point, and luckily for us, Brett did ask, "Does all of this make us safer?"

Matt:

Right. And the answer that Brett and his colleagues came up was, well, kind of.

Dr Brett Molesworth:

And together we've been talking about this movement away from, what would appear to be the focus on safety, to more of a marketing approach to conveying the safety briefing. And we were both intrigued, as the impact of that from a safety perspective, in terms of recall of information and how passengers would perform if they had to experience a non-normal situation such as an emergency evacuation.

Matt:

Well, they found that people paid more attention to the videos that were funny or that had a celebrity in them, which is good. And they also found that people in good moods actually pay more attention and can remember things longer. But, at the same time, they weren't necessarily paying attention to the right parts. They might've been distracted a little bit by the celebrity and the humor.

Dr Brett Molesworth:

What we do know is that individuals become rather bored of such videos if they're a frequent flyer. So, the objective of employing marketing techniques is to overcome this familiarity with the video and the boredom. So, if we look at it from an attention perspective, videos employing humor and or celebrities are quite effective in ensuring that individuals maintain attention. But the problem is that they seem rather poorly designed, because they overlap the humorous aspect, in most cases, with a key safety message. So that detracts from the memorability of the content.

Emily:

So did, Matt, when you were talking to Brett, did he say anything about sort of how to combat this? Like how do you balance finding a video that folks are going to pay attention to, but also retain some of the information that they also really need to get, in order to keep themselves safe?

Matt:

Yeah. So we talked about that and what it really comes down to is shifting the paradigm a little bit, from videos that just give information that's required, to videos and experiences that would actually train the passenger to do the right thing, if the need arises.

Dr Brett Molesworth:

These videos educate individuals. And in most circumstance, there is a difference, and that's what I was getting at a moment ago when I spoke about passengers interacting and being part of the safety briefing, because it moves from that education to a training aspect. And what we do know is individuals, when they physically engage with an activity, that that will be more memorable than when they just listen and try to rote learn content.

Matt:

So for example, they do ask people to count the seats between them and the exit. And they also ask them to both buckle and unbuckle the seatbelt. And we found that people actually were more likely to remember it, after having actually done it, as opposed to being told.

Clip, Air New Zealand video:

Flight Attendant: It would be wise to note your nearest exits could be behind you, so cast your eyes about and count the number of rows to your nearest exit.

Emily:

There's an extra challenge for safety videos, because they're no longer competing with your boredom. They're competing with your devices that are also commanding your attention. So since 2013, FAA regulations have allowed the use of personal devices at any time, which means things like the especially all-important in-flight safety videos are really facing epic challenges in trying to deliver this mandated information into your brains. But ultimately, experts say that paying attention to the safety briefing is super important and is actually going to keep you safer, whether you're bored or not. So, even if it's boring, even if you've seen that particular video a thousand times... Maybe don't watch it on YouTube before you get it on the airplane. Maybe wait for the surprise, because safety, fun, then learning, because you never know, it could be fun to be safe.

Theme music up and under

Nick:

We hope you've enjoyed today's episode of Airspace podcast from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. Please note, today's episode may be behind you.

Emily:

You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram @airspacepod. Airspace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda, distributed by PRX.

Theme music up and out