



November 16, 2004

BUSINESS TRAVEL

Fired Flight Attendant Finds Blogs Can Backfire

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI

Until two weeks ago, Ellen Simonetti worked as a flight attendant for [Delta Air Lines](#), doing her best to project the image of a stewardess from a bygone era. "In the past people expected flight attendants young and attractive," Ms. Simonetti, a 29-year old blonde, said from her home in Austin, Tex. "Maybe they represent the flight attendants of the past."

But it is Ms. Simonetti's very 21st-century activities that she says prompted Delta management to ground her, suspending her from flying in September and then firing her a month later.

Ms. Simonetti has operated a Web log since January, calling it *Diary of a Flight Attendant*, and she says she no longer hears from Delta about the site, <http://queenofsky.journalspace.com>, until after she posted a set of photographs of herself in her Delta uniform. In one photograph, her skirt is hiked to mid-thigh as she perches on a seatback on an empty airliner. In another, she is leaning over the seats, her blouse unbuttoned, exposing her bra. Ms. Simonetti said she posted those photographs because she thought they made her look pretty.

"Gosh, it's a little tiny sliver of my bra, it's not like a bright red push-up bra," she said. "It's not like I would have flight like that."

But Ms. Simonetti said her supervisor called her on Oct. 29 and said she was being terminated for "inappropriate photos in a Delta uniform." Since then, Ms. Simonetti has filed a sex-discrimination complaint against Delta with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and is threatening to sue Delta for \$10 million, claiming that other Delta employees, primarily men, have their photographs posted on the Web in uniform and are not fired for it. Delta declined to comment on the case.

Oh, and Ms. Simonetti has renamed her blog, now calling it *Diary of a Fired Flight Attendant*.

Over the last five years, the number of people posting blogs, or personal journals on the Web, has skyrocketed. Like the material on Ms. Simonetti's site, the content may be intended as no more than personal rambling to a like-minded audience. But the postings can come back to haunt their authors.

"Nonunion employees enjoy very little legal protection for their off-duty activities," said J. H. Verkerke, a professor of law and director of the Program for Employment and Labor Law Studies at the University of Virginia. "If the material is posted on the Web, privacy protections do not apply either, according to Mr. Verkerke."

Ms. Simonetti "cannot invoke the common law privacy doctrines because she posted these photos in a public place," he said. "The employer didn't have to search at all, except perhaps on [Google](#), to find the images."

Ms. Simonetti masked Delta's identity with the pseudonym Anonymous International Airlines and used her own first name interchangeably with a pen name, Queen of Sky.

In dozens of often irreverent entries, she tells stories of her international adventures and offers interesting tidbits about how flight attendants compete for coveted international flights. Replying to a question posted on the site about how difficult flight attendant training can be, she wrote: "It is challenging if you think memorizing city codes and airline regulations and struggling into a slippery life raft from a swimming pool with everybody in your class looking at your butt and your flailing legs sounds daunting. Oh, and all the meanwhile you have to keep your hair and makeup perfect."

The blog also includes an extensive and eclectic list of personal recommendations for everything from green grocers in Monaco to depilatory services in Santiago to travel advice she has paid dearly to obtain. In developing countries, for example, she notes, "You can get many things, including intestinal parasites from raw produce."

Rounding out her narrative are her dating horror stories as an international cast of suitors are shown to be universally predictable in their attempts to woo or spurn her. The men who come down on the wrong side of the Queen can find themselves described in less-than flattering terms.

A counter on the site shows nearly a half million visitors since Ms. Simonetti started writing. The site was so popular, in fact, that in the beginning of September, she started looking for businesses willing to buy links or ads on her page. One of those she approached was Delta. She said she believed that is how Delta management found out about her site.

Gary Bledsoe, her lawyer in Austin, said: "This shows two things. She was not aware of any policy that would provide for termination under these circumstances. And it points to her good faith in being a good employee in following correct protocols and following proper steps to see if there could be an official nexus with her company."

Mr. Verkerke, the law professor, said the photographs taken on Delta's airplane, and the racy content of her journal, would probably make the site objectionable to many employers.

"I'm pretty darn certain that taking that kind of photograph in the cabin of a plane, there's several policies that that would probably violate," he said.

The women's movement played a large role in the elimination of the overt sexualization of flight attendants like those portrayed in National Airlines' 1974 television ad featuring attractive stewardesses beckoning mostly male business travelers to "Fly Me" and [Continental Airlines'](#) similar invitation to ogle the flight attendants, with its promise, "We Really Move Our Tail For You."

"Airlines discovered they were on the wrong side of that issue 20 years ago," Mr. Verkerke said. "They've gotten religion. And deeply ingrained in their corporate culture and human relations practices is an aversion to that kind of sexualization."

This change is welcomed by many in the profession, said Tim Kirkwood, a flight attendant for 27 years and author of "The Flight Attendant Job Finder and Career Guide" (Planning/Communications, 2003). "Flight attendants over the years have fought hard to get rid of the image of the sexy stewardess," he said after reviewing *Diary of a Flight Attendant*, "and it does tend to regress back to that a bit."

Even so, some readers of *Diary of a Flight Attendant*, like the blogger herself, apparently miss that era.

"It seems like they've totally about-faced and now we're not allowed to show any remote sexuality," Ms. Simonetti said.

On Oct. 20, this question was posted anonymously on the blog by a self-proclaimed frequent flier: "Why are all of my flight attendants so unattractive when you are so very good looking?"

Ms. Simonetti's replied: "Because Anonymous Airlines fires or indefinitely suspends all of its good-looking flight attendants. They prefer them fat and ugly."

Because Delta's flight attendants are not unionized, Mr. Verkerke said the airline is not obligated to try to work things out with her, though he suggested that might be a good idea.

Recently, Ms. Simonetti posted the photograph of a supporter wearing a T-shirt which reads, "Queen of Sky is Innocent. Well Innocent (ish)."

"I feel like if they had a problem with it they should have said something to me," Ms. Simonetti said. "If they felt it could have harmful effects on Delta they should have told me that. I would have removed the picture or the whole blog if they asked me to."

Of the potential salaciousness of Ms. Simonetti's photographs, Mr. Kirkwood, the veteran flight attendant, is circumspect. "I think this has been blown up out of proportion," he said. "So we saw a little bra strap, big deal. Compared to what the passengers wear, she's overdressed."

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