

## STAND BY YOUR SEATS

Jennifer Coutts Clay

When CEO Michael O’Leary announced that he might install a special area for stand-up high-density-type seating in the new jetliners on order for Ryanair, reactions from the general public ranged from giggles of disbelief to shock and awe – not to mention a frisson of horror. Just imagine being strapped to some kind of bar stool for take-off and landing, and then standing up all the time throughout the flight, squashed against who-knows-who or who-knows-what!

But there is an interesting and relevant historical precedent which eventually turned out to be an enormous and enduring success. At the end of the 1800’s, in central London, there was a social revolution in concert-going circles. Up to that time, classical music events were attended mainly by formally dressed sociable notables, who sat in serried ranks of theatre-style seats that were positioned in parallel rows. But in 1895 – amid cheers and jeers – Roger Newman, the founder of the ‘Promenade’ concerts, declared that he was going to make his annual series of performances available not just to the high-end cognoscenti but also to audiences who, hitherto, had not enjoyed access to such cultural delights.

Instead of installing a traditional seating layout in the stalls section of the Queen’s Hall auditorium, Mr Newman organized a cheap and spacious EMPTY area to attract a radically new market segment of customers called ‘Promenaders’. The intrepid pioneers were invited to ‘promenade’, or walk around, wearing everyday clothing – and they were encouraged to stand in groups alongside the orchestra pit.

Mr Newman even installed a fountain to keep everyone cool during the summer months – a note for Mr O’Leary: now that could be a real ‘wow’ factor for your product branding at Ryanair!

The product advance was perceived as being akin to strolling in the viewing terraces while watching a military parade or sporting event, or strap-hanging inside a crowded train, bus or ferryboat when there were no seats available. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a modern parallel would be the close-up physical group encounters as witnessed at current pop or jazz festivals.

This year at the Royal Albert Hall (the home of the ‘Proms’ concerts since 1941) of the 6,000 places available every night for the highly acclaimed series of broadcast performances, 1,400 tickets were allocated for sale to standing-area customers – principally students and tourists – at just UKL5-00 (five UK pounds) each, the price of a cup of coffee in a smart restaurant. Anyone who has ever spent a stand-up evening squashed against an army of aficionados, and within a fiddle-bow’s length of fortissimo-style renditions of the grandest works by the greatest composers, will attest that the experience is unique, inspiring and incomparable. And long may it continue!

Question: Would Mr O’Leary’s proposed aerial stand-up revolution meet with similar success? Concepts for stand-up seating have been presented at serious aviation conferences over the years, and the main topic of discussion has always been the potential testing processes necessary to achieve certification status for high-density-type seating options. Preliminary sketches showed

structures reminiscent of vertical spray-tanning booths, fun-fair joy-ride cabs, funicular gondolas or avant-garde ski-lifts. Clearly, the technical requirements to develop stand-up seats suitable for use on aircraft would be extremely complicated. Other questions included:

- How will safety procedures be implemented in the stand-up section of the cabin in the event of an emergency?
- How will cabin crews be able to monitor and manage the flights?
- How will passengers be protected during periods of unforeseen air turbulence?
- What will happen to the closely packed group during take-off and landing?
- Will children, pregnant women and people with disabilities have access to this new class of travel?
- How will individuals cope if they feel sick or faint?

Some critics have dismissed Mr O’Leary’s announcement as nothing more than an attention-grabbing PR ploy, pointing to the fact that his Boeing 737-800 jetliners are already ‘maxed out’ i.e. carrying the total number of passengers allowed under the specific aircraft type and model certification. But could there be a deep-logic plan in the air? If the existing permitted number of passengers could be huddled together in stand-up seating zones in, let’s say, two or three ‘sardine-can sections’, then the other parts of the cabin could be opened up and used for different purposes.

Stand-up-seating passengers would be glad to stretch their legs by visiting the attractions on offer e.g. revenue-generating programs such as: pay-as-you-eat-and-drink cafeterias, pay-for-your-shower-and bathroom cubicles, pay-for-your Internet access to information and business services, entertainment and shopping galleries – or how about on-board casinos for gambling enthusiasts? This algorithm would not be new in the aviation sector: at major airports, passengers are typically herded into narrow corridors and scrunched into corners at check-in points and boarding gates while retail stores and commercial outlets monopolize the main areas of prime space.

From the customer point of view, stand-up-seating areas in the aircraft cabin would be welcomed more for ultra-short-haul hops (the aptly named ‘banana flights’) than for long-haul trans-oceanic or trans-continental multi-stop operations. Of course it would be necessary to explain clearly that the bar-stool brigade, albeit corralled in clusters, would not actually be tethered together as for a tug-of-war contest. And yes, this dramatically different configuration might well operate smoothly if all the passengers could be guaranteed to be of relatively small stature.

But what about everyone else? Well, if he can resolve the issues mentioned above, and if he can set his air fares at – or below – the cost of a cup of coffee, Mr O’Leary will probably succeed in generating an endless supply of aficionados beating a pathway to his jetliner entry-doors. The potential customer base could comprise not just students and impecunious tourists, but also

ships' crews, sports fans, music groups, teams of workers – all those hale and hearty travellers who want to get from point A to point B at coffee-cup air fares.

Just think of the product launch buzz! The music theme selection for the boarding recording could be Sir Elton John belting out his hit tune "I'm Still Standing". And the advertising slogans? How about: "Fly to your dream location...Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity...Zero-gravity coffee-cup air fare...An unforgettable experience...To be squashed up against the most perfect who-knows-who or who-knows what!"

Bon voyage, everyone! And now we just need a catchy name for this lucky new market segment.... Stand by for take-off? The captain's command takes on a whole new meaning!

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