

## ***St. Louis Business Journal***

### **“Becoming Fred Taylor”**

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I would be lying if I said the first thing I noticed about Fred Taylor was his title, impressive and unusual as it is Manager, Proactive Customer Communications.

Even though I've never met Mr. Taylor, I'm prepared to give him an outstanding letter of reference. You would too if you were in my seat.

That seat was on Southwest Airlines Flight #1340, flying from St. Louis to Chicago Dec. 1, otherwise known as the day of the ice storm that knocked out power for hundreds of thousands of St. Louisans.

What fool would be flying to Chicago on such a day?

Not just me, my daughter and a friend who were looking for a weekend of retail therapy, but an entire plane filled with weary travelers trying to make their way home, business commuters and families on their way to a wedding. A plane filled with everything but patience.

Except for us. My trio was bound for a fun-filled weekend and we weren't about to let a slight delay get in our way. When the time stretched for hours - six to be precise - we were still in good spirits. Our own spirits, to be sure, since FAA regulations prohibit the serving of any beverages before the plane takes off and there are only so many peanuts you can eat.

I make the point that while many were frustrated by the comedy of errors that produced one delay after another, we were pretty sanguine about the entire situation.

After all, other airlines had canceled their flights altogether so we believed ourselves fortunate to hitch a ride out of town.

We arrived in Chicago at 10:30 that night, made it to a great restaurant where we never would have been able to get a reservation at a 'normal' eating hour and proceeded to have a great weekend, boosting the Chicago economy.

All of which is to emphasize that we never complained because we didn't think we had anything to complain about. So you can imagine my surprise when I received a memo from Fred Taylor:

*I don't think I can provide you with a rational explanation for the myriad of untimely disruptions and significantly frustrating delays that occurred with your December 1*

*flight from St. Louis (STL). And I know that no matter what I say in hindsight, it cannot make up for the poor service you were given that exhausting day. What I can say is, you deserve a heartfelt apology from us, and on behalf of Southwest Airlines, I hope you will give me the opportunity to offer it to you....*

*In addition to my sincere apologies, and in an effort to try to restore some of the goodwill that we lost, I am sending two complimentary, roundtrip passes to each person who was on your flight, along with our invitation to use them for travel between any cities that Southwest serves. Of course, measuring the total amount of each person's inconvenience is difficult to do; but I ask you to accept this gesture in order to give us another chance to provide you with far better (and more typical!) air travel experiences in the days ahead.*

I am framing Mr. Taylor's memo as a reminder of what 'proactive customer communications' means. I've shared it with my colleagues and it's our goal to mimic Fred Taylor as closely as possible during 2007. We're not looking for lengthy delays or power outages or mistakes in stories or delivery problems, but we know they're part of our business reality and, quite possibly, part of yours.