



An Important Arrival: The Anatomy of a Vintage Advertisement

Bradford Hudson

The advertisement for American Airlines that is reproduced on the following pages appeared in national magazines in late 1957. It is a two-page centerfold color spread depicting a couple arriving at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston, after a flight on American Airlines.

The discussion below provides a deconstruction and analysis of its elements, considers the related evolution of the airline and hotel industries, offers a glimpse of advertising agencies during a formative period, and reflects on some related issues in marketing. This will hopefully appeal to scholars and enthusiasts of brand heritage, transportation history, advertising history, or travel ephemera.

American Airlines

American Airlines was formed through a series of acquisitions of smaller aviation companies be-

tween 1929 and 1934. American quickly became the leading domestic airline, in terms of revenue passenger miles, and was listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 1939. American remained among the leading airlines over the following decades, ranking second in size by the end of the century, and arguably first in prestige among consumers and industry analysts.

This advertisement appeared at the dawn of the jet age. Most carriers were still using propeller aircraft exclusively, including American Airlines whose flagship was the DC-7 featured here. American would offer jet service on transcontinental routes starting in 1959, using the new Boeing 707 aircraft.

Mercury Service

The headline “Sign of an important arrival – The Mercury emblem” refers to the travelers and their



AIR TRAVEL IS AMERICA'S BEST BARGAIN

Since 1941, the index of retail prices for other products has risen almost 85%, while the total increase in the cost of air transportation, despite constantly improving service, has been less than 4%.



The Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston, world-famous for its distinguished hospitality



LUXURY LEADER
IN THE
WORLD OF FLIGHT

Sign of an important arrival-The Mercury emblem

Join the company of eminent and discerning passengers who make the Mercury label their own personal travel emblem. The deluxe accommodations on America's fastest airliner—the DC-7, the

excellence of the menu, the thoughtful efficiency of service, are all evidence of the Mercury's sole right to the designation *luxury leader in the world of flight*. You fly the famous Mercury at no extra fare.



luggage tag, which displays the subsidiary product brand and logo for the 'Mercury Service' offered by American Airlines.

The name was inspired by the Roman winged messenger god Mercury, and had been used to designate high-speed transcontinental travel since the introduction of the DC-3 aircraft in 1936. This service became non-stop with the introduction of the long-range DC-7 aircraft on the route from New York to Los Angeles in 1953.

Mercury Service was extended to ten other cities in 1957, including a non-stop route from Boston to Los Angeles. This advertisement was part of a themed series with different versions for each city. It was intended to reinforce the simpler and more factual announcements that had appeared immediately after the service extensions were introduced.

Ritz-Carlton

The hotel depicted in the advertisement is the original Ritz-Carlton property in Boston, located at the corner of Arlington Street and Newbury Street. Opened in 1927, it was part of a chain of luxury hotels throughout Europe and the Americas, which was founded in association with the legendary hotelier César Ritz. Most of these hotels did not survive the Great Depression, and the Boston location was one of the few remaining properties by 1957. The hotel was known to generations of Bostonians simply as 'The Ritz' and was widely regarded as one of the best hotels in the United States.

The property was sold to Atlanta real estate developer William B. Johnson in 1983, who acquired the building to obtain the rights for the Ritz-Carlton brand, which he then extended to a new chain of lux-

ury hotels throughout the United States. The brand was subsequently sold in 1995 to Marriott Corporation, which is the current operator of almost every hotel using the Ritz-Carlton name worldwide.

This is not the current Ritz-Carlton property in Boston, which is located across Boston Common on Avery Street, and was opened in 2001. The original building depicted in this advertisement was purchased by the Tata Group in 2006, which is currently operating the property as a luxury hotel under the Taj brand.

Pricing

The graph in the lower right corner of the advertisement provides a comparison of the change in airline ticket prices against the Consumer Price Index (CPI), during the period 1941 to 1956. The accompanying text notes that consumer prices increased much faster than airline prices during this period, but does not offer any conclusion about the relevance of this information for consumers. Presumably, the graph is presented as a form of evidence for a claim regarding the increasing affordability of air travel.

The same method of comparison can be used to extrapolate prices forward over the next half century, based on CPI data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As an example, a round-trip coach class ticket on American Airlines nonstop from New York to Los Angeles was advertised as low as \$198 in 1957. Using CPI data, we can calculate the equivalent value of this ticket at \$1,618 today. However, during a recent search of the American Airlines reservations website, a similar ticket was priced as low as \$324.

Prices in the hotel industry offer another point of comparison. As an example, a room night at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston was advertised in the American Hotel Association *Red Book* as low as \$9 per night for 1957. Using CPI data, we can calculate the equivalent value of this room at \$74 today. However, during a recent search of the reservations website for the current Ritz-Carlton in Boston, the least expensive room was priced at \$395.

Combining these calculations for the airline and hotel industries provides a stunning contrast. The airline ticket in 1957 was about five times as expensive as the airline ticket today. The reverse is true for the hotel industry. The hotel room today is more than five times as expensive as the room in 1957.

