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“Making It Right When Things Go Wrong, For Southwest Airlines Team, Work Means Always Having to Say You’re Sorry”

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There are some things that Fred Taylor Jr. and his crew at Southwest Airlines Co. just cannot explain.

For example, there was the female passenger who kneeled in front of her middle seat and chewed on the seat cushion, then stripped off her top and ran down the aisle. But Taylor and others on his customer service team can apologize to the other passengers on that flight and did so, as they've done thousands of other times when something has gone wrong in the air or on the ground.

Their job: to find out the situations in which something went wrong - a mechanical delay, bad weather, a medical emergency or a berserk passenger - then apologize to all passengers on that flight quickly and profusely, within 24 hours of their bad experience, if possible.

Taylor cringes at the title he was given a couple of years ago by one reporter: chief apology officer. But apologize is what he does for a living, along with assistants Melissa Chalupa and Adrienne Yurdyga.

Their letters to passengers, almost always sent in an e-mail these days, have three basic components:

- A sincere apology that the customer had a less-than-perfect experience.
- A brief explanation of what happened.
- A gift to make it up, usually a voucher in dollars that can be used on their next Southwest flight.

In the case of the woman who doffed her top after chewing the cushion, there's not much Southwest can say, other than "Well ..."

"Well, it's a very short letter, as you might imagine," Taylor said. "We basically say we can't explain the person's behavior, but what we can do is apologize for the disruption and invite you back for a better experience."

In a similar case in August 2008, Chalupa sent this e-mail to passengers on a Tulsa-bound flight:

"On behalf of Southwest Airlines employees, I extend my apologies for any disconcerting feelings you may have had as a result of the bizarre behavior of one of your fellow travelers. Certainly, your patience and cooperation while the local authorities responded to the situation and conducted their respective investigation is greatly appreciated - I imagine the wait was a bit of a hassle as well, and I'm sorry for this inconvenience."

Usually, Southwest can explain what went wrong and do a little education, as Yurdyga did in June for passengers aboard a Chicago flight that was diverted to Milwaukee:

"As the pilots were making preparations to land at Chicago Midway, they received an indication for the flaps. (The flaps are the movable panels on the wings' edges that help give the aircraft extra lift during takeoff and create 'drag' during landing.)

"As a precautionary measure, the pilots diverted to Milwaukee to utilize their longer runway. After speaking to our maintenance department, I learned that the culprit was one of the position sensors (which indicates the location of the flaps), and it was replaced to correct the problem."

Happier customers

Most major carriers have similar efforts to reach out to customers, some that were started well before Southwest launched its program 10 years ago. American Airlines Inc. has had a proactive team in place since the mid-1990s.

One can argue that it may not be wise to remind a customer of a bad experience.

But an apology for a bad flight can actually make a passenger happier than a noneventful flight, American executive Mark Mitchell said, citing internal surveys.

"We know how our customers score us on a routine flight, and we also know how they score us when we handle a delay situation very poorly or very well," said Mitchell, American's managing director of customer experience.

"When we handle a delay situation well, they score us about 14 to 16 points higher than they do for just a regular old on-time flight," he said.

Taylor and Southwest chairman, president and chief executive Gary Kelly credit former Southwest president Colleen Barrett for championing the idea of being proactive at their airline.

The usual tendency for big business is to be reactive - respond when the customer complains. That's not good enough, Taylor said.

"Our objective is to get out in front of the situation before the inquiry occurs. We want to try to think about the way a situation happened on board, the way our customers were affected by that," Taylor said.

Referring to the 137 seats on most of Southwest's airplanes, "we're analyzing up to 137 customers' mentalities," he said. "We have to be psychologists and be able to foresee the impact."

Kelly said it makes good business sense to quickly talk to customers after a bad experience. Plus, it's just the right thing to do.

"We have over 85 million boardings on an annual basis, so there are a lot of transactions, and not everything goes perfect in a travel experience. We try to have as personal a relationship with our customers as we possibly can," Kelly said.

"And it's also with the understanding that a lot of our customers are not necessarily repeat customers," he said.

Low complaint rate

Something is working for Dallas-based Southwest, which uses LUV as its ticker symbol. The airline has a lower rate of complaints than any other major U.S. carrier - much lower.

The U.S. Department of Transportation ranks airlines for the number of complaints received per 100,000 passengers. In 2009, Southwest's rate was 0.21 complaints per 100,000, the best of the 19 airlines ranked.

Among major carriers, next-best was Alaska Airlines Inc. at 0.50 complaints per 100,000, a rate more than twice as high as Southwest's. Worst was Delta Air Lines Inc. at 1.96, more than nine times as high as Southwest's rate.

Fort Worth-based American, Northwest Airlines Inc., US Airways Inc. and United Airlines Inc. all had complaint rates more than five times as high as Southwest's 0.21 per 100,000.

Kelly said the proactive effort is important in improving Southwest's image among customers.

"How many of those [who received the apologies] are customers who came back and said, 'You know, Southwest really treated me right in that one instance,' " Kelly said. "You just don't know how those touch points are going to affect customers and what impact it might have on our future business with them."