



# Facing Some 'Home' Truths: Brand Backlash and the Case of Qantas

## Case

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## Abstract

This case study explores the complex challenges associated with building and maintaining a national and iconic brand. Stakeholder perceptions of organizational behaviour can have significant implications for the success or failure of a brand campaign. In this case study, the authors examine qualitative commentaries on the Qantas “Feels Like Home” television advertisement campaign in order to shine light on how different industry stakeholders perceive and construct meanings of brand. This case study also demonstrates how qualitative analysis and techniques can be used to provide expository insights on the differences between brand identity and brand image.

## Case Learning Outcomes

This case will help students to:

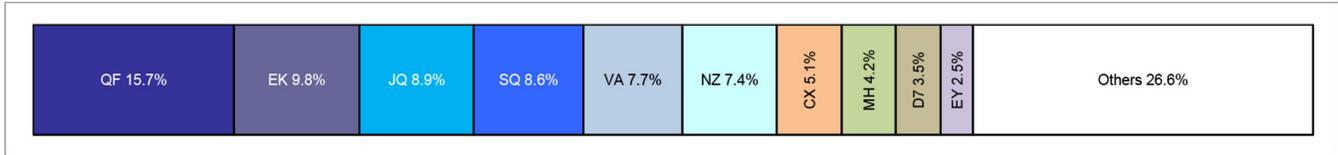
- understand the challenge of effective brand management in the aviation industry;
- undertake a systematic branding analysis and understand the role of qualitative (narrative) analysis;
- highlight and evaluate the integral role of effective media management;
- analyse the Country of Origin effect on emotional attachment to brands; and
- understand the role branding can play within an organization’s overall marketing strategy.

## Identifying the Context: Is Qantas Experiencing Some Turbulence?

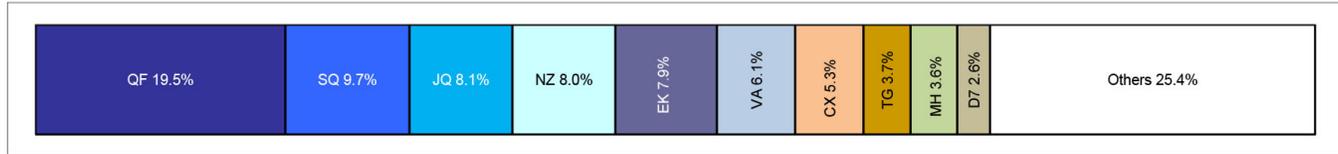
A range of commercial, industrial and political events have created challenging times for Australia’s most iconic airline—Qantas. Since 2010 the airline has taken radical steps in an attempt to protect its market position. Due to increased deregulation of the aviation sector, Australia has been subject to an “open skies” policy, with an influx of international competitors as well as resurgence in competition between a small number of domestic airlines. This trend towards “deregulated skies” is global due to bilateral aviation agreements forged between countries. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the competitive pressure has reduced Qantas’s market share from 28.6% in 2005 to 15.7% in 2015. There is also evidence that internal management strategies adopted by the organization in response to these pressures have weakened the positive reputation the airline previously had with its Australian customer base.

Figure 1: International passengers by major airlines 2014–2015.

**Top 10 in 2015**



**Top 10 in 2010**



**Top 10 in 2005**



AO - Australian Airlines  
 BA - British Airways  
 CX - Cathay Pacific Airways  
 D7 - AirAsia X  
 EK - Emirates

EY - Etihad Airways  
 JL - Japan Airlines  
 JQ - Jetstar  
 MH - Malaysia Airlines  
 NZ - Air New Zealand

QF - Qantas Airways  
 SQ - Singapore Airlines  
 TG - Thai Airways  
 VA - Virgin Australia

Source: Aviation: International airline activity 2014–15, Statistical report, Department of infrastructure and Regional Development. Retrieved from [https://bitre.gov.au/publications/ongoing/files/International\\_airline\\_activity\\_FY2015\\_m.pdf](https://bitre.gov.au/publications/ongoing/files/International_airline_activity_FY2015_m.pdf)

Figure 2 provides a summary of key events in the Qantas timeline since 2011 including: large-scale job cuts and redundancies; industrial turmoil and lockouts of employees; restructuring of the organization away from domestic maintenance and operations towards offshore operations; the posting of significant financial losses; and the airline’s call for legislative reform which would allow Qantas greater access to international capital and investment. Figure 3 shows the values and attributes propagated by key stakeholder groups.

