



IS DISNEY STILL THE CONTENT KING WITH KIDS IN-FLIGHT?

News / Airlines



With the fourth Wizarding World of Harry Potter set to open at Universal Studios Hollywood in April, Paramount Pictures building theme parks in London and Spain and a pair of 20th Century Fox World parks recently announced for Malaysia and Dubai, it's clear that the studios are determined to give Disneylands the world over a real run for their money in the next decade. But, when it comes to kid-themed IFE, most industry insiders seem to agree that Disney is still the unofficial king of content.

And with the studio's glittery, live-action *Cinderella* fighting for space on the IFE dial with Pixar's *Inside Out*, a three-year old animated phenomenon called *Frozen*, and the first six films in the Disney-owned *Star Wars* saga debuting on IFE systems – followed closely by *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in March – it's hard to disagree.

But as the first generation of so-called “digital natives” take flight in connected cabins worldwide with their shiny PEDs in tow, one has to wonder how much longer the House of Mouse can continue to dominate the children's IFE landscape? In other words, is Disney still the only game in town for kids when they fly?

“I think that's a tough one.” says Jovita Toh, CEO of Hong Kong-based Encore Inflight Limited. “I mean, when it comes to animation, you can't beat Pixar, you can't beat Disney. Japanese animation and anime have been popular with some kids, but that tends to skew older. Teenagers mostly.” That said, Toh points to the popularity of one of Encore's recent animated hits, the hand-

drawn, French-Finnish co-production *Moomins on the Riviera* as an example of how wide open the kid's IFE space has become of late.

Having watched his own children grow up with Disney IFE, digEcor CEO David Withers seems to agree. "Look, there is no doubt about the appeal of Disney product to children, Disney does that really, really well," says Withers. "They are excellent at kid's content, but so are a lot of other people. And when you get into the European market there are a lot of smaller production companies, and actually a couple of really good ones in Australia, that are turning out some fantastic kid's programming ... colorful and engaging, covering ages from zero right on over to pre-teen, that whole span. It's a really interesting area and I think airlines are increasingly realizing the importance of content like that."

And though some carriers may view regional, locally produced kids' content as a convenient, cost-saving alternative to pricier Disney fare, El Al's IFE manager Tal Kalderon says a careful balance of both is key in keeping kids entertained in-flight.

"Local content doesn't come onboard to replace the majors. [El Al] still has movies, we still have CBeebies, we still have Disney, but now we're trying to expand our kid's content," explains Kalderon. "I didn't want to be in a position where kids say: 'I've already watched that. There is nothing new here.' So, we filled our kid's IFE category with so much content that they can never say: 'Oh, there is nothing to watch'," jokes Kalderon, adding that at the end of the day: "[Kids] will watch Disney, but they will also watch many others."

And according to Elliot Wagner, the VP of international program sales & North American partnerships for Discovery Communications – the exclusive inflight provider of hugely popular Hasbro animated series like *Pound Puppies*, *Littlest Pet Shop*, *Kaijudo*, *My Little Pony* and *Transformers: Rescue Bots* – that goes double for today's post-millennial digital natives.

"Kids don't necessarily know or care what network it is that they're watching, or who owns it, or the brand, they like what they like and they will find it," says Wagner. "If it's on Discovery or Disney, they find it there, if it's a Nick show or a Netflix show ... or YouTube, they find it. They don't differentiate. That said, I think Disney's got some great IFE programming that clearly attracts kids, my daughter is ten and so a lot of what she watches are Disney shows."

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And while anecdotal evidence from most of the people we spoke to – including my six-year-old daughter, who said she would watch *Frozen* twice before perusing any non-Disney content on offer next time we fly – suggests that Disney IFE content is indeed still the fairest in the land, Wagner's point about digital natives being brand-agnostic is a good one.

In fact, veteran consumer trend-watcher Phil “the Supermarket Guru” Lempert predicted last month in his annual Trend Predictions Report that brand agnosticism is the number one trend that retailers and businesses should be concerned with in 2016. And while that doesn't mean that kids will suddenly stop wanting to watch *Big Hero 6* or *Disney Descendants* in-flight, it does suggest a definite change in the way even the youngest consumers interact with seemingly bulletproof brands like Disney moving forward. Digital immigrants at airlines would be wise to keep a keen eye on the viewing habits of the wee ones in-flight.

But whatever they're watching when they fly, BBC Worldwide program sales executive Pete Williams insists that original, quality content will always be the real king with kids of any age.

“We don't see Disney as the only option in-flight, particularly because we have our own branded channel, CBeebies and we know how well that content sells to many airlines,” says Williams. “But, I think for kids it has to be a quality product, you're very responsible as a program maker and as a distributor. Yes, it can be cheap and easy, but I think there needs to be a value to kid's education and if whilst having a great, fun show we can introduce an element that almost unknowingly educates, then I think there's a real value to that.”

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