

Houston Chronicle

“Southwest shows its industry the importance of sincerity”

By LOREN STEFFY

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DALLAS — From behind red-framed glasses, **Colleen Barrett** rolled her eyes at the idea that Congress would tell her how to treat passengers.

"I don't want the government telling me how to handle customer service," said Barrett, president of Southwest Airlines, the biggest low-fare carrier. "I want to make those decisions on an individual basis."

Southwest has continued to receive some of the highest marks among major airlines, both for on-time service and overall quality, even as rivals have stumbled in recent months.

Just after Christmas, American Airlines rerouted a plane from Dallas to Austin because of bad weather, then left passengers for nine hours without pulling to a gate. About the same time, **United Airlines'** regional affiliate stranded 110 passengers in Cheyenne, Wyo. Two months later, **JetBlue** Airways kept planeloads of passengers sitting on the tarmac at New York's Kennedy airport for as long as 11 hours because of winter storms. Those incidents are fueling cries by irate passengers for a federally mandated bill of rights requiring airlines to compensate them for long delays.

In February, airline delays rose to their second-highest level since the **Bureau of Transportation Statistics** began tracking arrival times in 1999. Meanwhile, quality of service has declined for three straight years, according to the annual **Airline Quality Ratings** study by professors at **the University of Nebraska** at Omaha and **Wichita State University**. The researchers predicted things will only get worse.

Thinking like a passenger

All of which is what brought me here, to Barrett's cluttered office at **Dallas Love Field**. I wanted to see how the airline that puts more people on planes each day than any other U.S. carrier handles the inevitable breakdowns in its complex flight network.

The answer lies with **Fred Taylor**. **Taylor's** title is senior manager for proactive customer service communications. It means he's paid to think like a passenger.

He meets daily with dispatchers, maintenance supervisors and other flight operations personnel to review things that went wrong on specific flights and develop a response. On Wednesday morning, Taylor was concerned about a smoky smell reported by a flight attendant on a plane to Chicago.

Most of the meeting focused on flights that were canceled or rerouted because of bad storms that moved south from Chicago to Dallas the previous day. But Taylor kept coming back to the smell, even though that flight had proceeded normally.

Had the passengers smelled it? Was it an overpowering smell? What was the mood of the passengers?

Explanation in order

Later, he explained his concern. If the smell was strong enough for passengers to notice, he thought they deserved an explanation.

Sometimes the incidents are more involved. For example, a Jan. 8 flight out of Denver returned to the gate after flames shot out of one engine.

"This can be an amazing, and admittedly shocking sight — especially when it is dark outside and you're not prepared for that to happen," Taylor wrote in an apology to passengers on the flight. "Again, I'm sorry if you were startled."

The plane was never in danger, but maintenance crews replaced the engine, which meant rerouting passengers on other flights. With his letter, Taylor sent vouchers for a free round-trip flight.

Taylor said he writes about 20 such letters a month, or about 240 a year. Assuming an average of 110 passengers a flight, that's more than 26,000 individual letters of apology that Southwest mails annually. Most of that mountain of mea culpa comes with vouchers for free or discounted flights.

"We've never been afraid to say we're sorry, and we've tried to make it up when we were wrong," Barrett says. Taylor says he can usually get a letter in the mail in 24 hours.

"Our goal is to get the letter to them before they write to us," he said.

At the same time, Barrett stresses that the willingness to apologize doesn't mean the airline's a pushover.

"We don't say we're sorry if we're not," she said. "We will defend our employees. We don't say the customer is always right."

Following Southwest's lead

Other airlines are making similar apology efforts, especially now that the industry's poor customer service is drawing congressional scrutiny. JetBlue, for example, voluntarily implemented a passenger bill of rights that calls for vouchers based on delays.

The call for a passenger bill of rights is born out of justified outrage. But 30 years after deregulation, too much of the airline industry continues to operate by the old rules, the first of which is that passengers must suffer for the system's inefficiencies and failings.

Southwest's policy stands out not because it's remarkable, but because it's unexpected. Taylor showed me responses he received from his letter about the Denver flight. One theme: surprise at an apology from an airline.

His letters might get a similar reaction coming from any large company. In an age of automated voice systems and email, personal communication is a rarity.

Taylor's apologies are astoundingly simple and sincere, and that's what resonates with customers. It's also why appeals to Congress won't improve airline service.

Sincerity can't be legislated.