

NUTS: Southwest Airlines Blog

“Being Proactive—The Next Generation of Customer Service”

Part Four—Southwest Airlines Proactive Customer Service Communication Team

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(In the first installment, I outlined the need for Proactive Customer Service; in the second, we drilled down a bit deeper into how that is accomplished; and in the third, we looked at the key elements to effective communication. Now, it's time to walk the talk.)

Walking The Talk

The thing about the airline industry is—there's no shortage of opportunities to proactively communicate!

My Team's primary responsibilities include:

1. Monitoring our current operations systemwide, and determining if our Employees in 14 different operating and Customer contact departments understand what's happening out there.
2. Correcting any inconsistencies in the information that exists.
3. Ensuring our Frontline Employees are extending the appropriate Customer accommodations (if needed).
4. Reviewing the previous day's operation, and determining what (if any) type of proactive explanation should be issued about a particular disruption of our scheduled service (in the air or on the ground).
5. Evaluating and preparing communication to our Internal and External Customers for possible disruptions in service that may come about as a result of an uncontrollable/forecasted weather-related event.

The real challenge exists in evaluating our Customers' concerns, and trying to determine which Customers need information. This evaluation is difficult because we have to base our decision on very **subjective** information about the situation.

My Team is constantly monitoring the service that our Frontline Employees are providing, and we work very hard to keep everyone on the same page insofar as what's happening with our operation. Through experience, we have developed an instinct to know when it is the right time to engage and which media to utilize.

We try to make our proactive efforts personal. If there has been some sort of unexpected interruption* of the Customers' travel plans, or some level of disappointment with the service we provided (no matter who is at fault), my Team will

provide our Customers with a heartfelt letter of apology (usually within 76 hours of the event's occurrence—typically, we are able to do this within 48 hours), to explain what happened and invite the Customer back for a better experience.

For instance, if a flight gets disrupted because the weather isn't cooperating with our plans to operate our scheduled service, and if this disruption causes what we consider to be an inordinate delay in the travel plans for the majority of the Customers onboard, then we may apologize for that experience. True, we didn't cause the problem in this regard; but it still wasn't something we want our Customers to go through.

**One short disclaimer: In general, most seasoned travelers have come to expect that routine flight delays and minor mechanical interruptions may occur. As such, to avoid creating unreasonable expectations, we don't send proactive correspondence for every disruption. We realize that, based on the way the circumstances unfold, there are incidents (no matter how "routine") that affect our Customers differently, and our Customer Relations Department is ready to address these issues one-on-one.*

In addition to keeping up with the way our Employees are taking care of our Customers and scanning the system for flight disruptions, my Team will also reach out to our Customers if the forecast looks like Mother Nature could significantly disrupt our scheduled service. In this regard, we will publish information on Southwest Airlines' Internet web site (**southwest.com**) to provide a weather alert that includes the appropriate Customer accommodations.

(Next time, we will look at the end result of all of our proactive efforts.)