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ON THE ROAD

Business Jet Industry Tries to Salvage Its Image

By JOE SHARKEY
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THE business jet industry, as we all know, has been hit hard by a teetering economy and public hostility against anything perceived as wretched corporate excess.

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Chris Gash

Sales are down. Orders are being withdrawn. Corporate flight departments are being closed or told to keep a low profile. Layoffs are mounting.

That is why the industry is not laughing at an Internet advertisement from scrappy [JetBlue Airways](#). The purported aim of the ad (it is at www.welcomebigwigs.com) is to introduce the comforts of JetBlue to executives who suddenly find themselves unable to use a private jet. Along the way, it pokes fun at chief executives not used to doing anything for themselves and notes that the airline flies to Aruba, Las Vegas, Nantucket and other places that might interest the executives.

Last week, the National Business Aviation Association sent a letter to JetBlue, saying that the ad “maligms business aviation in an attempt to boost ticket sales.” Companies that use private aircraft also spend about \$11 billion on commercial fares each year, the association said. And it noted that flying JetBlue “doesn’t make sense for businesses located in any of the thousands of towns and communities your airline doesn’t serve.”

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The ad, the letter said, was “nothing more than an attention-grabbing stunt to fill airline seats.”

The ad has certainly gotten attention. Every day, I get another e-mail link to it. The ad is “meant to be viral” on the Internet, said a JetBlue spokesman, Bryan Baldwin. “We are not anticorporate jet or anti-C.E.O. We’re recognizing that the economy is hitting people hard, and we want to show everyone that there are still travel options out there that are good for business and don’t have to be at the expense of comfort.”

And the business industry’s pain only deepened on Monday, when ABC News reported that [JPMorgan Chase](#), which received \$25 billion in federal bailout money, was buying two luxury Gulfstream G650 jets for about \$60 million each, and planned an \$18 million “lavish renovation” of its corporate jet hangar.

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I could almost hear the wincing on the other end of the line when I asked some consultants in business aviation last week about the people's fury.

"We were poised for an adjustment" after five years of record sales, said William J. Quinn Jr., the chairman of Aviation Management Systems, a consulting firm. But, he said, the industry was not prepared for this kind of vilification.

The industry had already had a slowdown last fall, as the economy weakened. But its travails went from bad to worse in November when the chief executives of the three top American automakers flew from Detroit to Washington in corporate jets to make their case for federal bailout money.

"Certainly the boys from Detroit really didn't help us much," Mr. Quinn said. "They got caught up in a political quandary and that just snowballed."

The industry is trying to fight back. It is saying that egregious abuses of corporate jets are rare. More often, it says, having a company plane makes financial sense. Think of an eight-member technical management team that has to get to and from, say, Shreveport, La., to Tallahassee, Fla., and can't spend four days doing so on commercial airliners.

That side of corporate flying — the working stiffs who need to get somewhere efficiently — has also been devastated in this emotional atmosphere, said Chris Crum, a founder of Sextant Advisory, a consultant for corporate flight departments.

About 85 percent of corporate fliers are small operators, not tycoons on Gulfstreams. "Those folks are not only scared and pulling back, but they won't say anything," he said. "They don't want to be on the radar." This group, he added, "has tremendous credibility and isn't tainted, right or not, like the big guys."

Corporate aviation will spend years digging out of this, and each new example of wretched excess makes the hole deeper.

"I flew on a Falcon 2000 for four years for American Standard, and from the second they got on that airplane, the business conversation was nonstop, the laptops were out, and it was all business," said Susan C. Friedenberg, a former business jet flight attendant who is president of Corporate Flight Attendant Training. "These airplanes are a workplace at 46,000 feet. What do you think, we're having parties up there?"

Parties up there? Um, yes, people do think that. The industry has a long way to go to convince people otherwise.

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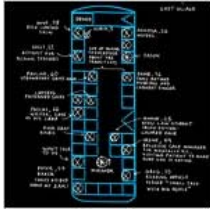
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