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In Airline Gift Bags, a Chance to Sell



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Yvonne Wanjala, left, and Zorana Simeunovic, Emirates flight attendants, with amenity kits on a plane bound from Kennedy Airport to Dubai.

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI
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The little amenity bags given to premium-class travelers hold an oversize importance to the airlines: they not only reflect the airline's brand, but also demonstrate the carriers' high regard for top customers.

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Soon, some airlines may even turn the amenity kit into a revenue source by selling them to economy-class passengers.

"The airlines are very interested in co-branding and revenue sharing,"

said Anita Gittelson, the executive vice president for product development at Wessco who is considered the godmother of the modern-day amenity kit. She said she was working with several airlines to offer kits for sale, though no airline said it had immediate plans to do so.

"We're trying to look for ways to give coach class an opportunity to purchase for very little money what business and first class gets for free," Ms. Gittelson said. "Revenue generation and airlines are like two magic words. They need the money."

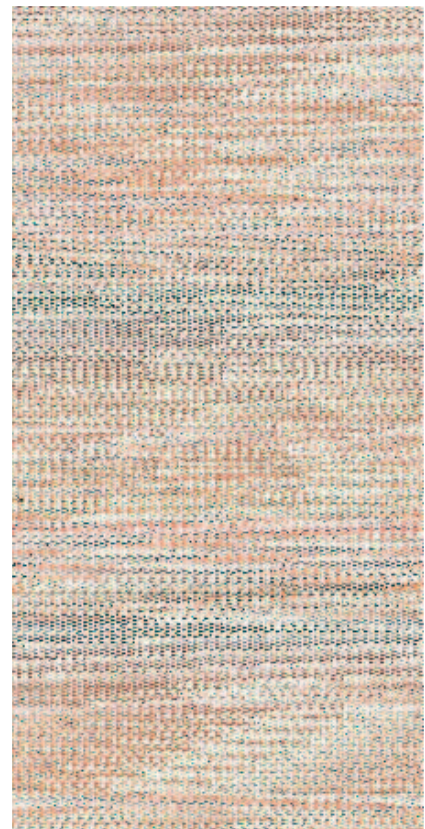
In the early days of air travel, passengers received tubes of generic toothpaste, vials of perfume and emery boards — all in miniature sizes. These kits, dating to the 1950s, are now collectible, sold on eBay and other sites. "Pan Am and TWA were pioneers when it came to in-flight service," said Steven Lott, an collector and executive with the Air Transport Association, the airline industry trade group. "Getting your hands on an amenity kit from the early days of commercial aviation, those are historic mementos."

Still, those bags, heavy and rigid, bear little resemblance to those handed out today, said

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Jennifer Coutts Clay, author of the book “[Jetliner Cabins](#)” (Academy Press, 2004). There’s been a transition, she said, to “synthetic fabrics, eco-fabrics like bamboo tied up with raffia, and now we see airlines providing handy, useful items, not just items that display the airline’s own logo.”

Drugstore brand items started appearing in amenity bags in the mid-1980s, but the most transforming change may have occurred in 2000, when Ms. Gittelsohn persuaded Delta Air Lines to take a chance on Essentiel Elements, an aromatherapy company in California that at the time was little known outside of a few department stores and [spas](#).

When Essentiel Elements products and discount coupons were placed in Delta’s amenity kits, sales of the products increased, said Ms. Gittelsohn, whose company handled the customers’ orders. “It was a marvelous introduction to the public of a brand that was just starting to move,” and Delta got a commission on the sale, Ms. Gittelsohn said.

“It was a new revenue stream for Delta,” said Laura Peck Fennema, who founded Essentiel Elements, “and it had a very positive impact on our business.” Ms. Fennema sold the company to Gilchrist & Soames in 2002.

