

## ***Smart Brief: Now I Know***

### **“Why Southwest Has A Chief Apology Officer: Who’s Sorry Now”**

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At the end of 2013, the United States Department of Transportation released its monthly ranking of airlines based by on-time performance. It was bad news for Southwest Airlines, which performed poorly, coming in last on the list for two straight months. The methodology used to make this determination was somewhat controversial — the inspector general of that very same agency stated as much — but if you’re an air traveler whose flight was delayed significantly, that’s hardly any solace.

But that’s OK. When it comes to apologies and explanations, Southwest has a guy for that. His name is Fred Taylor, and he’s sorry your flight didn’t work out as planned.

Even if you weren’t going to make a stink about it.

From May of 1997 until the summer of 2001, Taylor was working as an assistant customer service manager out of one of Southwest’s smaller offices, in this case in Baltimore. The president of the corporation at the time, Colleen Barrett, took notice of him and hand-picked him for a new role, leading up what the company now calls “proactive customer service.” That’s not a typical title and one that therefore requires additional explanation. A 2007 profile of the *New York Times* summed up Taylor’s unique job duties, explaining that he “spends his 12-hour work days finding out how Southwest disappointed its customers and then firing off homespun letters of apology.” The *Times* half-jokingly called Taylor the airline’s “chief apology officer.”

These aren’t form letters. They all follow a similar format, sure, but they’re responsive to the customer’s actual issues. As the *Dallas Morning News* reported, each letter contains a “sincere” apology (how the newspaper could confirm the sincerity is unknown); an explanation as to what went wrong, and why; and a voucher to defray some of the cost of a future flight on Southwest. In the letter, Taylor’s team investigates what occurred on the flight in question and details the reasons behind it. The *Dallas Morning News* article, for example, cited a flight where a female passenger inexplicably “kneeled in front of her middle seat and chewed on the seat cushion, then stripped off her top and ran down the aisle.” Taylor, in response, mailed off an apology to the other travelers on board — not that the woman’s bizarre behavior was at all the airline’s fault — within 24 hours.

That still sounds commonplace in the customer service world, but what makes Taylor and team different is that they don’t wait for the other customers to actually complain. Instead, once Taylor finds out about a problem — typically early on in the process, and often from the flight crew itself — he issues the apology letter (and voucher) to all passengers on board. This is true whether the problems were caused by another customer, by the weather, or even due to Southwest’s own errors. Some watchdogs are

taking notice of Taylor's work, too, and in a good way. Consumerist — typically a consumer advocate which has difficulty finding good in anything corporations do — cited one of Taylor's team's letters with approval, calling it "refreshingly honest and informative."

Whether this proactive approach is successful is hard to say, but there is one sign which heavily suggests that it is. At least four other airlines — American, JetBlue, Continental (pre-United merger), and US Airways have all experimented with similar approaches.

**Bonus Fact:** Those fluent in stock market matters may believe that Southwest's customer-first approach is in its DNA — or, more accurately, its ticker symbol. Southwest trades on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol LUV, an obvious reference to the word "love." But in this case, love is not in the air. It's on the ground. LUV is a reference to Dallas's Love Field Airport, which was the main airport in the area until Dallas/Fort Worth International opened in 1974 — and was Southwest's first hub.