

Main Street

“The Sorriest Job in America”

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In the movie *Up in the Air*, George Clooney plays a layoff consultant who specializes in breaking the bad news to soon-to-be laid-off employees.

But that was Hollywood, and we all know that reality is often stranger than even the best fiction. Exhibit A: Possibly the hottest job in corporate America - a “professional apologizer.”

Before you laugh, consider a few diverging examples of how to handle customer service problems:

In August 2009, movie subscription service Netflix (Stock Quote: NFLX) suffered a small interruption in service. The interruption didn’t even impact all of its loyal customers, but Netflix immediately sent out an email apologizing to everyone, and offered them a refund. Even the ones who weren’t even aware of the brief network downtime got a refund.

Compare that to JPMorgan Chase (Stock Quote: JPM), which earlier this month saw its online banking service go down for more than 60 hours. The bank said nothing about the problem the whole time, and finally issued an apology after the service was back up and running. But the bank didn’t e-mail or even tweet the lukewarm apology – it just posted it online.

Not only did the bank admit to keeping its 16 million online users in the dark during the power outage, it also issued a vague promise to “do better” if the network goes down again. Furthermore, the bank vaguely blamed a “technical issue” on a third-party software provider – passing the buck to an unnamed company that customers likely don’t know or care about.

Perhaps companies like JP Morgan Chase could hire a “professional apologizer” to handle customer experiences before they become customer problems.

That’s exactly what Southwest Airlines (Stock Quote: LUV) has done. The moniker was given to company customer service manager Fred Taylor Jr., along with his team members, Melissa Chalupa and Adrienne Yurdyga. Their job at Southwest is to get on top of a negative customer experience – such as lost luggage, an odd experience on a flight, or a big delay on the tarmac – and get them an official company apology within 24 hours.

The apology usually comes in the form of a personal e-mail from one of the team members, and it always follows the same format: A heartfelt apology, followed by an explanation of the problem and a takeaway for the customer, like a gift voucher that can be used on Southwest flights.

The notes can be more personal than the average corporate form letter. The *Chicago Tribune* got a hold of one of Taylor's apologies, an Aug. 2008 email to all the passengers on a Tulsa, Oklahoma-bound flight where a passenger was acting strangely.

"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."

Taylor has to be on call on a 24-hour/seven day basis but the position comes with good pay and benefits, he said in an interview with the website *Wallet Pop*.

The position also requires a college degree, plenty of holiday work (when the airlines are busiest) and some solid experience in customer service – seven years in the case of Taylor's team at Southwest.

The gig is in high demand, but Southwest reports there are no openings on the 'apology' team right now. If you're lucky, maybe Fred Taylor himself will tell you he's sorry for that.