

## Why Delta Hired Zac Posen

*Photo: John Minchillo/AP Photo*

On the surface the [announcement](#) that fashion designer [Zac Posen](#) will design new employee uniforms for Delta Airlines (NYSE: DAL) seems an extravagant diversion. “Delta Employees Will Probably Be Dressed Better Than You” reads the headline of a Consumerist [article](#) reporting the news. Racked’s [coverage](#) suggested the new uniforms are intended to distract travelers from bag fees, nonexistent leg room, missed connections, and other travails.



(Credit: [www.deltamuseum.org](http://www.deltamuseum.org))

In an industry that frequently points to its razor-thin margins as a reason for disappointing financial performance, hiring a hot designer seems like an unnecessary expense. It would make more sense, it seems, for Delta to spend its limited resources making more substantive changes. But spending on higher quality, more stylish employee uniforms actually might make a real difference for Delta, and for any other company undertaking a turnaround.

**Better uniforms mean happier employees.** Research (including a [seminal study](#) published by the Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration which showed a significant linear relationship between the design of uniforms and the attitude toward the job of employees who wear them) shows a direct connection between employee uniforms and employee attitudes. Beyond the quality of the uniforms themselves, investing significant resources in what employees wear allows companies to send to them a strong message about how much they’re valued. Customers are likely to benefit from the morale boost since it’s well-known that levels of employee satisfaction directly correlate with customer satisfaction.

**Distinctive uniforms are differentiating.** From Hooters girls' tight tank tops to Hot Dog On a Stick's jockey-inspired get ups, companies use employee uniforms to differentiate their brands. In service industries, employees serve as walking billboards and their dress can help companies stand out in a sea of sameness. Recall how much attention [Southwest Airlines](#) (NYSE:LUV) got when its flight attendants started wearing shorts and tennis shoes. In fact, the airline [states](#) that the "Southwest Airlines Flight Attendant uniform is one of our most cherished brand identifiers."

**Moreover, employees represent the brand — and employee uniforms convey the brand attributes and personality.** Contrast the dress style of employees at two electronics stores: T-shirted

[Apple](#) (NASDAQ:AAPL) employees reflect the democracy and accessibility of the Apple brand, while geeked out Geek Squad employees reflect the expertise and precision that [Best Buy](#) wants associated with its brand. In the airline industry, [Singapore Airlines](#) (SIA:SP) is renowned for designing the complete appearance of its attendants, its "Singapore Girls." Beyond clothing, the company specifies hairdos, foundation shades, brands and colors for lipstick and nail polish, and jewelry (e.g., elegant watches preferably an upscale brand). The Singapore Girl embodies the brand's traditional Asian values and hospitality. If customer experience is theater — as some people consider it — employee uniforms are the costumes through which the brand's story is dramatized during a customer's visit.

So perhaps people shouldn't be so quick to judge Delta for its new partnership with Zac Posen. And actually, it's not the only airline to consider designer uniforms a worthwhile investment. A few years ago Virgin America hired Banana Republic to design its uniforms, and last year it one-upped itself by giving the task of updating those designs to the British fashion icon Vivienne Westwood. Of course, Delta needs to excel in many other aspects of its operations in order to succeed in the larger brand transformation it is hoping to achieve. But designer employee uniforms may be just the kind of spend that multiplies the investment.

*Denise Lee Yohn is a brand-building expert, speaker, and author of [What Great Brands Do](#). Visit her [site](#), sign up for her [newsletter](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#).*