

Southwest Airlines: Customer Relations Newsletter

“Proactive Customer Service and the PCS Team”

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Apologizing to one person requires humility and a headset (or pen and paper); apologizing to 250,000 people requires a herculean task force or, as they're known here at Southwest Airlines, Proactive Customer Service.

In 2001, Southwest Airlines employee Fred Taylor, working out of Baltimore, MA, received a letter from Colleen Barrett. The President of the company had a few pet projects she wanted to discuss; namely, implementing a strategy to streamline the way irregular operations are reported and communicated to Customers. A firm believer in seizing opportunity, Taylor jumped at the chance to spearhead Barrett's vision. Eight years later, “Fred Taylor's group” is responsible for the revolutionary idea that endeared Southwest Airlines to fliers everywhere: accepting responsibility when it's the right thing to do.

“People think we're crazy,” Taylor said. “Companies are afraid to say ‘I'm sorry,’ but we don't see it that way. We want to develop that goodwill; we see it as building confidence. The Customer's expectation is for us to be open and honest. But you have to be informed to do that [apologize] well; you can't just shoot from the hip.”

PCS consists of five people: Fred Taylor, Melissa Chalupa, Adrienne Yurdyga, Marla Nelson and Liz Hammond. Together, they work to keep a pulse on approximately 14 different groups within Southwest Airlines, driven ultimately by a goal of empowering Customers and Employees to make informed decisions when faced with the unexpected. The group accomplishes this task by monitoring flight activity systemwide, paying particular attention to disruptions and irregular operations.

Using information which they are constantly gathering, PCS prepares proactive internal and external communication, like the MOM/Merge reports distributed each morning. PCS is primarily responsible for communicating with Customers almost immediately when there's an incident that requires attention. On average, the team reaches out to more than 500 flights a year. They also manage special projects like the SODA rebooking tool which was introduced to CR in November.

With a continued focus on improving the Customer experience, PCS and CR with its large volume of employees are poised to bolster each other's functionality in the upcoming year, something Taylor sees as a mutual benefit for the joining departments. “Customer Relations needs to be one of the most informed,

engaged departments our company has,” Taylor said. “It’s important that a rep be able to answer a call or a letter and think ‘I’ve got that, I have the information I need to handle this.’”

The changes will be subtle as PCS strategically looks for opportunities to get involved with CR while maintaining their own productivity and schedules. “This last year, 2009, has really been about getting things in order down here,” Taylor said. The noticeable merge will unfold in the coming months. “Starting next year you’re going to see the meshing of objectives, and we’ll really get to start harnessing the power of numbers in the CR department.”

Welcome to the team PCS! We’re glad to have you onboard.