

TGIM

Thank Goodness It's Monday

Positively Outrageous Service At Southwest Airlines Comes From Creating TGIM Employees

by Larry Johnson

I recently delivered a speech for a meeting of Southwest Airline Sales Agents. Now I've always liked Southwest. Their customer service is great; their fares are the lowest anywhere; and their humorous approach to the routine aspects of flying are legendary.

We're all familiar with the often-ignored, always-boring, "airplane safety seminar" that takes place at the start of every flight on airlines other than Southwest: "Ladies & gentlemen, please follow along on the safety card...there are eight exits in this Boeing 737...blah, blah, blah."

With Southwest you're likely to hear this routine speech start off with, "Ladies and gentlemen, there may be fifty ways to leave your lover, but if we have a problem, there's only eight ways off this plane— so listen up."

This light-hearted approach has earned Southwest the reputation of being the "FUN" airline. But their reputation goes far beyond fun. Here are some facts: (source: www.southwest.com):

- According to the March 4, 2002 issue of *FORTUNE*, Southwest ranked second among companies across all industry groups, and first in the airline industry in the magazine's 2002 America's Most Admired Companies list.
- On May 21, 2001 *The Wall Street Journal* reported Southwest Airlines ranked first among airlines for the highest customer service satisfaction according to a survey by the American Customer Satisfaction Index for the first quarter of 2001.
- Since 1997, *FORTUNE* has ranked Southwest Airlines in the top five of the Best Companies to Work For in America. Southwest ranked first in 1997 and 1998, second in 1999, and fourth in 2000. Southwest chose not to participate in 2001.
- In the midst of a booming economy of the late 90's, when good employees were few and far between, Southwest boasted the lowest employee turn-over rate in the industry. In 1999, Southwest received 144,442 resumes for 5,134 openings.

- Despite having the lowest fares in the industry, Southwest's profitability consistently outstrips all its competitors.
- Since the 9/11 tragedy, Southwest is the only airline in the industry to show a consistent profit.

Obviously, the folks at Southwest have figured out how to run an airline.

On my way to give the speech, I had an experience that perhaps offers a partial explanation of why Southwest does so well.

I flew into Dallas the night before the event on a Southwest flight. Upon arrival (which was delayed until 2:00AM because of weather) I discovered my luggage had not arrived with me. In a bleary-eyed state of sleep deprivation, I informed the Southwest baggage office about the problem and after a heart-felt apology from the agent, was assured that the errant bag would come in later that morning, around 8:00AM.

The agent told me that the day-shift personnel would make sure the bag was delivered to my hotel - at Southwest's expense.

"Ok," I said, "But it's really important that I get it in the morning because I'm giving a speech tomorrow afternoon. I'll need something to wear besides these sweats I've got on." (I didn't tell them that the speech was to be given for their own Sales Agents at Southwest's University for People, located right there at the terminal on Luv field. As far as they knew, I was just another passenger with a lost bag.)

"No problem," I was told.

Worried about my bag arriving on time, I awoke that morning, after just five hours sleep, at 8:00AM. I called the Southwest baggage office to get an update. I spoke to Baggage Agent Ray Stump (the day-shift guy), who, when I described my black Tumi Suiter, knew exactly which one I was talking about.

Since I hadn't given him my name or claim number yet, I thought it remarkable that he would know which bag was mine. "Does he have a personal relationship with every piece of luggage that comes through the Southwest terminal, or what?" I thought.

Ray said that the delivery service that usually brings the bags was backed up and wouldn't be able to get it out to me right away, "But no problem," he quipped, "I'll bring it out to your hotel myself and give it to the concierge."

I told him thanks for his willingness to go the extra mile, hung up, and went back to bed for another couple of hours of much-needed sleep.

When I awoke, I checked with the concierge, who said no luggage had been delivered. Panicked, I called Ray, who assured me that he had delivered the bag to the concierge at my hotel an hour ago. He then told me not to worry – that he, Ray Stump, would call the concierge himself to get the problem straightened out. Five minutes later, the concierge called to tell me that the bag had been found.

Hooray for Ray Stump! Southwest calls this *Positively Outrageous Service*.

But the story doesn't end there. Later that day, as I was walking down the concourse at the Southwest Terminal (baggage in tow,) on my way to their University for People to give my speech, I heard someone call out, "Hey, Mr. Johnson."

I turned to see a young man in a Southwest uniform who introduced himself as "Ray, the baggage guy."

After thanking him again for his extra special effort, I asked how he knew it was I walking down the concourse. (He had never seen me, and he didn't know I was coming to Southwest to give the speech.)

"Your bag," he replied. "I know my customers' bags."

"WOW!" I thought, "This Ray fellow really does seem to have a relationship with his bags." Or was it just that Ray Stump, like practically all Southwest employees, cares intensely about his job and his customers? He's what I call a TGIM (Thank Goodness It's Monday) worker.

Think about the last time you decided to take the solemn vow that you would never do business with a company because of poor service. Perhaps it was a store that wouldn't take back a defective item; or it was a bank that made a mistake in your account; or it was an airline that failed to deliver your baggage to the same location as your body. As you recall the interaction you had with whom ever you spoke, does it seem that this person truly cared about your situation, or does it seem otherwise?

If it seems that he or she did NOT care, then you are in the majority. Research tells us that the overwhelming reason customers stop doing business with a company can be traced to the customers' perception that the company doesn't really care about them. And more often than not, this perception is conveyed to customers in one-on-one interactions with people who work for the company.

Southwest, on the other hand, appears to have captured the secret of hiring, training, and retaining people who really do care. People like Ray Stump.

So how do they do it?

According to Southwest Training Manager Kay Caldwell, it's a combination of:

- Selecting the best people possible – Southwest employs a rigorous process of screening job applicants.
- Paying them well – Southwest employees' pay is above the industry average, but not exorbitantly so.
- Making them owners - Southwest was the first airline to offer a stock purchase plan to all employees.
- Giving them superb training.
- Treating them like they are the most valuable asset Southwest has.

The event at which I spoke is a good example of the latter two. In addition to the required job-skills training that all Sales Agents must complete to do their jobs, Southwest puts on a five-day training extravaganza annually for more than 1000 of them. During the event, they are wined, dined, and given the opportunity to attend seminars that develop not only their work-related skills, but also their skills for living their lives more effectively.

Kay tells me that the purpose of the event is three-fold:

1. To enhance the ability of their sales agents to do a better job by acquiring improved skills.
2. To let the agents know how much Southwest appreciates the great job they do.
3. To give the agents a break from the job so they can have some FUN.

It sounds like they not only believe in giving *Positively Outrageous Service* to their customers, it looks as if they also believe in giving *Positively Outrageous Service* to their employees. No wonder they are known as the FUN airline. And it's no wonder that they are the most successful airline in America. After all, they make it a business of cultivating TGIM kinds of employees.

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