Figure 2: Timeline of major events 2011–2014.

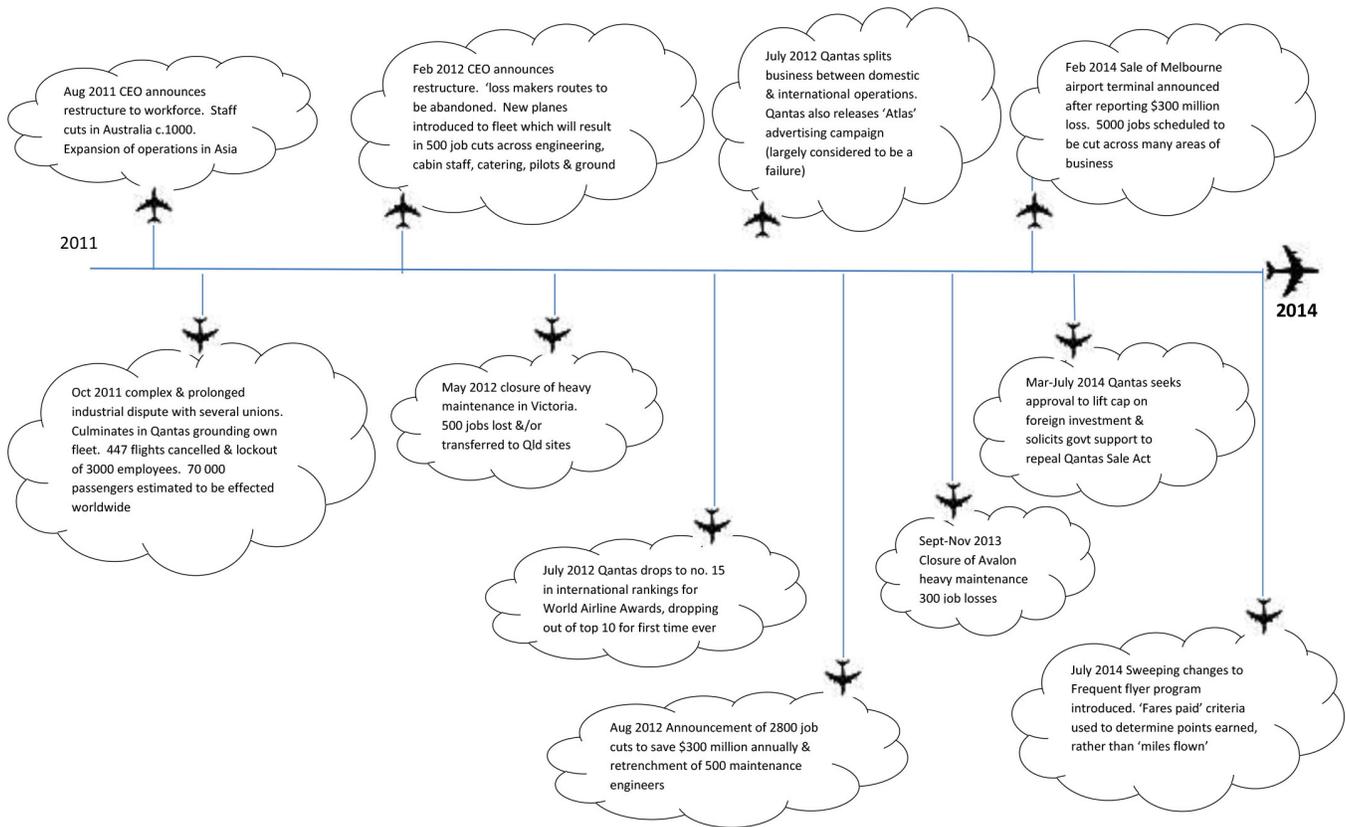
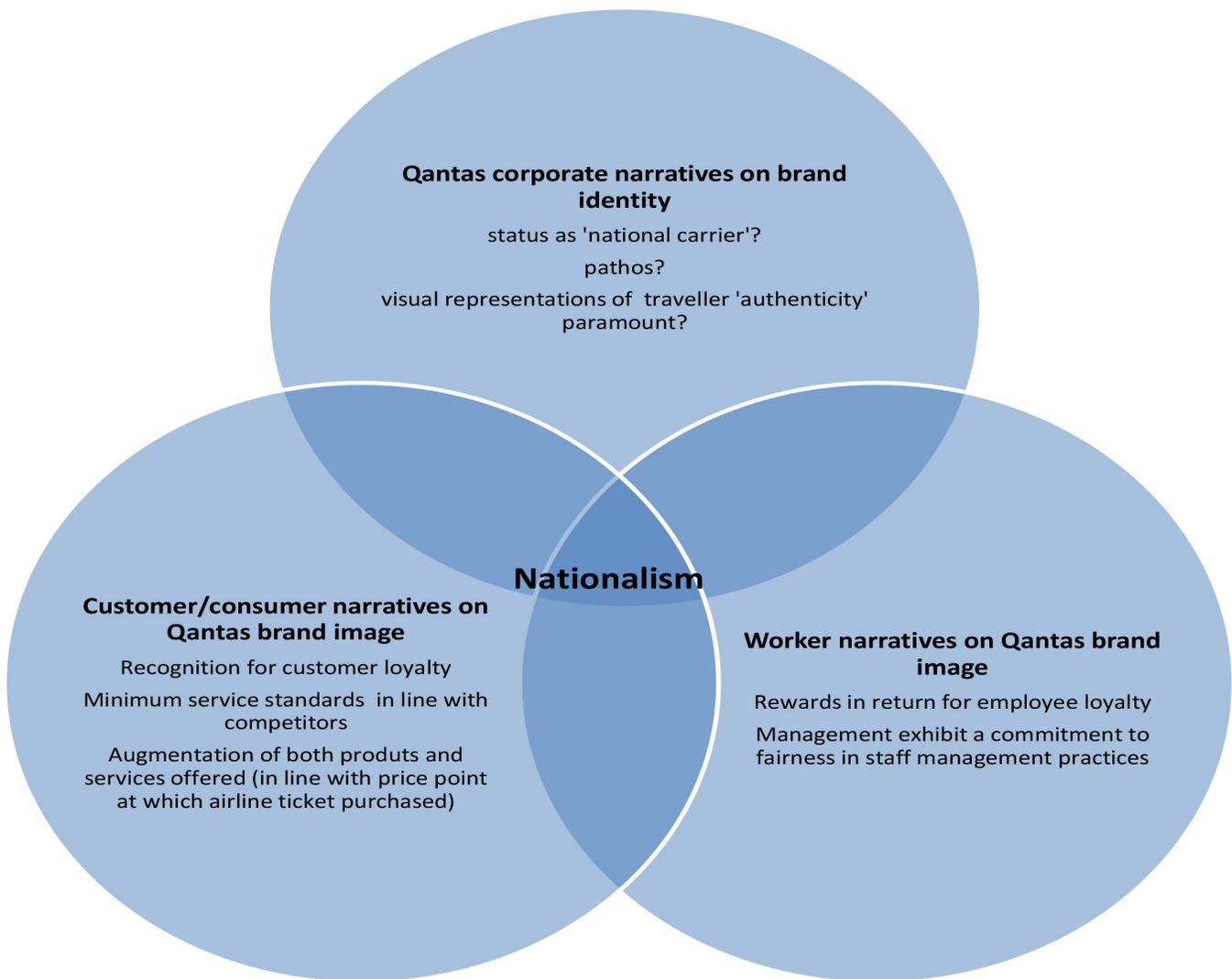


