

2015 APG Awards

Title: British Airways – Visit Mum

SUMMARY

Visit Mum is the story of how one mother and her son were able to invoke tear-jerking nostalgia in anyone living away from home. For British Airways, it's a story of defying conventions in a category wrought with clichés and overly rational, price and product driven messaging. It's a story that changes the conversation about an airline's role in people's lives, a conversation that captures hearts before it speaks to minds.

We were tasked with solving a critical business problem – how do you get more people to fly on British Airways from North America? Our data analysis discovered a huge business opportunity to India, while ethnographic work in the community unveiled a unique perspective on the audience. This translated into a creative idea that touched people on a deeply emotional level and an execution that reached millions.

The Visit Mum platform not only reversed BA's fortunes on one of its most important routes, but set a precedent that would change the way BA approached retail marketing for years to come.



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THE PROBLEM? FOR AN AIRLINE KNOWN ONLY FOR FLYING TO LONDON, LONDON WASN'T CALLING.

In the UK, BA is the market leader, an institution, the national flag carrier with the gall to tell Brits to stay home and support the Olympics aspirations of their countrymen rather than fly somewhere exotic on holiday.

In North America, BA is a considerably smaller fish known for one thing: flying to London. They do this well – transatlantic routes to London represent ~70% of BA's total revenue from North America.

There was just one problem. UK bound traffic was not forecast to grow at a significant rate in 2013 (just 1.8% according to IATA) and the competition was getting tougher with every airline focused on a piece of BA's transatlantic pie. The 10% revenue growth target set for BA in North America seemed improbable at best.

The business challenge at the beginning of 2013 was clear: **to grow revenue for North America we needed to win over new audiences travelling to destinations beyond the UK.**

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FINDING A NON-ANGLOPHILE AUDIENCE IN NORTH AMERICA SHOULD BE EASY, RIGHT? WRONG.

We started our search by entrenching ourselves with the statisticians and econometricians in BA's revenue management team. With their guidance and our analysts' magic formulae, the numbers started talking.

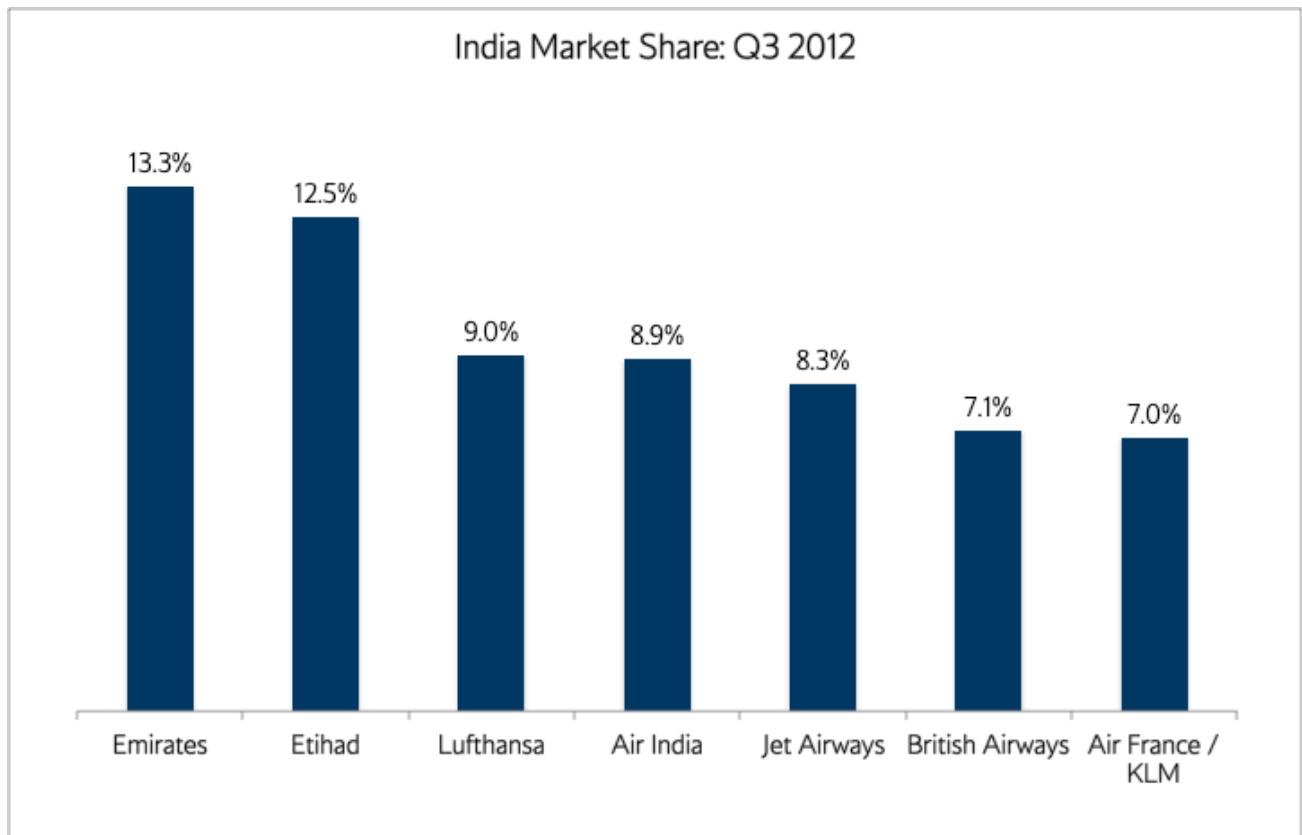
Surprisingly, we found the greatest revenue opportunity was not European, Middle Eastern or African destinations, but the double long haul routes to India. This market was worth almost \$2 billion and BA only had ~7% of it, compared to some of the key competitors whose share was in double digits.

