

ALASKA AIRLINES GREAT AMERICAN ECLIPSE FLIGHT

Category: Special Events and Observances (Program)

In March of 2016, eclipse chaser Joe Rao (Hayden Planetarium lecturer) and Dr. Glenn Schneider (astronomer at the University of Arizona's Steward Observatory) reached out to Alaska Airlines with an unusual request: Would Alaska Airlines alter the path of a commercial flight from Anchorage to Honolulu, putting the plane directly in the path of a total solar eclipse over the Pacific Ocean? After a bit of coordination and a lot of math, Alaska Airlines delayed the flight by 25 minutes to catch the eclipse, resulting in 100+ surprised and delighted passengers and a half dozen over-the-moon eclipse chasers.

By the time the 2016 flight landed, this group of umbraphiles had captured Alaska Airlines' heart – and planted a seed. What if the airline could do something even bigger for the 2017 eclipse?

RESEARCH

The 2016 eclipse flight had been an unexpected viral success. A [video of the eclipse shot for Alaska by an enthusiastic eclipse chaser](#) had earned 3.4 million total views and 28,000 shares on Facebook alone and within two weeks. Even a year after the eclipse, the flight was still being mentioned in media stories, including a July 2017 story in the LA Times.

Having seen the power of eclipses to capture public imagination, the team knew they had the opportunity to do something truly special for the Great American Eclipse of 2017. With that goal in mind, the team began researching the competitive landscape surrounding the 2017 eclipse.

In short, the space was already crowded. More than seven million people were expected to travel into the path of totality – the greatest temporary mass migration to see a natural event in U.S. history, according to The Atlantic. A CBS News article reported that up to 200 million people could see the eclipse, making it the most viewed in history. Media outlets had been planning eclipse coverage for months, with every major network planning live coverage. Eclipse stories from every angle were dominating the news cycle – in the week leading up to the event alone there were 4.4 million mentions of the eclipse, according to Brandwatch.

In addition to analyzing the media landscape, Alaska reassembled the planning team of astronomers and pilots from the 2016 eclipse flight to assess the opportunity Alaska had to recreate the eclipse intercept, as well as how likely other airlines would be to host similar experiences. In this process, the team discovered a crucial detail – while the 2017 eclipse would traverse the entire country, viewing the eclipse from a plane would be hugely complicated. Because of the small size of aircraft windows, any attempt to view the eclipse from an airliner would need to catch the eclipse low in the sky – between 25 and 35 degrees above the horizon. Catching the sun in that window required intercepting the eclipse roughly 1,000 miles off the west coast in uncontrolled airspace that isn't typically used by transpacific flights.

Ultimately, this analysis showed that Alaska Airlines had a unique opportunity and a major planning head start in chartering a flight to intercept the 2017 eclipse. To be successful, the flight would need to take off from and return to Portland – an Alaska hub where the airline had strong relationships with airport leadership. This relationship would give Alaska a huge logistical edge. Additionally, the off-route location for viewing the eclipse meant the feat would be impossible for other airlines to duplicate without months of planning and chartering a special flight for the event.

The team agreed that the combination of national interest in the eclipse, existing relationship with some of the country's foremost eclipse experts and Alaska's unique positioning to make an intercept flight happen were too great an opportunity to pass up. Using the results of the 2016 eclipse flight as a guide, the team dove into planning for the 2017 Great American Eclipse Flight.

PLANNING

With the greenlight to make the 2017 eclipse flight happen from Alaska's leadership, it was time to start tackling logistical hurdles.

The team started by assessing optimal viewing angles from the 737-900 aircraft, ultimately choosing to fill only 64 of the aircraft's 181 seats with guests. Of those 64 seats, the team developed a layout dedicating seats to key national media, influential eclipse chasers and members of the scientific community, contest winners and charity auction donors. Those invited to join the flight would be given the experience of a lifetime and would maximize the sharability of the event through social and national media.

Beyond the social and media opportunities presented by passengers, the team developed a content package for distribution through Alaska's social media channels and blog. The team audited Alaska's 2016 efforts and media coverage and identified a storyline around giving people a truly unique view of the Great American Eclipse from 35,000 feet – a perspective that couldn't be matched by anyone else. Beyond the video, the blog post could give people a behind-the-scenes look at the planning process, celebrating the talented group of pilots, astronomers and eclipse chasers working together to make the flight happen.

The team developed the following objectives for the Great American Eclipse Flight:

Objective 1: Be the first commercial airline in the nation to announce a plan to view the 2017 solar eclipse from the air.

Objective 2: Drive positive brand awareness with a content package on Alaska's owned media channels reaching 1 million people.

