



The future of flight is clear

Kris Madden was recently in Auckland and snuck inside Air New Zealand's mysterious 'Hangar 9' innovation centre to get a glimpse into the future of flying.

I'VE DISCOVERED THAT I am Mr Burns when it comes to flying. Well, that's according to customer research conducted by Air New Zealand in designing their revolutionary new aircraft cabins.

For the past three years, a dedicated team has been secreted away inside an innovative design centre in Auckland called 'Hangar 9', plotting a radical change in seat design and service for long-haul flying. The team literally threw away the rule book, with the aim of creating new-generation aircraft that will, *wait for it*, actually give customers what they want.

Although it's long been obvious to us flyers, Air New Zealand realised that everyone's needs are different when travelling long-haul.

The team created customer profiles based on characters from *The Simpsons*. Frequent flyers are represented by Monty Burns, because we have high expectations, want our own piece of the plane and, most of all, want to be left alone when in the air.

The creative team brainstormed a number of "what ifs", with no idea considered too extreme. In all, thirty variations of seats were made and rejected, until finally after exhaustive testing using actors playing each type of customer (who they made sit and lie in the seats for up to six hours at a time), came up with what they believe to be perfect solutions to cater for different types of flyers.

Economy class passengers are most certainly the ones that will feel the biggest benefit, with the introduction of the *Sky Couch*, a variation on the old 'lying down on an empty row of seats' trick. A large leg rest folds up to add 50 percent to the length of the seat. Three seats together create the holy grail of economy travel - a lie-flat surface that can comfortably fit two smallish adults, or an adult and a couple of kids.

Air New Zealand said the cost will be based on buying two seats at standard prices with the third seat at approximately half price.

Initially there will be 22 sky couches, taking up the first 11 rows of economy class.

The premium economy cabin has also had a dramatic makeover with the introduction of all-new *Space Seats*, which are perfect for smoochy couples. The seats are encased in a shell thereby providing more personal space, and are offset at a slight angle, so you can share your space with your travelling companion, or be Mr Burns-like and keep to yourself facing the aisle. The configuration also means the person in front can no longer recline their seat back into your lap.

"Why does airline food have to be bad?" the Air New Zealand team asked. The answer? It doesn't!

The overhaul of the meal service will be more akin to eating in a tapas restaurant, or bistro, than what is usually served at 35,000 feet.

New oven technology will cook food from scratch rather than simply reheat it, and flyers will be able to dine-on-demand from a digital in-seat ordering service – another world first.

Business Premier passengers will enjoy on-demand food service and new fluffy duvets, pillows and mattresses.

The new products will be available on the new Boeing 777-300 aircraft which will feature 246 seats in economy (including 66 seats creating 22 *Sky Couch* combinations), 50 in *Premium Economy* and 44 in *Business Premier*.

This next generation travel will first feature on selected services between Auckland-Sydney and Auckland-Los Angeles from December this year, followed by return services between Auckland-Los Angeles and through to London from April 2011 – just in time to bring in those droves of international footy fans for the Rugby World Cup.

The airline plans to refit its fleet of eight Boeing 777-200 aircraft from mid next year, with all Asian, North American and UK services to have the new product by around 2012.

By looking at services from the customer's viewpoint, Air New Zealand has undeniably redefined the long haul travel experience and set a benchmark for competitors to follow.

As my alter-ego Mr Burns would say – E-x-c-e-l-l-e-n-t!

Photo: Lie down flat in economy

WHAT TYPE OF FLYER ARE YOU?

SOCIALITES <i>Bart Simpson</i>	Social, but needy. Can't entertain themselves so need external stimulation and direction. Highly involved in the flight and looking to the airline experience to entertain them.	29%
TERRITORIALISTS <i>Mr Burns</i>	Want their own piece of the plane and to be left alone. They claim their territory and form a close relationship with their space. Highly involved in the flight, but selfishly – it's all about me! Weighted towards frequent flyers.	26%
DISENGAGED <i>Mo the Bartender</i>	Jaded flyers. It's a bus trip, a way to get from A to B. Don't like flying so don't try to make it special because you can't. Very hard to please. Close to the 'Cocooners', but differ in their complete lack of enthusiasm.	18%
COCOONERS <i>Lisa Simpson</i>	Flight is necessary part of the trip but not the trip itself. Zone out, just get me there and let me entertain myself. Not highly involved in the flight, but can look after themselves. Prefer a quiet cabin away from families. Probably snigger at 'Positivists'.	17%
POSITIVISTS <i>Marge Simpson</i>	Planners and organisers. Fidgety and excited. The flight is part of the holiday and they want the fun to start NOW. Want engagement in everything. Highly involved in the flight and the romance of travel.	10%