Figure 3: Narratives on Qantas as a “national” airline brand: values and attributes propagated by key stakeholder groups.



## The Qantas “Feels Like Home” Campaign: Identifying Key Elements

As a response to challenges faced in maintaining market share, Qantas launched a new television-based advertising campaign, “Feels Like Home,” in November 2014. Initial reactions to the campaign were mixed: some viewers said that the campaign “felt like a coma” while others felt the campaign was, “The best ad I’ve seen in ages. Beautifully made” (Campaign brief, 2014).

The campaign itself comprises a series of five two-minute commercials which chronicle the journeys and emotional reunions of Australians flying home from remote and overseas locations to family and friends. Cinematic scenes of emotional travellers include images of a fly-in fly-out miner commuting from a shift in the Pilbara, a mother travelling to Australia from Hong Kong, a backpacker returning from South America, a granddaughter leaving Los Angeles, and a young woman departing London to board a flight to Australia. Emotional vocals represent a strong feature of the campaign, as a young female Australian singer (Martha Marlow) provides the narrative for the advertisement through a sentimental acoustic rendition of the Randy Newman song “Feels Like Home”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7XFafi4lGo&list=RDx7XFafi4lGo>).

## Key Stakeholder Commentaries on the Qantas Brand

All organizations must understand the role of the stakeholder, but the stakeholder has particular importance

for airlines. Researchers examining aviation have identified that the “point to point” nature of aviation requires a high level of “relational coordination” between stakeholders such as workers, management, and institutional representatives (Gittel, von Nordenflycht, Kochan, McKersie, & Bamber, 2009). Without creating high-trust, highly effective work processes, attracting, retaining, and meeting the expectations of customers will be difficult to achieve. It is this desire to understand the perceptions of stakeholders which has guided the qualitative analysis undertaken in this study.

Understanding how various stakeholders perceive a campaign can highlight the difficulties organizations experience when they roll out a new branding strategy. In this section we examine a sampling of qualitative comments, where stakeholders discuss Qantas and the television advertisement which forms the basis of the “Feels Like Home” campaign. Stakeholders include customers, workers, marketing directors, and trade unions, as well as the CEO of Qantas.

## The Role of Qualitative Analysis

Undertaking a qualitative analysis of stakeholder commentary provides an effective process of analysis. Qualitative data is often rich in information, providing insights to readers that would otherwise not have been captured by more quantitative based research including surveys (Collis & Hussey, 2009, p. 63). Qualitative analysis allows for the study of social events and phenomena from the perspective of the individual actors themselves, thereby minimizing the risk of the researcher imposing their own bias on the study (Jupp, 2006, p. 249). Qualitative analysis also allows you to gather more powerful data that supports propositions.

This case study is supported by the findings of a narrative analysis of key aviation industry stakeholder commentaries on the “Feels Like Home” campaign, including commentaries and statements made by Qantas executive and organizational representatives; worker and employee observations shared through online forums and social media applications; and customer and consumer statements from formal critiques and editorials through to more informal (reactive) remarks.

The period of data collection spanned six weeks from the launch of the “Feels Like Home” television advertisement (November 7) through to December 19, 2014. During the period of observation, over 150 commentaries—ranging from short commentary strings of a few lines through to extended prose (consolidated articles)—were gathered, and categorized by author (stakeholder). These commentaries were thematically analysed to identify key issues raised about the content and approach of the campaign.

## Qantas Corporate Representations and Commentaries on Brand

Two important goals for the “Feels Like Home” campaign are revealed in an analysis of statements by Qantas executive staff. First, Qantas hoped the Australian public would form an enduring, emotive, and patriotic connection to the Qantas brand as a national airline. Second, Qantas viewed the campaign as a creative or artistic re-interpretation of these nationalistic sentiments.

Our hope from the [new] ads is it is all about rekindling that emotional connection with Qantas that we all know Australians have for the airline... The airline has run the ad past a lot of focus groups and received an emotional response... We have been having to provide tissues to our focus groups. (Olivia Wirth, cited in Freed, 2014)

We know that we’re the spirit of Australia. (Neil Lawrence, cited in Ironside, 2014), 2014)

We often hear that seeing the Qantas red tail at the airport, or stepping on board of a Qantas aircraft makes Australians feel like they are halfway home already. That is the spirit that we want to capture. (Alan Joyce, cited in Freed, 2014)

In launching the campaign, Mr Joyce said now was the right time to invest in reinforcing what makes Qantas special. (Qantas, 2014)

The stories we’re telling through this campaign are repeated everyday across our network. They reflect the

special pull of home, the love of family and friends, and the way Qantas helps bring Australians together around the country and around the globe. (Alan Joyce, cited in Campaign Brief Australia, 2014)

## Consumer–Stakeholder Commentaries on and Perceptions of the Qantas Brand

At first, many consumers reacted with overwhelmingly positive responses to the “Feels Like Home” campaign, which highlights how consumers have historically connected to the Qantas brand and how the message could ignite a sense of nationalistic pride.

