

Press Photos

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It is generally rare that one reads about graphic design in daily media. But in the spring of 2002, the Swiss media were keen to cover the rebranding of the national airline Swissair, an event that marked a new chapter in the financial turbulence of the company that had started back in the summer of 2001. From the very first articles on the Swissair crisis, reports on it had been highly emotional, and when the aircraft remained on the ground in October 2001, the press wrote of a national tragedy. One press photo showed a large, neon Swissair sign, dismantled and spread out on the ground. [Fig. 71] Another showed a group of aircraft lined up, with the Swiss cross on their tail fin hastily covered, as if to hide an act of national shame. [Fig. 72] The question arises, how was it possible that economic malpractice should cause such emotional media coverage? And what role did the corporate identity and design of Swissair play in this?

The Swiss cross has always featured prominently on the tail fins of Swissair planes.¹ Yet the corporate identity of Swissair did not use the cross as a logo until the 1970s. In 1952, Rudolf Bircher first created a logo in the form of an airplane silhouette.² Swissair modernized its

campaigns throughout the 1960s, and in 1966 it started to work with the design agency GGK,³ who continued with Bircher's logo. In 1978, Karl Gerstner developed a systematic new identity, and presented the Swiss cross on a trapezoid background as a ubiquitous logo.⁴ Markus Kutter later recalled the decisions behind it:

"The starting point was an airline with a Swiss cross on its tail. So we asked: What is Swiss about this? Besides the cross, everything about it was actually American. [. . .] You could not simply work with an immanent Swissness, [sic] you had to create it."

(Ausgangspunkt war eine Airline mit einem Schweizerkreuz an der Heckflosse. Stellt sich die Frage: Was ist daran schweizerisch? Ausser dem Kreuz war ja alles amerikanisch. [. . .] Swissness konnte man nicht abrufen, die musste man produzieren.)⁵

GGK applied Gerstner's logo in the following years, and set up Swissair for an international market, with an awareness of how to employ Swiss stereotypes to communicate the airline's values.⁶ After all, the Swiss cross did not only symbolize "home" for Swiss passengers, but it also promised national, cultural clichés such as punctuality and cleanliness to passengers of other nationalities.⁷

Prior to the airline's grounding in 2001, Swissair had undergone a difficult decade in which all airlines had suffered from the fragmentation of the market. At the same time, the Swiss national brand itself had been

on the up.⁸ The Swiss cross had made an appearance in pop-culture and on T-shirts,⁹ and the magazine *Wallpaper**, edited by Tyler Brülé, had run a special "Swiss Survey"¹⁰ to praise Swiss design products and culture.¹¹

Swissair was grounded in October 2001, and from then on the smaller Swiss airline Crossair helped to run parts of the remaining business. From this collaboration there sprang an effort to relaunch Swissair as an entirely new company and brand. In early 2002, the new company was publicly presented, with a new name, logo, and complete corporate design in which the globalization of the market and the popularity of Swiss national symbols had been fused together. Disregarding its previous collaboration with Swiss designers, the airline did not trust a Swiss agency to create its new appearance, and instead commissioned Tyler Brülé's company Winkreative, a British agency.¹² Brülé became a prominent figure in the Swiss media and did not tire of explaining his concept and vision to journalists. Swissair was renamed "Swiss" and Brülé kept referring to "Swissness" as the key influence for the campaign. He used "Swissness" as a synonym for characteristics such as quality, punctuality, and comfort. This concept was questioned in the press: "At the heart of the brand is the so-called Swissness. Can you sell an airline with it?"¹³ But the branding expert Dominique von Matt replied: "Without a doubt. We Swiss do have some difficulty

in identifying with the country and the values it embodies. Abroad they are much more relaxed about such things. Swiss is sexy. Switzerland stands not only for reliability, cleanliness, tradition and quality. Switzerland is also associated with prestigious architecture, with the most exciting theater in Europe, with the best techno parade. One doesn't want to see it here in Switzerland yet, but the Swiss image to the outside world is better than their view of themselves."