But who were these travellers? By observing patterns in the data we discovered a large segment of customers who travelled in groups to the same destinations, every year or two. These travellers – first and second-generation expat Indians living in the United States and Canada – were travelling “home” to visit friends and relatives.

This was a huge revelation. Indian expats were BA's most valuable non-premium audience in North America. The competition on these routes was fierce but fair - a level playing field from a service and product perspective - but BA was way behind in market share compared to other major carriers like Emirates and Lufthansa (with 13.3% and 9% respectively).

ULTIMATELY, WHAT WERE WE SHOOTING FOR?

1. Incremental revenue [data removed for client confidentiality]
2. Increase market share of non-premium Asian-Indian market and strengthen BA's position against our closest European competitors (Lufthansa and Air France/KLM)



Source: Airline Global Distribution System (GDS)

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THE QUESTION TO THE PLANNER - WHAT ON EARTH DID A BRITISH AIRLINE KNOW ABOUT NORTH AMERICANS FROM SOUTH ASIA THAT WOULD CONVINCE THEM TO FLY WITH US?

Skeptical but enthusiastic, we got to work to discover some “insights”. The journey to India is long - rarely less than twenty hours - with two long haul flights, 11+ time zones, layovers in random European or Middle-Eastern cities, and more often than not, the pain is compounded by your entire family being in tow. In other words, it’s more than just a big deal, it’s an ordeal.

We embarked on a journey with our ethnographers to understand the inner workings of Indian expat culture, their lives before they left home, how they keep in touch, and what goes into planning a trip back. Hours spent discussing expat life in the Indian restaurants of Jackson Heights, Queens, accompanied by Masalas, Tandooris and more than a couple of pints of Kingfisher. Eavesdropping on Skype calls between expats and their families, sharing information from the mundane updates about the new bathroom tiling to minutiae on preparations for the next weeklong wedding extravaganza.

“You know what, I have a strategy when calling home. I try not to Skype with my Mum so much, because then she can see if I’m paying attention when she’s talking for thirty minutes about how successful the neighbor’s cousin is. And I usually try to end our conversations before she asks whether I’m bringing the family home for Diwali” (Ashish 34, Chicago)

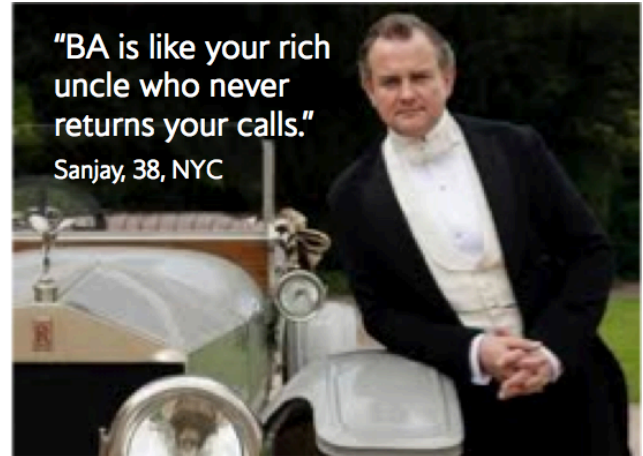
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AND WHAT DID WE DISCOVER?

