

Virgin Atlantic Airways

Virgin Atlantic – You’ll Never Forget Your First Time!

In one of the worst economic years for the airline industry Virgin Atlantic finalized its commitment to launch a new route between North America and London Gatwick to Toronto – the first non-U.S. North American route. With pressures mounting over reduced business travel and the economy facing heavy business layoffs, corporate travel and international was being paired back. Virgin Atlantic always known for its splashy parties and large image when entering a market was faced with a tough decision as revenues were in a slump and the airline was predicting it would not post profits for the first time. To say the least, the mandate was to cut the budget or jobs would be lost when the Toronto launch occurred! There was no budget for launch, yet the expectations were high among the media. How to overcome this scenario with limited lead-time to plan and execute?

Plus, British Airways and Air Canada were highly esteemed by Canadian travelers and the airlines were solidly entrenched in the marketplace. Many Canadians held strong ties to not only their national carrier, but had loyalties to Her Majesty, which they viewed British Airways as an extension to all things good in England. The media was highly skeptical of Sir Richard Branson and the airline’s intentions.

North America was responsible for communicating to the corporate travel agents, wholesalers and media based in Canada. Since there is always a launch flight into a new route, a clever theme was created and more than 150 key targets were personally invited by phone via the sales and PR department to fly with Sir Richard Branson on the inaugural flight.

To keep the impression that this would be a “classic” over-the-top adventure with Sir Richard, Sharon created a branded campaign for the inaugural flight: “You Never Forget Your First Time.” A short message was printed onto existing card-stock stationary. The invite, along with a copy of Branson’s book, Losing My Virginity, was packaged with airline colored metallic confetti and shipped as a follow-up to each phone invitation.

Meanwhile, the media and corporate sales clients would need to be entertained on a limited budget. Sharon brokered deals with a hotel partner in Kensington Gardens to host the entire group for a low cost of \$90 a night for three nights. She then proceeded to make arrangements with the nightclubs, prestigious restaurants, London theater, walking tour operators, Kensington Palace to name a few to have the group hosted – 80 percent of the arrangements were provided complimentary. The theme of the London visit was also branded as the “London Daze & Knights Tour” – because we would have them in a fun daze and of course meet a knight along the way!

The group was flown to JFK and entertained at Virgin Atlantic’s Clubhouse and then escorted with PR and sales. At the Clubhouse, each guest was given a laminated credential on a lanyard that read “VIP” with details of the trip on the back. The

credentials were designed in-house, and the airline utilized existing lanyards. Everyone was given a sense that they were about to embark on an exciting adventure; plus credentials made them feel special.

The trip included all the major Canadian dailies and numerous freelancers. The group also received special surprises behind the scenes. Sharon had purchased a multitude of party supplies and goodies during a sale at a local party store before leaving the U.S. and shipped them to the hotel. A Virgin Atlantic staff member went with her and ensured these goodies popped up at all the right times!

Harrod's teddy bears were waiting in each guest room on the first night with a "sleep tight" note. There were also fun Virgin products placed in each guest's hotel room, which also had been negotiated for at a low price. Despite being sister companies, Virgin Megastores, Virgin Cola, Virgin Vie all charge for their products to the airline.

On another evening there were drawn baths in each guest's room with a created yellow ducky floating holding a cell phone and stamped with the Virgin Atlantic logo inviting guests to relax and kick back after a day out in London.

The highlight was a night walking tour where the group had just dined at a Michelin starred restaurant, again where Sharon persuaded them that the media/agent exposure was worth closing the restaurant for and giving a low set menu price. As the group boarded the bus they found on their seats "tiaras," "crowns" and small bottles of bubbles to blow. The guests lit up at the opportunity to be "royalty" and blow bubbles as they enjoyed an exciting night tour of London.

Needless to say the trip was a smash hit, which culminated with a return party onboard with Sir Richard Branson to Toronto. Not only did the airline receive a tremendous amount of attention by ever news organization in Toronto and Canada for its one daily flight and establish the route, no one ever suspected that this launch was accomplished on a shoestring budget! It was one trip no one would ever forget!