It must be acknowledged that such comparisons are based on single examples, and that the Consumer Price Index may not offer a perfect conversion rate for updating the prices of airline tickets or

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Primary sources for this article included numerous documents and ephemera in the personal collection of the author, including an original version of the advertisement depicted. Other primary sources included interviews with retired executives conducted by the author, historical databases for newspapers including *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*, and vintage copies of industry directories such as the *Hotel Red Book* and *Radio Annual*. Historical and comparison data about the Consumer Price Index was obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics at the United States Department of Labor. Current pricing for airline tickets and hotel rooms was obtained by the author from the reservations websites of American Airlines and Ritz-Carlton Hotels. Secondary sources for this article included *Eagle: The Story of American Airlines* by Robert Serling, several volumes from the *Almanacs of American Life* series published by Facts on File, and various other publications and websites.

hotel rooms. Furthermore, there have been several developments since the appearance of this advertisement that have caused seismic shifts in the airline and hotel industries. These include computerized reservations systems, variable pricing methods and revenue management, the deregulation of the airline industry in 1978, changes in the ownership structure of the hotel industry, and the rise of internet travel intermediaries.

Nonetheless, even if these specific conversions are not precise, they are valid in principle. The price of airline tickets has declined relative to other goods and services over the past half century, including hotels. From a consumer viewpoint, airline travel became more affordable during the decade prior to this advertisement and this trend has certainly continued since then. However, from a business viewpoint, it could be argued that airline executives have failed in maintaining their strategic position.

Luxury

The couple depicted is fashionable and presumably wealthy. The woman is wearing large diamond earrings, while the bellman in the background is carrying her fur coat.

This advertisement is attempting to position American Airlines and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel as comparable products. The Ritz-Carlton in Boston was certainly a luxury hotel at the time, and the brand remains so today. As the hotel industry expanded over the next half century, and as product segmentation became more pronounced, the Ritz-Carlton brand maintained its prestige.

In contrast, the entire airline industry has lost its associations with luxury. Air travel was originally an expensive mode of transportation, reserved for small numbers of senior executives and affluent individuals, but this changed during subsequent decades. According to *Almanacs of American Life*, the number of airline passengers increased from about six thousand in 1926 to 12 million in 1946 to almost half a billion by the end of the century.

Underlying causes included improvements in the speed and comfort of aircraft, growing confidence about safety among consumers, an increase in disposable income, and the competitive effects of deregulation. The subsequent rise of discount airlines seriously undermined consumer associations between air travel and luxury, while wealthy travelers eventually abandoned commercial aviation entirely, after the introduction of fractional ownership systems for private jets.

Co-Branding

This advertisement offers an early example of cooperative marketing between two separate companies, which formed an alliance to promote their brands together. The benefit for Ritz-Carlton becomes apparent if one considers its strategic position at the time. The hotel was built as part of an extended chain, but this was now defunct and the Boston property was independently operated. The owner could not afford such an extravagant promotion, and was undoubtedly delighted to have the advertisement funded by a marketing partner.

The benefit for American Airlines becomes apparent if one considers the changing nature of airlines, which were already in the process of transforming from luxury products to consumer commodities. American Airlines needed to differentiate itself from other airlines, while reinforcing prior associations with luxury that could support premium pricing. It wanted to share in the reflected glory of the Ritz-Carlton.

This advertisement includes visual signals of both aspects of the conflicted status of the airline industry at the time. The woman outfitted in furs, the elite status of the hotel, and wording in the text clearly indicate an appeal based on luxury. And yet, the chart comparing airline prices to CPI data acknowledges that ticket prices are dropping precipitously compared to other goods and services, implying a growing democratization of air travel.

Lennen & Newell

The advertising firm for American Airlines during this campaign was Lennen & Newell. Although virtually unknown today, it was a leading agency with clients that included Colgate-Palmolive, Lorillard, and Nabisco.

The strategic approach, copywriting, and artwork for this advertisement were heavily influenced by Carruth L. 'Bill' Smith, who was the account executive for American Airlines at Lennen & Newell. Perhaps not coincidentally, he was also the brother of Cyrus R. 'C.R.' Smith, who served as president of the airline from 1934 to 1968.

This period represents a formative 'golden age' for agencies on Madison Avenue, during which the advertising profession entered popular culture. This is exemplified by numerous entertainment offerings in which advertising executives played prominent roles, including feature films such as *Lover Come Back* (1961) and television series such as *Bewitched* (starting in 1964).

More recently, this era has been featured in the retrospective television series *Mad Men*. Lennen & Newell reportedly served as one of the models for the fictitious Sterling & Cooper agency during development of the series. The methods and atmosphere portrayed in the program are not entirely misleading. Former employee Allan Hayes recently remarked that the agency “came closer to *Mad Men*’s ‘historical accuracy’ than any other place I ever saw.”

Artwork and Copywriting

This advertisement was not considered important by art directors of the era, nor is it considered significant today by art connoisseurs or advertising historians. When asked recently for reactions to this advertisement, several former art directors were dismissive. One remarked that it “follows all the period conventions. Inoffensive, no factual substance, despite the silly graph, and loaded with the client’s good opinion of itself. In 1957, all us lowly artists really dreamed of doing [more innovative] work like Helmut Krone, Milton Glaser and, just a bit later,

George Lois.”

The latter refers to advertising art director George Lois, who would eventually be inducted into the Art Directors Hall of Fame and receive the Special Medal from the American Institute of Graphic Arts. Ironically, Lois worked briefly as art director for the American Airlines account at Lennen & Newell during 1957. Lois had a difficult relationship with the agency, the account executive, and the client. In an incident that is now legendary, Lois became so aggravated during a meeting with Smith that he overturned his desk and stormed out of the office, subsequently resigning a few days later. When asked recently to comment on the advertisement reproduced here, Lois disavowed any connection.

Nonetheless, this advertisement is particularly evocative of a distinct era in commercial illustration, and offers a superb example of a style of advertising that was common on Madison Avenue during the post-war period. It also remains a visually compelling and appealing image for certain audiences today, particularly those who have nostalgic views of bourgeois American culture during the 1950s. ■



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