Objective 3: Develop a strategic content partnership with GoPro to drive at least 800,000 views of Alaska's owned media channels.

Objective 4: Secure five national media outlets as guests on the flight, driving at least 100 stories and reaching 50 million people.

The budget for the project was \$80,000.

EXECUTION

The announcement: On June 26, the team issued a news release announcing the Great American Eclipse flight. The announcement outlined the flight plan and the intention to include scientists, eclipse enthusiasts, social media contest winners and news media in the festivities. The announcement set off a flurry of inquiries from media and eclipse chasers vying for a seat on the flight.

The guest list: Through a combination of inquiries received after the announcement and targeted pitches to key national media, the team assembled a guest list including NBC, CBS, AP, Reuters, USA Today, BBC, The Guardian, Radiolab and Weather Channel. In addition to national media, the team opened up seats for local Seattle, Portland and Bay Area media – a key market for Alaska Airlines expansion. C+C secured the #1 TV stations in Portland, KTVU and KGW, as well as KQED (the Bay Area NPR affiliate) and The Seattle Times and Oregonian, the top newspapers in both markets.

To create additional story angles and maximize social media opportunities, the team also built a list of key eclipse experts and enthusiasts to invite on the flight. In total, the team secured seven enthusiasts, including NASA Astronaut, Dr. Michael Barratt.

Addressing imitators: Leading up to the eclipse, other airlines began to announce "eclipse viewing" flights throughout the country. But months of careful planning told Alaska the only way to truly intercept totality was over the ocean, due to the angle of the sun. To further separate Alaska from the rest of the pack, C+C designed a "flight map" to clearly explain the importance of the flight path and timing to intercept the eclipse. This diagram was displayed as a 4 ft. by 6 ft. map at a pre-flight news conference, and electronic versions were provided to media. In addition, the team placed a national NPR story in the week leading up to the eclipse about the flight mechanics, helping to tell the story of collaboration between Alaska pilots and astronomers.

Day-of celebration: The morning of the eclipse, Alaska held a pre-flight news conference at the airport gate with the 737 Fleet Captain Brian Holm and NASA Astronaut Dr. Michael Barratt to share the story of how the flight came together. Local media outlets not on the flight were invited to take part in the news conference, garnering additional coverage in the target Portland market. But this was more than just your average news conference – it was a "send-off party," complete with a doughnut wall, photo opportunities with the Alaska Airlines Great American Eclipse Flight map and live music. Once on the plane, passengers were provided with their very own Alaska-branded swag bag filled with flight mementos.

Content package: From the initial outline and with the post-flight deadline in mind, the content team went to work drafting the behind-the-scenes blog post in advance of the flight, conducting interviews with the key aviators and astronomers in the weeks leading up to the flight. By the day of the flight a 1,500-word story about the event was close to complete, with only final descriptions of the flight itself left to be written the day of the eclipse. At the same time, the team developed a promotional partnership to shoot the eclipse flight exclusively on GoPro cameras and share the resulting video through both Alaska Airlines' and GoPro's social media channels after the flight.

EVALUATION

Objective: Be the first airline to announce a plan to view the 2017 solar eclipse from the air.

Results: Alaska Airlines was not only the first airline to announce plans to view the eclipse from the air in June, but they were the only airline that had the math equation right to intercept totality. Through meticulous planning and partnership with astronomer Dr. Glenn Schneider, Alaska provided the ideal vantage point to view the eclipse from 38,000 feet. While other airlines attempted, Alaska's attention to detail from all angles allowed them to truly own the "eclipse from the sky" event.

Objective: Drive positive brand awareness with a content package on Alaska's owned media channels reaching 1 million people.

Results: The blog post and video were integrated seamlessly, resulting in a multimedia package that reached 2.5 million people.

Objective: Develop a strategic content partnership with GoPro to drive at least 800,000 views of Alaska's owned content package.

Results: The strategic partnership with GoPro resulted in a video and blog post that combined have been viewed nearly 1 million times (and counting!) – Alaska's best performing organic content of the year. In addition, GoPro shared the video with its 12 million+ followers, generating even more positive social media buzz. Social mentions of Alaska increased by 458%.

Objective: Secure five national media outlets as guests on the flight, driving at least 100 stories and reaching 50 million people.

Result: 15 media outlets were represented on board the flight, including NBC News, BBC News, USA Today, CBS News, Associated Press, Reuters, The Guardian, Radiolab and more. Outlets represented on the plane also included targeted outlets from key DMAs, Portland and the San Francisco Bay Area, strategically building rapport with top outlets in those markets. In total, the flight generated more than 3,700 stories and reached more than 139 million people.