

CRM Magazine: Destination CRM

“Extreme Loyalty Requires Extreme Commitment”

Net Promoter Conference '10: Three companies reveal the secrets to delivering high-quality customer experience.

By LAUREN MCKAY

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NEW YORK — Jeanne Bliss isn't afraid to get into character.

When she wasn't stepping into combat boots and taste testing MREs, Bliss was introducing customer experience champions from Zane Cycles, Southwest Airlines, and USAA. Why are these three companies so commendable? Perhaps because achieving customer loyalty is no walk in the park. Especially in an economic crisis, businesses are faced with tough decisions, Bliss said. Everyday as individuals and as business people we make hundreds of decisions -- and how we go about them tells a story about who we are and what we value. "How we choose to correct something that goes wrong, how steadfast we are in delivering goods, that all indicates how much we consider ... the people on the other end of our services," Bliss told attendees. The following companies show how customer experience can not only improve customer loyalty, but can be the basis for how the company operates:

Southwest Airlines

Fred Taylor has gotten great at apologizing. As the senior manager of proactive customer service communications for Southwest Airlines, Taylor says "I'm sorry" more times a day than some people will utter in a year. Taylor writes around 240 letters a year to Southwest passengers, oftentimes apologizing for unseen problems on flights or with travel scheduling. Taylor was plucked from the front lines by Southwest in 2007 to start reaching out to customers proactively. Now the team of five measures customer experience system-wide and looks at pipelines where complaints could surface. "We have a process in place that gathers facts of experiences and determines validity and what we need to speak to," Taylor said. "Then we formulate correspondence to customers. It's not canned, rather it's unique to each [flight] experience." In his messages to Southwest customers, Taylor will:

- Acknowledge the situation;
- Apologize for the experience;
- Invite the customer to fly again with Southwest;
- Many times include a gesture of goodwill (such as a ticket voucher); and
- Sometimes add a video that explains the situation.

Taylor says the goal is to get the message -- usually electronic -- out to the customer within 24-48 hours after the experience. Bliss begged the question, "Why can't other

airlines do this?" To that, Taylor responded that Southwest's culture is centered on customer experience. It's difficult for other companies to see the value this brings to their business.

"I am fortunate to work for a company that puts forth a lot of support and resources to make sure my team [can] accomplish our mission each and every day," Taylor said. Southwest's proactive communications team receives positive feedback on a daily basis. Customers commend the company for recognizing mistakes and apologizing for bad experiences, Taylor said.

According to Taylor, 70 percent of Southwest customers who receive proactive communications return to the airline and bring others with them. "We create a wow factor...and a positive storytelling experience," he said.

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