

I LOVE YOU MORE THAN MY DOG

“Five Decisions That Drive Extreme Customer Loyalty in Good Times and Bad”

“Chapter 6: Decide to SAY SORRY”

Book By JEANNE BLISS

Southwest Airlines says “sorry” proactively to its customers every day. Each morning, a group assembles for a meeting they call “MOM” (Morning Overview Meeting). This affectionate name is not an accident. The brainchild of Colleen Barrett, president emeritus, and chief evangelist for what Southwest calls Customer LUV, the purpose of the MOM meeting is to learn about the experience you just had as a passenger of Southwest Airlines. Every morning’s meeting is a review of the previous day’s operation, not from Southwest’s point of view, but from the passenger’s point of view. Southwest wants to know what customers have gone through on their flights, with service, weather or delays BEFORE customers contact them.

Let’s say you just landed. The flight experience started out grandly but quickly soured. Checking in for your flight was pleasant, you found the seat you wanted, and ate your free peanuts. But there were delays taking off. Then weather in Chicago and a missed connection. You finally set foot into your home after two in the morning. The next day a letter from Southwest Airlines arrives...with a humble apology, a contrite and genuine explanation, a promise to improve, and a gesture to make it up to you. You had just begun thinking about how to voice your frustration when you open the letter which stops you dead in your tracks...with amazement...with appreciation. Some customers who have experienced this even say...with glee.

Who sent that letter? Surely it’s some machine-generated form letter, you might be thinking. Not a chance. What you’ve received is a personal missive crafted by **Fred Taylor Jr.** or another member of Southwest’s Proactive Customer Service Communications Team. Any thought of changing carriers quickly vanishes from the customers’ mind. “I LOVE Southwest!” is what takes its place. Magic.

Being proactive with an apology and a resolution for bad experiences is good business for Southwest. Their swift communication, human and contrite mea culpa, and promise to do better, paired with an olive branch commensurate with the disruption to their customers’ lives, generated a net return of \$1.8 million in repeat and additional flights booked by customers who received one of their Proactive Customer Service apologies in 2007. The sales force that Southwest Airlines creates in the 50,000 customers they amaze every year with these gestures has a return on investment that far exceeds the number of family members, friends, and colleagues who they compel to try this airline with the human touch.

DECISION INTENT: Apologize Even Before Customers Complain

Colleen Barrett, president emeritus of Southwest Airlines, told me, “We knew from day one that we wanted to be in the customer service business. The business we were in just happened to provide airline transportation.” Colleen’s notion is this: if you want to be best in customer service, then you’ve got to be proactive about it. You can’t wait for customers to tell you about your problems. You’ve got to be out ahead of them every day. And that includes when you make a mistake. So Colleen established a manifesto and a group dedicated to what Southwest calls “Proactive Customer Service.” This gets right to the heart of the matter for why this team exists.

MOTIVATION: Southwest’s Desire to “Wow.”

Southwest has turned the process for “saying sorry” into a core competency of their business. Each morning, a “MOM” (Morning Overview Meeting) is convened. The people who run the airline’s operations, its meteorologist, and Proactive Customer Service team members review the flights of the previous day for delays, issues, and service glitches. They get a read on the weather for that day that might have brought passenger delays and challenges to airports. Then the Proactive Customer Service team goes to work. They imagine themselves as passengers and decide which events warrant an apology, a hand of human kindness from Southwest. Depending on the severity of the situation, this ranges from offering the passengers’ next flight for free to a percentage off in the form of a LUV voucher. All come with a hand-signed, personalized letter customized to the experience customers encountered. No mass produced “sorry” letter allowed here!

IMPACT: Proactive Apologies Generated a Net Return of \$1.8 Million in 2007

For Southwest, their instinct to take “Golden Rule behaviors” makes them profitable. It helps to keep them flying. Based on how Southwest Airlines customers redeemed their LUV vouchers, and after completing the appropriate revenue accounting practices, a net return of \$1.8 million was generated in repeat flying in 2007 by customers who received letters sent from the PCS team. Southwest Airlines has consistently received the lowest ratio of complaints per passenger boarded of all major U.S. carriers that have been reporting their statistics to the Department of Transportation since September 1987. The *Wall Street Journal* named Southwest Airlines the airline champ of 2007. In a 2008 TIME.com survey, Southwest Airlines ranked number one for being the friendliest airline. Can your form a proactive team to do what Southwest does?