Do you fly a brand?

Do you ever choose to fly an airline because of its brand identity? Or, do you choose your flight based on schedule/price? I bet it's more than the latter than the former, but if all things are close, you may choose the brand you like the most.

Last week, I took my first flight on Virgin America. I was going out to San Francisco and Virgin flies from Washington to SFO at least twice a day. I had heard good things, and I thought that Virgin, like Southwest or JetBlue, was a lower cost carrier. Well, it really isn't. Virgin charges a comparable price to the other major carrier (United) flying to San Francisco from this area. And like United, Virgin charges for bags. Unlike United, Virgin charges for in-flight movies ($8 a pop). Virgin also charges for food, snacks and for premium (like Honest Tea) and alcoholic beverages. Pretty much the only thing that you can get for "free" is water, coffee and soda. But you order all of these items on demand, from your seat, via an in-flight on-screen ordering system. You want more water, you "order" it.

And there are other differences. The seats are leather, there's more legroom, and the cabin has a purple light. The flight attendants seem a bit younger and "cooler" than most, and there is definitely no in-flight magazine (because print is so yesterday). But what is really different is the safety video. Take a look:

http://youtu.be/DtyfiPIHsIg

Read more about how this video heralded a new brand strategy for Virgin America in Fast Company.

It seems that even though Virgin America basically nickels and dimes its passengers, **people enjoy flying with the airline**. It just feels different—more fun and more hip. Even the vibe at

the airport was different. Virgin shares a terminal with American at SFO. The Virgin side had funky chairs and work tables (with plug-in terminals). Lot of people were working at their laptops, with headphones on. Very few (if any) screaming children. Only one wheelchair request. The feeling was more tech-y, hip and relaxed. The American side felt darker, more stressed, more old-school.

The real difference may also be customer service. Our flight out of Washington-Dulles was delayed by two hours due to the huge storm that hit the Bay Area last week. The people at the podium immediately set to help out anybody who needed/wanted to change their flight plans. One of the crew brought out snack carts and gave out free water and snacks. Everybody seemed calm. There was no grousing. A woman in the waiting area across from me told me she travels Virgin to California all the time for work. She told me it was rare for there to be a delay. She herself had connections out of SFO, and had to change her flight. She got on the phone with Virgin, and they were able to accommodate her. She was going to leave the next day, but when she left, she did not seem upset. The airline had taken care of her. The delay was not Virgin's fault, but rather Mother Nature's. Virgin worked hard to lessen the impact of the delay and to accommodate its passengers (or guests as they call them).

Now, would I fly Virgin again? Most likely. I would know to bring food on-board though, and maybe a movie on my smartphone. It would still depend on price and schedule, but all things being equal, Virgin wins out. It just felt better.

What about you? Do you fly an airline because you like what it stands for? Let me know in the comments.

UPDATE

I just came across this post on the Wonkblog on the Washington Post, which lists airlines on how often they lose your

luggage. Virgin America is last on the list (loses the least amount of luggage). Now that may be because fewer people check their bags, or because Virgin is better. Either way, it is a good reason to fly an airline.