Every airline was telling expats that they were a bit more “Indian” than the rest. They had a more culturally “sensitive” product, more authentic Hindu, Jain or Muslim meals, and a broader range of in-flight Bollywood movies, and without fail, everyone offered stock photos of their cabin crew in saris. Lufthansa even built a virtual “Chai-Lounge” - a personality test that let you know what type of tea your personality resembles. The reaction? Nobody cared.

We could never be more authentically Indian than the Indian carriers, nor as warm, friendly and empathetic as the other Asian carriers. We were lumped in the “Western” carrier class - efficient, clinical and professional. Further, it was clear that British Airways’ image suffered from the long shadow cast by Britain’s colonial influence on the South Asian region, leaving a clear and present mark on

generations of Indian nationals and expats. So not only was the airline's DNA ill-suited to compete with more culturally compatible competitors, but the brand's association with India's turbulent history even weighed us against our European counterparts.



Time and again we heard people change the subject from planes to people and in-flight entertainment to real lives on the ground. The journey details were irrelevant. The flight was merely a means to an end, an experience they were willing to tolerate to get home.

A pretty sorry state of affairs for a planner hoping for something to set British Airways apart. We were at a loss and we were worryingly close to resorting to the category status quo of uninspired, ill-informed, and poorly targeted noise plastered on travel booking sites.

We needed a different way in. A way to change the discourse of the category. A way we stumbled across late one night - "if we can't win on the flight experience, and nobody cares about that anyway, let's focus on why you choose to go".

That was it. **British Airways understood that it's never been about a flight, but about making the effort to take the journey.**



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OUR SOLUTION? MUM'S THE WORD.

If Indian expats are not interested in the flight, let's not talk to them about the flight. If they are not interested in hearing from BA, let them hear from someone else.

In this deeply matriarchal community, mothers are the pillar of the family, concerned and judgmental in equal measure, ever interested in the details of your life across the Atlantic. Who better to deliver a message of nostalgia, memories and a visceral longing to return home than Mum herself?



We found one such mum in Mumbai and asked her to cook her son's favorite meal. This home cooked dinner would be delivered to him in New York, courtesy of British Airways. At least that's what we told her.

We knew we had the right message – we needed the right time and place to deliver it. Our research taught us Indian expat travel planning remains an analogue experience – with local travel agents managing group bookings for the entire community. This presented an additional bump in our already somewhat winding road – if the majority of bookings weren't going to come from people clicking on a “book now” banner ad, and with little budget to bombard our

audience in the traditional sense, we needed a strategy that would ensure our message was passed on organically, from expat to expat and mother to son.

The format was long form film, five minutes and twenty seconds to be precise - five minutes longer than the client was comfortable with. "Nobody will watch a five minute ad", echoed in the halls of the client's offices. It's difficult to overstate the culture shift that had to occur to move a traditionally tactical retail selling organization into a content marketing machine. But we persevered and evangelized our strategy with clients on both sides of the pond.

We captured an India not of bejeweled elephants or incredible architecture, but of young boys playing cricket in a back alley, lingering shots of Mumbai's fishermen in a chaotic market, scenes so intimate you can feel the warm, humid air draught from your screen. The story is narrated by Alka and Ratnesh, a mother and her son. And crucially, no actors, no sets, and definitely no planes, pilots or passengers.



