

On January 27, a Southwest Airlines plane carrying 118 passengers skidded off a snow-covered runway in Spokane, WA. No one was hurt, though the incident closed the airport. Seamless integration of communications and all customer touch points let Southwest deliver consistent messaging and manage the situation quickly and effectively.

“Even if the wheels fall off, customers will be impressed by how we handle it – not just because we’re timely, but because we’re all saying and doing the same thing,” says Linda Rutherford, VP of PR and community affairs. “[Our] commitment is that [no one] walks away with the perception that the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing. We’ve really focused on integration and synergy, which lead to consistency.”

Cooperation is a product of Southwest’s culture. “It starts with [president and corporate secretary] Colleen Barrett,” she adds. “She always has been an intuitive communicator, making sure everything we do is connected. Even if departments [don’t] report to each other, she expect[s] integrated and coordinated efforts. Culturally, we’re all trained to think about impact on other departments, or services we can offer other departments.”

A four-layer activation process, including formal and informal meetings and a variety of communication platforms, is in place to evaluate and communicate in all situations. In a case like Spokane, dozens of departments immediately convene on a POP (potential operations problem) call.

“The idea is to coordinate communications and organize facts so everybody gets consistent information,” Rutherford says. “We focus first on the message and then [on] all channels. If there’s a [factual] discrepancy, we work it out on the call. It helps us in PR say the right thing to begin with, which is important [in] an emerging issue – particularly one where media might want us to speculate.”

#### A CONSISTENT MESSAGE

Fred Taylor, senior manager of proactive customer communication, says the complexity of a situation that simultaneously affects many operations demands efficient, timely, and effective communication – internally and externally.

“Internal and external [audiences] want to know the same thing: ‘What are we going to do; when [will] we do it; and how is the company going to take care of us?’” he says. “My team ensures customers feel taken care of. If a disruption is significant enough, we go to them before they ask.”

Personalized apology letters are usually sent within 76 business hours, but Taylor says cooperation between departments is so



Southwest’s Katie Coldwell, Jim Ruppel, Linda Rutherford, Teresa Laraba, and Fred Taylor (l-r) work closely together to keep the airline’s employees and customers simultaneously and constantly informed

out to the public, employees hear it first, [or] at the same time.”

Teresa Laraba, VP of ground operations, says front-line employees in all 64 cities in which Southwest operates are leveraged when something goes wrong.

“We get them information they can deliver to the frontline quicker,” she explains. “They get local media and it affects employees. During Katrina, for example, we stayed on the same page hour by hour. Station leaders are well aware of Fred, Jim, and Linda, and they don’t hesitate to call, ask a question, or raise the flag.”

#### NOT JUST FOR CRISIS

Cooperation and integration is equally valuable in non-crisis situations, such as last November’s introduction of assigned boarding, which required changes in both customer and employee behavior.

“We all got involved,” Rutherford says. “Marketing really wanted it to work because part of overall messaging is to woo business travelers. Ground operations needed to reeducate agents on what to say and do. Communications wanted this to succeed because early returns from media and customer bloggers would set the tone.”

The communications team helped create a staff-training module. Press releases, a Web tutorial, and Southwest’s intranet all delivered information on the change. Hundreds of company volunteers manned gate areas for four weeks to answer questions, explain procedure, and advise gate agents.

“The last thing we wanted was people not having anywhere to go with questions,” Rutherford says. “We proactively went up to them. The perception was [they] would not be lost or forgotten even if [they] didn’t have questions. If [customers and employees] did not see the benefit of change, it could have damaged the brand.”

Southwest regularly uses the measurement tool Net Promoter to gauge customer opinion. During and following the new boarding initiative, Rutherford says, scores indicated an increase in customers who felt favorably about the airline. Rapid Rewards conducts a more extensive survey, which shows good awareness of the new boarding procedure and that it’s perceived as easy.

“All this equals one thing internally and externally: empowerment,” Taylor says. “[By taking care of customers], we give them another reason to come back.” ■

# Culture of cooperation

► A strong alignment between communications and customer service functions helps Southwest Airlines deliver a cohesive message and positive experience to consumers. By *Tanya Lewis*

efficient that letters sometimes go out within 24 hours. “That wouldn’t be possible without every department understanding what we’re trying to do,” he notes.

Jim Ruppel, VP of customer relations and Rapid Rewards, explains that while communications and customer service have always worked closely, the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes helped refine practices.

“We put together a communica-

tions plan where all employees are involved [and] saying the same things to customers, thereby [providing] consistency and stopping frustration,” he says. “If all customer contact groups say the same thing, it does not matter where the touch point is, the customer can get first-contact resolution.”

Rutherford notes that there is equal emphasis on internal and external customers. All 33,000

employees receive regular communication, including a weekly survey, which normally generates 12,000 to 18,000 responses.

“Employees are both customers and owners,” says Katie Coldwell, manager of publications and initiatives, employee communication. “I need to make sure they’re educated so they can deliver for customers. We work hand in hand with PR. Any time a message goes

#### HOW SOUTHWEST AIRLINES’ INTEGRATION BENEFITS CUSTOMERS

- Consistent messaging mitigates customer frustration and improves travel experience.
- Coordinated messages allow quick, simultaneous delivery to customers.

- Consistent, up-front information distributed through multiple channels helps customers navigate change more easily.
- Proactive communication exceeds customers’

expectations and engenders good will toward the company.

- All employees are informed, trained, and empowered to deal with customer questions and solve problems, which keeps complaints to a minimum.