

“ARRIVING AT A PRE-DEPARTURE LOUNGE THAT IS REMINISCENT OF A TERRIBLY CORNY 1970s TELEVISION SITCOM COMPLETE WITH IMPOSSIBLY GREEN FLOOR PLANTS, OVER-PLUSH CARPETS AND OH-SO-VERY-MUCH MUDDY BROWN DRAPES ”

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Cash on the Blue Train

> THE 14TH album by blues-inspired working class singer Johnny Cash is called 'All Aboard the Blue Train'. As expected it's one of his most celebrated and important albums due to the single 'Folsom Prison Blues' – a track by Cash that is notorious for spurring on fans across the world. There is certain correlation to Johnny Cash and the South African Blue Train. Both revered and celebrated for their strength in times of lesser fortitude and both sadly losing their essence and forgetting their backbone motive.

Johnny Cash, the person brand, was so beautifully constructed as he toured across the United States wearing his signature black attire. The Blue Train adopted their demotic nickname as a reference to the blue-painted steel carriages introduced in 1937. This represented a regalness that was prevalent in SA at the time and the train became known across the world as a true luxurious vessel for travel, in the then terribly smart, expat

SA. The train was then called 'Union Limited' and 'Union Express' and dates back to 1923 when it carried passengers from Johannesburg to ships docked in the Cape Town harbour that would then eventually deposit them in England.

The train travels around 1 600km between Pretoria and Cape Town and back a few times a week and shows off with a butler service, and lounge cars that are very trendy right now offering non-smoking and terribly shouldered smoking facilities. There is also the ever popular observation car and carriages with gold-tinted picture windows. The compartments are soundproofed and all reveal en-suites (with some even sporting a full bath tub). The service, unusual for SA to say the least, is what causes the operators to refer to it as a 'magnificently moving five-star hotel' and is why they often take pride in the press by announcing that kings and presidents have travelled on the train. The real question is who actually are these kings and presidents?

As the case with Mr Cash, the train lost its mojo. What makes a train journey worth spending the time (which is now the ultimately luxury) is that it needs to compensate for this time by being I'd like to say 'incredible'. The ever-travelling owner of *Monocle* magazine, Tyler Brule, often talks about trains, planes, boats and any other method of transport in a column featured in the UK *Financial Times*. We would agree, critically, that a train's brand, as is the case-in-point with his piece on the 'Eurostar', is sacred and can very easily slip off the pedestal with neglect.

So starting at the online presence, the Blue Train's website is outdated and looks like you may be able to purchase health supplements or perhaps home delivery nappies. It certainly does not scream luxury, opulence, exclusivity or any of the other over-used words the 'lux industry' loves to use. Especially not the glass of probably not freshly squeezed orange juice that is handed to viewers on a napkined tray as the website's landing page.

As far as brand touch points go this is pretty much one of the first contacts potential passengers will have with the brand and its inability to caress and charm can be to its detriment I'd say. But that's just one element; there are so many other areas that need some serious love and attention and I believe 'R and R' won't be quite enough to save the national icon that is the Blue Train.

Arriving at a pre-departure lounge that is reminiscent of a terrible corny 1970s

television sitcom complete with impossibly green floor plants, over-plush carpets and oh-so-very-much muddy brown drapes that are thick and foul do not in any way excite the spirited traveller. Where is the luxury that designers, like Cecile and Boyd's and Christopher Jenner, ooze so effortlessly in their projects? Maybe the Blue Train should call them. The Blue Train has forgotten that luxury travel has an element of serious aesthetic that holds you to your seat.

But then again, it's simple really. A rebrand is all they need. The fundamentals of the brand are there: like Johnny Cash had his talent, the train has its heritage. Find the hue of blue that represents the train and use it in all the communication, inject some much needed modern technologies including Wi-Fi that will attract a younger affluent (and apparently there is this rising class right?) traveller and give people what they really want – that's great service and a bit of a song and dance. The reason people want to spend time on the Blue Train, the same as with other trains such as 'The Palace on Wheels' in India and the 'Orient Express' is because of the show, the drama (avoiding of course an Agatha Christie murder) and the incredible sensation of grandeur.

The Blue Train, like our friend Johnny, may have lost its way but then again many do and regain their sense of grandeur. Whether the privatisation of the train will help or not, the key now is to take careful stock of your once beautiful brand.

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