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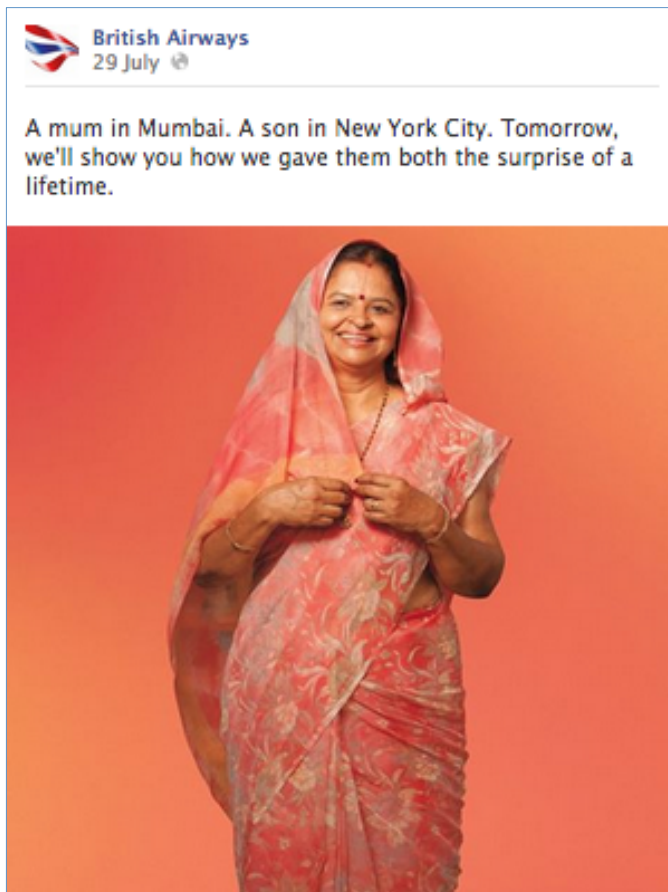
SO YOU MADE A FILM. IS THAT IT?

Nope. Not even close.

The web film was our centerpiece that would pull on the heartstrings of every son and daughter. Once they'd shed a few tears, we could draw them into a discussion about home, Mum, and eventually, the journey.

We partnered with the Times of India and the South Asian International Film Festival to add a cinematic credibility to our content. Included in the platform were downloadable recipes of the food featured, interviews with other Mums, and an Instagram contest to upload a picture of you and your Mum in exchange for a chance to win a trip to visit her yourself.

The search and booking data revealed that the end of summer was the biggest annual booking window for travel to India (Diwali and the wedding season) and by isolating specific markets, such as Toronto and Chicago, we could focus our limited media where other carriers were beating us.



