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“Airlines Learn to Fly on a Wing and an Apology”

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DALLAS — Airlines are getting serious about saying they're sorry.

After a spate of nightmarish service disruptions, American Airlines, JetBlue Airways and others are sending out more apologies, hoping to head off customer complaints and quell talk of new consumer-protection regulations from Congress.

But no airline accepts blame quite like Southwest Airlines, which employs Fred Taylor Jr. in a job that could be called chief apology officer.

His formal title is senior manager of proactive customer communications. But Mr. Taylor — 37, rail thin and mildly compulsive, by his own admission — spends his 12-hour work days finding out how Southwest disappointed its customers and then firing off homespun letters of apology.

“Erring on the side of caution, our captain decided to return to Phoenix rather than second-guess the smell that was in the cabin,” Mr. Taylor wrote to passengers who were on a March 7 flight to Albuquerque. A faulty valve was to blame. “Not toxic, it was obviously annoying,” he assured them, throwing in a free voucher for future travel to clear the air.

He composes about 180 letters a year explaining what went wrong on particular flights and, with about 110 passengers per flight, he mails off roughly 20,000 mea culpas. Each one bears his direct phone line.

This year, he has already exceeded that total because Southwest sent written apologies to 22,000 passengers who passed through a choked Las Vegas airport on Feb. 19 and 20. (That letter listed a general customer service number.)

Such fiascos are rare. But even on good days, big airlines have plenty to be sorry about: a tragicomic mix of broken planes, sick passengers and scary landings.

Now, rather than rely entirely on weary front-line workers, many airlines are institutionalizing the apology. American said its apology letters were running twice the level of a year ago. JetBlue now e-mails an apology within 36 hours of certain service failures. And Continental Airlines and US Airways both say they are sending many more apology letters.

Mr. Taylor of Southwest also writes an internal daily report, used by others at the airline to explain service failings. It is leavened with a comic touch that his wife said made him the clown of their freshman college algebra class.

Recapping a troubled flight from Las Vegas to San Jose last April 18, for instance, he explained that the plane had circled back after takeoff because the landing gear would not retract. And there was more.

“During the return, a customer became ill and apparently ‘decorated’ three rows of seats — and perhaps a few customers,” he wrote. “No word on how Linda Blair is doing.”

Mr. Taylor attends twice-daily meetings in Southwest’s operations center across the runway from Love Field. Any problems with its 482 Boeing 737s or its 3,200 daily flights are discussed. They are macho affairs, attended by mostly middle-age airline veterans — dispatchers, maintenance bosses, flight crew supervisors — who exhibit a studied boredom that suggests the end of the world would not faze them.

Then there is Mr. Taylor, cast as advocate for the nervous or otherwise unhappy flyer, sitting off to the side on a table top, swinging one leg and, on a recent day, sipping Gatorade to nurse a queasy stomach.

At the 9 a.m. meeting the next day, Mr. Taylor was back, skies were mostly clear and planes were full as spring break began in many locales. From the day before, an accidental deployment of oxygen masks — a rubber jungle, in airline-speak — was discussed.

“How’d that happen?” Mr. Taylor asked.

A co-pilot “flipped the wrong switch,” replied David Edens, a former pilot and a flight manager.

“D’oh,” Mr. Taylor said in conclusion.

They brought up the stinky Albuquerque flight next. “We’re going to write on that,” Mr. Taylor said. “They knew it stunk. They need to know it’s not toxic.”

Once the operations workers were done owning up to problems, Mr. Taylor cleared his throat and said, “I got one for you — sorry, Jeff,” to Jeff Lawrence, a maintenance supervisor.

A flight from Philadelphia to Nashville, already delayed because of problems with air traffic control, waited for a windshield wiper on the co-pilot’s side to be fixed. But while the work was being done, a battery was left on and it drained. Fixing that extended the delay to four hours.

Not entirely Southwest's fault, Mr. Taylor said, but "at that point, it becomes ridiculous in the eyes of the customer." Or, as he wrote to passengers, "An annoying set of circumstances to an otherwise aggravating situation." Vouchers were enclosed.

The airline industry has more to apologize for these days. Delays and lost baggage have been rising. Planes are more crowded. And airline workers, many suffering two rounds of pay and benefit cuts in recent years, sometimes have little sympathy left for customers.

Intense news coverage of the industry, meanwhile, means national attention for a planeload of passengers stranded for hours on a tarmac: American flights on Dec. 29, JetBlue on Feb. 14.

Apologizing is not particularly costly for airlines. It is handled by large customer service groups that the airlines maintain. Most airlines include flight vouchers, ranging from \$50 to two round-trip tickets, along with apologies for longer delays and other avoidable mishaps.

Southwest's apology program, in place five years, reflects the unusual personality of its president, Colleen C. Barrett. Favoring floral print blouses and wearing her naturally gray hair in a ponytail, she looks unlike most top female executives.

She arrived at the executive suite by a different path as well. A junior college graduate, Ms. Barrett, 62, developed her theories on customer service as a law firm secretary to Herbert D. Kelleher, a Southwest founder and now its chairman.

She learned that a law client who was promised something in two weeks but received it in one was vastly happier than a client who was promised something in one day but received it in four. "Under-promise, over-deliver" became her mantra.

Moving to Southwest and moving up, she applied it to the airline, the only consistently profitable company in the industry and one that receives generally high marks in consumer satisfaction surveys despite its no-frills approach. "I'm the hammer," Ms. Barrett said.

At one time, Ms. Barrett handled letters of apology herself. But as the neatly stacked towers of paper — she does not use e-mail — covering most of the seating and table tops in her office suggest, she needed help. A self-described compulsive reader of memorandums written levels below her, Ms. Barrett turned to Mr. Taylor in February 2001. She had never met him. He worked in Baltimore as an assistant customer service manager. But she felt she knew him.

"Fred, I can tell from everything that you write that we would be 'kindred spirits,' " she wrote to him.

Mr. Taylor's wife, Julie, read the letter to him while they were driving to the airport one day and she knew that Ms. Barrett had read her husband correctly. When she introduced Mr. Taylor to her family in college, she said, her father told her, " 'He may be hell to live with, but he's going to be a success.' That pretty much sums it up. He washes and irons his own clothes. He's very anal retentive. There have been a few times he felt he disappointed Colleen. And it really bothered him."

An outsider, Mr. Taylor initially had trouble getting detailed accounts of Southwest's missteps from the operational bosses. "They weren't giving me the whole picture," he said. "I'd get back and write and it wouldn't make any sense. Without a grasp of what went wrong, he concluded, "I'll lack credibility. And what good is that?"

Over time, he won their trust. "When something goes wrong, Fred is one of the first people I call," said Steve West, senior director in the operations control center. Mr. Taylor then gets word out to the rest of the company about what happened. "And my phone will stop ringing," Mr. West said.

Mr. Taylor, despite that access, tries to keep the customer's point of view. In his daily report he wrote of a San Diego-to-Las Vegas flight that was diverted to Los Angeles on Nov. 17 because the landing gear would not stay in the wheel well.

"The landing was routine from a piloting perspective. The customers' perspective was another story," he wrote, because they had been told to assume the brace position on landing. "We'll send a follow-up explanation and an apology for scaring the stuffing out of these customers."