

No Delays in Customer Service



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Opening Remarks

Thanks, Stef; and I especially want to thank all of today's webinar guests too. It's a pleasure to participate this afternoon and share with everyone some insight about Southwest Airlines' proactive communication initiatives.

Audience Key Takeaways

By the time we reach the end of the webinar, I hope to shed some light on what we do; why we do it; and how we make it happen. I'll discuss Southwest Airlines' communication strategy, and I'll share with you the overall results.

The bottomline is—our Customers appreciate when we proactively let them know about flight disruptions. And, with a lot of dedication and the right support, we are able to deliver consistent information across the board to satisfy our Customers.

Proactive Customer Service Communications Team

I have the privilege of leading Southwest's proactive communication initiatives, and my little Team of four is responsible for:

- Keeping a watchful eye on Southwest's daily operations (systemwide) 24/7/365

- Evaluating the effects any type of disruption may have on our Customers (internal or external)
- Maintaining a 360-degree view of what's happening by analyzing the needs of our Employees/Customers; providing the appropriate communication/accommodations; and developing new products/services to deliver better information/assistance.

Why Does Southwest Airlines Send Proactive Communications?

There are three main reasons why we do this:

- First, and foremost, we think it's the right thing to do.
- Second, we want to generate a favorable impression with our Customers.
- And, in doing so, we create trust and brand loyalty because timely and consistent information diffuses Customer stress; it empowers our Employees to move in the same direction; and it provides Customers with services that they like.

How Do We Make This Happen?

To make all of this happen, we have to stay “plugged in” with what's going on with our operations. We have to know what our Employees need and our Customers want. We also utilize technology to expedite the delivery time (of the information), and to improve the message consistency across all communication channels.

We have very intelligent and reliable People in our Technology Department—in fact, those who have worked with my Team on our Automated Outbound Messaging project could easily qualify for Mensa membership (it they aren't members already).

That said, there are times when it just makes sense to partner with third-party vendors (such as Varolii) to help us develop new products and to enhance the quality of the services being provided.

Southwest Airlines Proactive Communication Strategy

Our approach to delivering useful information boils down to this: We want our Customers to be informed early and often, and we utilize multiple communication channels (voice, text, and e-mail) to help us do that.

For our purposes, voice is useful and well-received if developed effectively. (To live up to our expectations, we spent a lot of time crafting automated messages that have warmth and are relevant; but also get to the point.) In this regard, text messaging, has proven to be the best method for delivering quick, cost-effective notifications. And, on that note, e-mail is less expensive and a good channel to provide a substantive message that contains robust content.

We also want our flight status messages to be in “real time” (*i.e.*, sent and received before the flight is scheduled to depart). As mobile phones get “smarter” (if you will), they’ll be capable of receiving better content—this is especially true when you consider multimedia messaging features. Today, text messaging gets the job done the best; but we continue to explore new methods and formats to give our Customers what they want.

Southwest's Checklist for Today and the Future

Of course, I'm sure you can imagine that providing the service isn't as easy as the concept itself. Like everyone else, Southwest has to sort out and decide which objectives will yield the best results. As such, we have internal and external items to consider.

Internally, we have a vision that consists of our mission and immediate communication needs. We also have a budget to work with, and in it we will go after what's important and include some of the easier things that will enhance the Customer Experience.

Externally, as technologies evolve, meeting the expectations of an increasingly savvy, self-sufficient consumer is an ongoing challenge. And, of course, for us, as an air carrier that's constantly working around the weather, trying to get our ideas "in place" before the next big storm happens is always top of mind as well.

Results?

So, how does all of this shake out with our Customers? Well, the results are overwhelmingly positive.

In the first 18 months that our Automated Outbound Messaging was in place, we sent over 5.5 million notifications for flight delays, cancellations, gate changes, and flexible accommodation alerts. Presently, I think we've hit or surpassed the 6 million mark. And, as you would expect, over 99% of those messages were sent error free.

Being proactive also generates return on investment—both tangible (by way of cost savings), and intangible (in terms of psychological satisfaction). In this regard, we've received wonderful Customer feedback; and I have an example that I'd like to share with you because it truly highlights both the functionality and value of our proactive communication initiatives.

An anonymous blogger posted the following comment about our Automated Outbound Messaging service on the popular airline blog FlyerTalk. The person wrote: "For the second time in less than a week, I've gotten an automated phone call from Southwest giving me flight status updates. Unlike other carriers, these actually work since I get them before I depart. Southwest really made my night last night. They called; told me my flight (the next day) was cancelled; and offered to 'press 1' to speak with a Representative. Within 30 seconds the Rep said, 'Mr. X, we're sorry about this cancellation. We can put you on the 9:30 a.m. departure. Would that be okay?' She even checked me in! I was able to sleep in an extra hour this morning because of that phone call!!!"

So, as you can see, being intentional with our proactive communication initiatives does yield the desired results. And, I believe, if you are determined enough and are creative enough to work within your means, you should be able to generate the same outcome.

Closing Remarks

Thanks so much for letting me share part of your day, and for giving me your undivided attention. I'm happy to field any questions that you'd like to submit online.