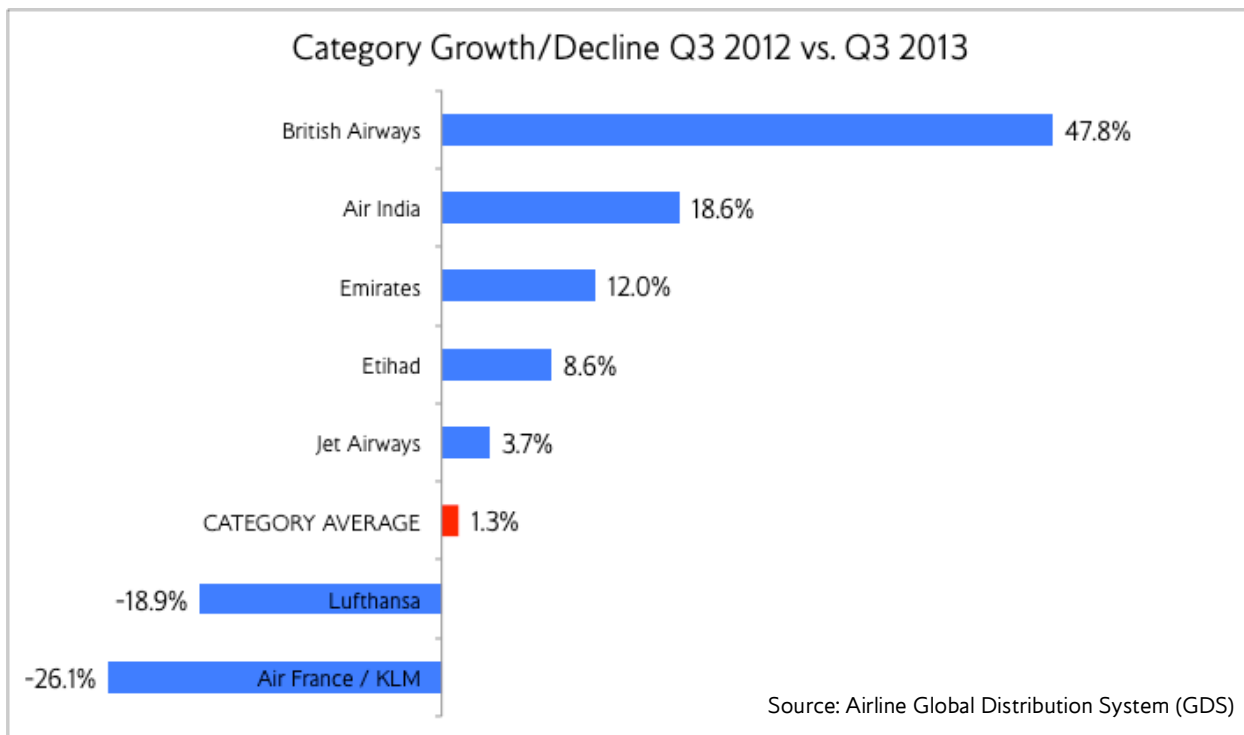


WELL, WHAT HAPPENED?

In keeping with much of this story, we should let the numbers do the talking. The Visit Mum platform has made over 1.3 million people cry.

[Sales data omitted for client confidentiality].

The impact on BA North America's entire business was profound: we grew by ~50% during a period when the category only grew by 1.3% (see below).



However, quotes from the expats themselves reveal the true impact of the effort:



Vasu Gangrade 10 hours ago

I am a student living in USA. I flew BA via London last year... This video brought back all the mixed feelings... Great Job BA... I am surely flying home in Xmas break this year... asking which airlines I'd prefer is a redundant question now :)



Da Rahul Singh 4 months ago

Thank you BA for a such a beautiful effort, you have earned me as a customer. I will always fly British now onward.
thank you




SARATH ERIC LEANDER @SEL_27 · Aug 9

Sheer timing that I'm seeing this ad today when I'm home alone. Thank god nobody saw me weep like a child. [youtube.com/watch?v=WPcfJu...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPcfJu...) #visitmum


Major news outlets took notice and re-posted the video, among their comments:



VR Vamsi 3 months ago
My God! So Emotional & Very Touching.....
Jus' for this initiative, I would fly on BA
God Bless BA & Team.....

**HuffPostGoodNews** @HPGoodNews 1 Aug
.@BritishAirways We just watched this. Could you send some tissues our way? huff.to/18PMcV
[View summary](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorited](#) [More](#)

**Sunday Times Travel** @ST_Travel 1 Aug
It takes a special film to get @lessybella welling up. Well done @British_Airways and beautifully shot youtube.com/watch?v=WPcfJu... #visitmum
[View media](#)

**Travelocity** @travelocity 3 Aug
Get the tissues: British Airways Surprises Mom with Free Visit from Son She Hasn't Seen in Years news.yahoo.com/blogs/trending... via @YahooNews
[View summary](#)

Global industry influencers from LinkedIn to Coca-Cola praised the campaign:



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THAT'S ALL VERY WELL, BUT HOW CAN WE PROVE IT WAS THE CAMPAIGN THAT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR BA'S FORTUNES?

Ticket price was not a factor. Airlines adjust their prices in real time to match those of their competitors. The result is that they are usually within a few dollars of one another. This period was no exception.

There was no change in capacity (number of seats the airlines have to sell).

Media spend was constant: BA spent about the same budget on media during the campaign year (September 2013-August 2014) as it had in the year prior (September 2012-August 2013). In addition, BA's media spend is in line with other competitors in this category.

It wasn't category growth. The category grew at a rate of 1.3% between Q3 2012 and Q3 2013. BA grew by almost 50% over the same period, while Western competitors, notably Lufthansa and Air France/KLM, declined.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

The business success attributable to Visit Mum has put British Airways in a position to challenge the Eastern airlines' dominance of the Indian audience in North America for the first time ever. British Airways was able to engage North American Indian expats in a relevant, emotional and completely original way, and it's safe to say, united a few families along the way.