These days, more airlines are doing partnerships. In [a press release](#) this month, Davi, a California skin care company, announced a deal with Korean Air, saying it was part of a plan to market products to “top-class customers worldwide.” Airlines can get discounts or even free products from manufacturers that want the exposure of being a carrier’s chosen brand. “The airlines have been much more active hunting around for customers, Ms. Coutts Clay said. If an airline “advertises clearly which [ice cream](#) it is using or which coffee, these will be linked to contract deals of some kind or another. That’s the way for the business to go.”

Still, while some carriers seek to recoup some of the costs of the kits, other airlines insist the bag is a gift and not a vehicle to sell products.

“We’ve never seen these as a commercial venture,” said Robin Padgett, vice president for aircraft catering at Emirates, which produces separate kits for men and women. “We don’t see this as a revenue-generating exercise. It’s a customer experience-enhancing exercise.”

Creating a bag that makes an impression takes more than a trip to the drugstore for toothpaste and a zipper pouch, which is why Ms. Gittelsohn said she looked for little-known boutique products and acted as an arbiter of quality and taste for airlines. She says her job is to know what products will make a passenger feel special as well as effectively plug ears, shade eyes, moisturize skin and eliminate morning breath.





“It has become an art form of sorts,” Ms. Gittelsohn said. “Airlines today will ask their interior designers to work on their kits.”

Part of the challenge is making a bag that is stylish while dealing with the many considerations of working in an environment where weight, size and cost are critical.

“It’s always a balancing act between function and design,” said Michael Bierut, a partner in the New York office of the international design consultant Pentagram, which designed the amenity kits, cabin interiors and corporate logo for United Airlines.

A version of this article appeared in print on May 24, 2011, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: In Airline Gift Bags, a Chance to Sell.

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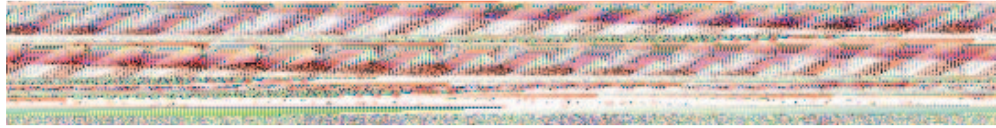


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When the design does not work, it becomes clear right away. Ms. Gittelson said she helped Delta create an amenity box that was a tin in different shapes, in a vintage aviation motif. The airline soon realized it had made a mistake.

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“They were lovely,” Ms. Coutts Clay said. “I have a couple in my collection.” But, she said, “Where were we supposed to put them? My carry-on bag is pretty full.”

The trend today is for environmentally friendly kits. American Airlines, Aeroméxico and Cathay Pacific Airways point out that their bags, which are reusable, contain corn-based toothbrushes and shampoo bottles and bamboo socks.

Still there are those like Bob Lilienfeld, a frequent traveler, environmental activist and author of the book “Use Less Stuff” and [a blog](#), who argue that the more earth-friendly action would be to eliminate the bags altogether. “If I can fly first class somewhere, the odds are good that whatever is in the kit, I already have,” he said. “My suspicion is that most ultimately, it gets thrown away.”

That concern is why Cathay is considering offering passengers items from a tray or announcing that amenities are available for those who request them from flight attendants. “We’ve asked cabin crew and passengers what they think of that,” said Alex McGowan, head of product at Cathay.

Alice Liu, the director of onboard products at American, said the company was always re-evaluating what customers found useful. “We are constantly looking to the customers to see: ‘What do you want? What are the things you don’t use? We don’t want to put more items in a bag that you’re not going to utilize.’”

Amenity kits are a flexible element of premium class travel that allows airlines to keep their image fresh, Mr. Bierut said. “If they are trying to be hip, they put hip brands in their package,” he said. “It’s easier than doing any physical capital improvements on the airplane.”

But that is not what makes them so attractive to Mr. Lott, who has 40 kits in his collection. For him, the amenity kit is much more than the sum of its parts.

“It is a piece of history and it’s offered on flights all over the world and it is unique to



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aviation," he said. "It reminds me of the wonderful history and the magic of flying."

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