Just a great ad.... very biased, but there is nothing like seeing that red kangaroo which is going to take you back home.... great stuff. (Starman, in Flynn, 2014)

Wow, fantastic!! I must admit to being converted already as I flew CX and SQ whilst living in Asia for 7 years but always boarded a QF flight home for that exact reason. A great job to capture that. (Burgo, in Flynn, 2014)

What a great ad. The line about how people see those “red tails” and how they feel walking onto a Qantas plane on the way home is so true. Very clever of Qantas to tap into it. (Al, in Flynn, 2014)

In the beginning, the campaign generated some negative responses as well:

I think this is really bland and dated. It's depressing and has no real idea. The pictures are nice but lack any real story telling and the ending is so overdone. Sorry but not my cup of tea. (Sorry, in Campaign Brief Australia, 2014)

## Employee–Stakeholder Commentaries on and perceptions of the Qantas Brand

Trade unions, such as Australian Workers Union (AWU), also seized upon the Qantas branding campaign to voice their position. The AWU represents a number of occupational and worker groups at Qantas. Qantas has been facing increased competition from new international competitors on key routes, and these international competitors are not subject to the same ownership and capital investment restrictions that Qantas faces. The AWU took the opportunity to advocate for removing international investment restrictions, launching the “Fair Go 4 Qantas” petition to protect and sustain Qantas and address its erosion in market share. The campaign fostered strong nationalistic, loyalist and proud sentiments about Qantas as the “national airline,” the “national carrier,” and an important “national provider” of both skills development and jobs.

The Australian Workers' Union is encouraging members to sign the “Fair Go 4 Qantas” petition, which calls on the federal government to level the playing field for the national carrier so that it can compete fairly against Virgin Australia... For the better part of a century Qantas has been a massive contributor to our national employment, skills base and economy. Allowing this important role to be chipped away by the current unbalanced situation is not in the interest of Australian workers or the Australian economy. (AWU, 2014)

## Insights from Customer and Worker Commentaries on the Qantas Brand and the “Feels Like Home” Campaign

Despite initial positive reactions, it soon became clear that stakeholder reactions to nationalistic elements of the campaign had some adverse consequences. Critics gave a range of reasons for disparaging the Qantas brand, such as the perceived failure of the airline to reward the loyalty of long-standing customers (changes to the frequent flyer program) or to maintain high standards of customer service during travel, as well as shifting market emphasis away from domestic customers and towards overseas interests.

How to trash your Corporate brand for Dummies. Written by Qantas management, based on true events. (Williams, 2014)

Joyce seems to relish his relentless mission to damage the Qantas brand and prepare it for sale at bargain price. (Jack, 2014)

I love Qantas and have no desire to avoid it – but I want it to deserve my loyalty and to have a CEO who's worthy of the brand. (Schadenfrieda, 2014)

Sickly sweet and laced with cliches. I'm surprised it wasn't released the same day that Alan Joyce announced he had fixed everything and the airline was back in the black. No mention of sacking over 5,000 people to achieve it not to mention the knock-on effect to the severed relationships with a multitude of Australian companies resulting in further job losses. Surly staff with a "I can't help you... next" attitude quickly make you realise that this is the Qantas welcome home. That annoying cough that Qantas has with customer service is likely to be a chest infection and no amount of incredibly expensive sweet TV syrup is going to fix it. (Mumbrella, 2014a)

Whatever you think of the ad campaign, it's like putting a new frock on a damaged body. Qantas' problems lie in their mistreatment of Frequent Flyers, whose loyalty has been repaid by slaps in the face for the past decade. When you treat customers with disrespect, they move away. It's really a very simple formula, and equally simple to fix. But no – Qantas will go down in flames before they admit that mistake. (Mumbrella, 2014b)

