

The Customer Experience Show

“Improving Customer Experience: Fred Taylor Interview”

Internet Radio Broadcast With Michelle Romanica

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Fred Taylor began his career as a Customer Service Agent with Southwest Airlines in 1997 and quickly progressed to more challenging leadership positions in frontline operations. Then in 2001, he was plucked from the Frontlines by Colleen Barrett, then President and CEO of Southwest, and asked to take on new responsibilities for coordinating the Company’s proactive Customer communications. Fred has revolutionized Southwest Airlines Customer Service, communications, and goodwill initiatives by creating the PCS Team (Proactive Customer Service team). The results of their proactive work have been (and continue to be) featured in over 50 print, television, and Internet media including: *Business Week*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, NBC, CBS, and FOX

1. Tell us a little about yourself and how you came to be in your present position at Southwest?

Well, I’ve been with Southwest over 14 years. And, in 2001, I was a Customer Service Manager at our Baltimore/Washington International airport when our then President (now President Emeritus), Colleen Barrett, invited me to take on a few of her pet projects. After coming onboard at Headquarters, and sorting out “what’s what,” these projects evolved into what we now call our Proactive Customer Service initiatives. From that, I created a small Team to help implement these initiatives 24/7/365. Now, our small Team of five is responsible for keeping a finger on the pulse of Southwest Airlines’ daily operations and proactively ensuring that our Internal and External Customers are provided with helpful/timely information, support, and accommodations when things may not, are not, and/or have not gone according to plan with our systemwide operation.

2. Many have said it is the culture at Southwest that is the cornerstone of your success. What are the key elements of the culture that sets everyone up for success there?

It is a cornerstone, for sure, along with low fares, frequent flights, and Positively Outrageous Service. The key elements of our Culture are: Putting People first and following The Golden Rule. Our People—they are the most important element of our Culture. And, we want to provide an environment that encourages them to do great things, grow, and generate outstanding results.

3. How do you continue to maintain that culture over time?

We encourage a Fun-LUvIng attitude because we believe that fosters an Esprite des Corps. We look for opportunities to celebrate Company successes; we make a big deal out of the Holidays; we search for excuses to throw a party; and we intentionally acknowledge important life events (e.g., birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, births of babies, etc). We also provide unwavering support to our Employees during challenging times in their lives too: illnesses, catastrophic events (fires, floods, etc), as well as the loss of loved ones. Being “there” for one another is the very soul of our Culture.

4. You have been instrumental in introducing what you call the 'next generation' of customer service at Southwest. What does that mean for your customers and how does that differ from the way you were doing things before?

It means providing something new, unique, and unexpected. It means going above and beyond b/c that's the right thing to do. And, doing it b/c you want to make the Customer feel better about your Company and the services being provided. It differs only in our delivery channels—you know, keeping up with the speed of the Internet, mobile technology, and the craving for instant information.

5. For those CEOs listening out there, what are the keys, in Southwest's world to creating a great Customer Experience?

Setting the right expectations with your Customers—then exceeding them. Being consistent—doing it all the time (not just when it's convenient). Going out of your way—even though you don't have to do that. Frankly, a little bit of assistance goes a long way. Basically, taking a minute to listen and then trying to find a reasonable solution. In fact, many of the services that we provide (or stopped providing) happened b/c that's what our Customers said they wanted. We really do listen and take action whenever its reasonably possible.

6. There are a number of businesses that each year, recognize companies for their customer service excellence. (Skytrax comes to mind in the airline industry.) And we're starting to see Customer Experience awards emerge. Do you see these awards as accurately reflecting what customers are feeling and saying? In other words, how much credence can customers give to those awards?

To me, any Customer Service award is appreciated and should be valued for what it's worth. Without naming names (so not to alienate anyone), I think the ones that are the most worthwhile are the ones in which the Customers are actually involved in the selection process.

7. The airline industry is a highly regulated industry. How do you develop your people to know how to balance meeting these regulations with doing the right thing for the customer?

It is a highly regulated industry; but that doesn't mean you have to confine your operation and service into a box. I've always led (and taught my Teammembers to do the same) that as long as you make decisions which are in the best interest of safety, security, and Teammember integrity, then the way you provide the service or solve the problem is really up to you. Rules and regs are guidelines to help point you in the right direction. So, if you follow this guidance and try to make "win/win" decisions for the Customer and the Company, then you should be okay.

8. Like so many of the world airlines, Southwest has been around for a long time - 40 years for Southwest. But your culture is quite different. What has made the difference for Southwest? Is it something that other airlines can still adopt?

For sure, our Warrior Spirit (the actual will to survive) is what makes the difference. And, that's carried over from generation to generation b/c there has always been a challenge (competitive or economic) lurking around the corner. Our Founders and our original Employees had the odds stacked against them, and they literally had to fight to survive (both in the court room and to get off the ground). It's always been that way—constant adversity—which means we have had to be creative, clever, and extra savvy to find fun/cost-effective ways to operate. That history, that foundation is special to Southwest, and I'm not sure it can be duplicated. That said, if a company starts early; sets the right tone; has the right attitude toward its People; and carries forth a genuine spirit, then similar results are possible for other companies. But, if you don't have the right Customer Service mindset, then you probably shouldn't try to implant it in the first place.

9. Does everyone at Southwest recognize themselves as a world leader of Customer Experience Delivery? If so, what is the main message you'd like other businesses leaders to know?

We hire People who are genuine service providers (above all else—no matter their area of expertise) b/c the product is the service. And, all SWA Employees know that they were hired to provide great service (internally, first, and then externally). So, the message is, hire great People who like to do good things for others. Empower them to do good things. And, give them the tools and resources to provide Positively Outrageous Service.

Closing Remarks: We don't pretend to be perfect; but we are humble, sincere, and we work hard to try to make you feel good about choosing Southwest Airlines—so, give us a try, and keep coming back for more!