

**AIRLINES CARRYING THE FLAG AND
THE FUTURE – LISTENING TO THE
LEADERS**

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Relative to the total size of an aircraft, the space it occupies is quite small. Minute, one may say.

There it sits, a small splash of colour on a white metal canvas of engineering excellence. A creative patch of identity, a spark for the imagination.

Yet, despite its being but a minor design section on a massive structure, as millions looking upon its image know, symbolically, strategically, and even emotionally, the presence of a nation's flag on the wingtips and/or side of the body of a commercial airplane can eclipse even the most impressive aircraft design.

It is not just a mark of place, it is a mark of pride, a statement of strength.

And an expression of just what a nation is capable of, wherever in the world it may arrive.

The combination of aviation and a national flag is a powerful one. On its own, aviation is an industry of awe. Inspiring us to literally and figuratively look to the skies, aviation has become an essential part of our lives, connecting the world at so many levels. From the business and busyness of travellers up top in the passenger sections of the aircraft, to the bundles of cargo in the belly of the plane, air transport has unlocked opportunity for travel, tourist and trade across the globe, unlocking opportunity for economies, societies, communities and individuals as never imagined.

Now, in 2014, commercial aviation – the ability to book, buy and board a plane to go from A to B (and C and D and then onto E if you wish) – celebrates its centenary. 100 years of erasing the borders of our maps and minds by connecting people and places through the skies.

As stated by Tony Tyler, Director General & CEO of IATA at the opening of the 2014 AGM recently in Doha, a destination located in a part of the world that is reshaping global air routes and hubs, since that day of first flight in January 1914,:

“The airline industry quickly grew from a single aircraft, one route and a lone passenger. This year we will connect 3.3 billion passengers and 52 million tonnes of cargo over 50,000 routes with 100,000 flights a day.”

As clearly conveyed by Tyler:

“Today, aviation is the life blood of the global economy. The industry supports over 58 million jobs and \$2.4 trillion in annual economic activity. It creates jobs for Kenyan farmers who sell fresh flowers in world markets. It facilitates global supply chains so that workers in many nations can collaborate to build computers, cars and even airplanes. Aviation delivers many of the real world goods that are traded in the virtual shops of internet commerce. As a catalyst for economic and social development, aviation and the businesses that we support have spread prosperity and lifted countless people from poverty.”

And, so importantly, as Tyler emphasizes:

“The intangibles create even greater value. Flying brings people together—families, friends and business colleagues. It helps minds to meet and exchange ideas. It gives people the freedom to be almost anywhere in just 24 hours. And it has turned our wonderfully big planet into a wonderfully small world of enormous and wonderful opportunities.”

Add a nation's flag into the mix, and the meaning of aviation takes on heightened importance and impact.

RECOGNISING THE RESPONSIBILITY

For the head of a national airline, the task of carrying passengers and cargo is made all the more pressurised when also carrying the flag. Especially 'young' nations actively working to establish and embed the country's identity within the global community, and across the global skies.

Such is the case for South Africa, and its national carrier.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary of democracy, South Africa's legacy carrier *South African Airways* (SAA) has become an overt statement of the spirit and determination of the people of the country. Acutely aware of the strong connection that the people of South Africa have with its flag carrier, the airline's new CEO, Monwabisi Kalawe, ensured that his entry into the job in mid 2013 was with full, firm focus on the critical role that SAA played in the advancement of the nation.

As a leader of the nation's flag carrier, and as a proud South African, he knew exactly where his compass pointed.

"It was an honour for me to take on the responsibility as CEO of SAA in June last year, which is an enormous responsibility and a mammoth challenge. I was lucky when I started that the SAA Board and leadership team had already crafted our Long-Term Turnaround Strategy called Gaining Altitude. Our strategy sets the airline a dual mandate. Not only do we have the responsibility to ensure that SAA is a commercially successful airline, but SAA has a dual mandate and supports the South African National Developmental Agenda through its contribution to the economy of South Africa, employee spending and job creation."

The numbers speak for themselves. Kalawe continues:

"SAA's annual contribution to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), which was quantified in a June 2012 Oxford Economics study, constitutes 0,3% of SA's overall GDP. Furthermore, SAA contributes economically through employee spending, supports developed and developing business hubs, opening doors to opportunities, facilitating access to global markets and spreading wealth. Furthermore SAA has created 35 000 jobs (directly and indirectly, through our supply chain) in SA and an additional 44 000 in tourism."

And that is merely the direct impact. The indirect impact, SAA's multiplier effect on numerous economic sectors, reinforces just how strongly South Africa's people, industry and future need SAA. Kalawe has this ripple effect at the forefront of his efforts:

"These numbers will increase as we spread our wings. Ultimately, SAA makes a considerable contribution to the national economy developing business and connecting people – not only with one another, but with global markets."

TAKING THE FLAG TO THE SKIES, AND TO HEART

Still, as a leader, focusing on the fundamentals was required to break through the immediate challenges that faced the airline and blocked its ability to reach new heights. Kalawe continues:

"I am very clear that although SAA has many strengths, chronic weaknesses needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency, such as the internal culture, brand equity, and the strategic and commercial viability of the airline. I strongly believe today that we can make

this airline once more the pride of the people of South Africa, at home and across the globe.”

For SAA’s CEO, the expectations are clear when it comes to fulfilling his mandate to the airline’s political and commercial stakeholders. So too is a part of the role that he takes just as seriously - his fulfillment of the promise that he makes every day to the over 52 million South Africans across the country who are emotional stakeholders in their airline.

For Kalawe, being CEO is a duty, not a day job.

“We are the South African ambassadors throughout the rest of the world and it is up to us, as the employees of SAA, to reignite and restore the confidence and appreciation in the value the airline offers. I believe wholeheartedly in the future of South African Airways.”

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