(Ohne Zweifel. Wir Schweizer haben zwar etwas Mühe, uns mit dem Land und den Werten, welche es verkörpert, zu identifizieren. Im Ausland ist man da viel unbekümmerter. Swiss ist sexy. Die Schweiz steht nicht nur für Zuverlässigkeit, Sauberkeit, Tradition und Qualität. Swiss wird auch mit angesehener Architektur verbunden, mit dem aufregendsten Schauspielhaus in Europa, mit der besten Techno-Parade. Man will es hier zu Lande noch nicht einsehen, aber das Fremdbild der Schweizer ist besser als ihr Selbstbild.)¹⁴

The grounding of Swissair, followed by the airline's relaunch under the guidance of a foreign agency with Tyler Brûlé as a proficient ambassador for the key narrative of "Swissness": this story contains all the elements necessary¹⁵ to make it newsworthy, and brought graphic design into the daily media for once. When Brûlé at first applied a slightly slimmer version of the official Swiss cross to the tail fins, for a more elegant appearance, it caused

a public scandal—which the media of course also covered in detail.¹⁶

In retrospect, this episode can be recounted from two perspectives, local and global. From a local perspective, it can be seen as an episode in a search for national identity, where the fundamentals of the Swiss cross and the national airline made the news very emotional. But from a global perspective, the story also illustrates how any skepticism regarding the notion of "national design" was set aside, as was any awareness of the potentially limiting impact of designing according to stereotyped national characteristics.¹⁷ On the contrary: "Swissness" was fully implemented in a design concept by an international agency that was now selling "Swissness" to an international market, not so much to the Swiss. In 2002, when the country was already going through an identity crisis, the upcoming national exhibition Expo 02 looked to answer "What is Swiss?" too, but on this occasion, the national desire for reinvention and the international throwback to conventional stereotypes clashed in the media.¹⁸

- 1 An illustrative overview of Swissair's livery can be found on the Swissair fan website of Patrick Eberhard (Eberhard 2013).
- 2 Rosner 1958: 240–249.
- 3 GGK was a design agency based in Basel, run by Karl Gerstner, Markus Kutter, and Paul Gredinger. Karl Gerstner left GGK in 1970.
- 4 Diener 1985: 8–31.
- 5 Kutter 2006: 125.
- 6 Junod 2014a.
- 7 "This symbol is a promise for the passengers and an obligation for Swissair itself. A special measure of precision and reliability is expected as well as confidence and conscientiousness—down to the last details," in Schmittel 1975: 204.
- 8 Swiss authors such as Max Frisch, Niklaus Meienberg, Paul Nizon, and others constantly questioned the role of the state, insisted on skepticism towards the notion of national culture in a global context, and certainly opposed any form of nationalist pride or symbolism. See Frisch 1953; Nizon 1970; Meienberg 1994.
- 9 Anita Fetz, politician of the left-wing Social Democratic Party, wore a red T-shirt with a prominent Swiss cross in parliament. See Fetz, 2002.
- 10 When *Wallpaper** included a fifty-seven-page "Swiss Survey" in 2001, the editors began with the moment when they had seen a Swissair aircraft for the first time and the impression it made on them: "We knew that somehow this represented glamorous travel, uncompromising quality and also a giant toy box with wings," cit. in *Wallpaper** 2001: n.p.
- 11 *Wallpaper** 2001.
- 12 Goldstein Crowe 2004: 16–33.
- 13 Speiser 2002.
- 14 Dominique von Matt in Speiser 2002.
- 15 According to Imhof, the media predominantly cover news that can be scandalized, personalized, or emotionalized. See Imhof 2011: 285.
- 16 Schmid 2002.
- 17 See also Fallan & Lees-Maffei 2016a.
- 18 Imhof 2002; 2012.



Fig. 71 A neon Swissair sign disassembled and spread out on the ground, Mar. 27, 2002.



Fig. 72 Swissair planes grounded and lined up with their tail fins hastily covered.