## Employee–Stakeholder Commentaries

Qantas workers also had negative reactions about the campaign. This was in part due to timing. The campaign was rolled out as the company implemented a number of managerial strategies aimed at restructuring the business to compete more effectively, such as downsizing the workforce (as outlined in [Figure 1](#)). The comments made by workers reveal that these stakeholders believe a national airline has the responsibility to deliver ongoing and stable employment to Australians and exhibit non-combative leadership and management qualities. Workers perceive that Qantas has failed to deliver on these responsibilities, and therefore they view with cynicism company representations that exalt the values of nationalism and national spirit and use emotive themes such as homecoming and reunion.

By the end of Qantas' current "transformation", 5000 hardworking Australians will have lost their jobs. (Phillips, 2014)

Qantas workers are the backbone of our national carrier and the reason the airline enjoys the excellent reputation that it has. They deserve better than being buffeted by a series of horror announcements from the airline's management and an uncertain future. (Blue Mountains Union News, 2014)

Alan Joyce, should resign with head in hand and very ashamed of the way he has ran Qantas into the ground. This is our heritage not yours. The whole board should be on notice. Do you think any other company would still have these people running the show? I just hope that they rethink top level and start with new management. (Rosemary, cited in Phillips, 2014)

One could be excused for thinking that Joyce's brief on joining Qantas was to run it into the ground to make it ripe for takeover by its competitors or foreign "investors" who will then strip it of its cash and infrastructure assets and laugh all the way to their banks leaving the Australian government with the problem of the wreckage of people's lives. If that is not the case Joyce has a peculiar way of showing it! (Cassandra, cited in Phillips, 2014)

Similar negative sentiments were expressed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU):

For over 90 years Qantas has been the spirit of Australia employing tens of thousands of Australians, training thousands of apprentices, keeping regional communities connected and playing a key role in national crises such as the Bali Bombings and Boxing Day Tsunami... Australians rightly expect the flying kangaroo to be in the skies for the years to come... (ACTU, 2013)

## Conclusion

Examining the responses to Qantas and its re-branding campaign through qualitative thematic (narrative)

analysis can permit a deeper examination of constructed meanings of brand. For employee–stakeholders the emotive images of travelers presented in “Feels Like Home” evoked strong reactions to and criticism of the ad campaign, seemingly calling into question the credibility and authenticity of an emotional narrative. Numerous stakeholders even perceived Qantas as combative and less customer-focused than in the past, which led to an increase in negative comments about the campaign.

There is considerable complexity associated with constructing and maintaining a national brand. In the case of the “Feels Like Home” campaign, Qantas struggled with changing public perceptions of the airline, shaped by the turbulent financial, political, and industrial challenges it has faced since 2010. Criticism of the campaign spread quickly across internet-based forums. The “Feels Like Home” campaign shows that although the emotional and nostalgic themes of “homecoming” and “nationalism” formed a longstanding part of Qantas’s brand profile in Australia, effectively managing stakeholder perceptions and meanings of key concepts underpinning a brand requires more than a single brand campaign.

## Discussion Questions

- 1. Three key stakeholder groups—Qantas corporate interests, workers and customers—provide qualitative commentary about Qantas and its recent marketing. How do their perceptions differ? Are there any areas of shared understanding or perception of the Qantas brand held by all stakeholders?
- 2. While the sentimental narratives of homecoming and family reunion have been long-standing features of Qantas branding since the 1980s, based on the stakeholder commentaries presented here, the “Feels Like Home” campaign has failed to connect with many key aviation industry stakeholders. Why has this disconnect occurred?
- 3. A gap appears between corporate representations and understandings of a brand (the brand “identity” held by a company) and diverging stakeholder perceptions of brand (brand image) that can have significant implications for the success of an advertising campaign. In the context of this case study, how can qualitative analysis of these different commentaries help to shed light on the gap between “brand identity” and “brand image”?
- 4. Identify some strengths and weaknesses in the “Feels Like Home” television campaign approach used by Qantas to re-invigorate the brand.
- 5. How might Qantas have approached its advertising campaign differently? Is it possible for organizations to effectively re-brand in the face of widespread “bad press”?

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