

GEORGANNE & RICH -ON THE ROAD



WE SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

By Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender

Try it, the culture is good.

Our job is primarily on the road, flying from one speaking engagement to the next. Travel is nothing new; many of you reading this spend much of your time on the road, too. You get to see a lot of airports, and you get to personally experience that fine airline customer care that you hear a lot about in TV ads, but rarely see first hand.

“... they fly out of an airport that is farther away and harder to get to. We don’t mind because their people don’t treat us like we’re an inconvenience. They actually seem glad to see us.”

Travel is hard enough these days with all the security. We’re not complaining; we’re grateful the TSA agents screen travelers so carefully. We always allow enough time so we never feel rushed at the airport.

IT’S THE AIRLINE PERSONNEL WE DREAD.

Generally we plan our own travel so we can pick which airline to fly, but

occasionally a client will have a preferred carrier. A few months ago that preferred carrier was American Airlines.

We booked our tickets far in advance on American’s website. The process was simple until we got to the seat assignment page and found there were only middle seats available. So we chose two, then called American’s toll-free number to try and get better seats. “Changing seats shouldn’t be a problem,” the agent said. “We purposely hold seats to be assigned at the gate and this flight isn’t full. I’m sorry that I can’t help you now, but the ticket agent will be able to change your seats when he/she checks your bags.”

This was going to be a long trip, so we purposely arrived three hours before our flight, and stood on line to check bags and change seat assignments. The ticketing agent told us a gate agent would have to change our seats. We still had 2.5 hours before the flight so we crossed our fingers.

We arrived at the gate before our flight information was posted, but there was an agent there. He tapped on his computer a few minutes, then told us we were out of luck. Center seats were the best he could do. Then he turned away and began another task. We asked if he’d try again later. He said he made a note in the computer, and if he could

make changes later, he’d call us. Long story short, we watched as several other parties, who arrived at the gate after we did, had their seats reassigned. After five attempts with that agent, another agent stepped in and reassigned our seats. And the flight wasn’t even full.

WHAT WE LIKE

This experience only reinforced why we prefer Southwest Airlines, even though they fly out of an airport that is farther away and harder to get to. We don’t mind because their people don’t treat us like we’re an inconvenience. They actually seem glad to see us.

They also seem to have built policies around their customers. For example, tickets can only be purchased via their toll-free number or on their website. Unlike other carriers, you will never find a lower Southwest fare anywhere else. We appreciate this because we never have to wonder if we could have gotten a lower price elsewhere for the same flight.

If something changes, and you can’t make your trip as planned, no problem. Southwest gives you full credit toward your next flight. The other guys charge you a hefty fee to rebook. On Southwest if your trip cost \$300, that’s how much you have to spend on your next trip.

Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender are nationally recognized experts on customer service, customer retention strategies, “messing with the media,” and everything retail. Contact them by e-mail at info@kizerandbender.com. © Kizer & Bender 2005. All rights reserved.

This has saved us lots of money over the years.

With Southwest you only have to fly eight round trips to get one free, so you don't have to count miles. They don't limit the number of seats available, and they have a very short list of blackout dates. Another cool thing about Southwest: when you redeem a travel reward, they throw in a book of free drink coupons. These come in handy when trying to entice someone to change seats with you.

And speaking of seats, some people don't like the fact that Southwest doesn't pre-assign seats. You used to have to wait on line for a boarding pass and take your chances, but not anymore. Now you can check in on-line before leaving for the airport. We do this and we're always in the first group to board the plane. We actually like the no seat assignment thing – it feels better knowing that we're in control of where we sit.

CORPORATE CULTURE

Southwest wants you to have a good experience so you'll come back. We can honestly say that in all of our years flying with them, we've seen a lot of snotty passengers, but we've never encountered a snotty associate. They're pretty adept at keeping their cool even under pressure.

Every company has a culture that is practiced from the top down – everyone from the CEO to the newest front line associate must have the same shared values and practices. A company's culture is its personality; it's something that customers can sense the second they walk in the front door. Your company has a culture, too. Is it one that you've carefully cultivated or did it just evolve on its own over time?

Your culture can make or break your company. Southwest Airlines is the only U.S. carrier to be profitable every year since 1972. Others are struggling. One would think that when a company is in trouble, the

associates would step up to the plate and deliver over-the-top, outstanding customer service, but that's not always what happens. It's the company culture that comes through during the rough patches.

As professionals who speak about customer service, we applaud Southwest for its corporate culture. In our 15 years of travel together

we've experienced an occasional glitch, but for the most part, our flights have left on time, they're fun, and our bags are waiting for us in one piece when we arrive at our destination. Southwest's culture has never let us down. It's their consistency in doing things well that brings us back – and when it comes to great customer care, consistency is key. ♦



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