



# How to Prevent Turnover in Customer Service: *Creating an Insanely Positive Workplace Culture Like Southwest Airlines*

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# Creating An Insanely Positive Workplace Culture At Southwest Airlines

by Larry Johnson

A few years ago, I 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.

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 Garment Bag, 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 assured me, "I'll bring it out to your hotel myself and give it to the concierge."

I thanked him 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, a bank that made a mistake in your account, or 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 who have a TGIM attitude. 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 fairly.
- 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 employees who make it happen.

## Ten Dos and Don'ts

- |     |                                 |   |                                  |
|-----|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| 1.  | Do communicate clearly          |    | Don't be vague                   |
| 2.  | Do be friendly.                 |    | Don't try to be a friend         |
| 3.  | Do care about your people       |    | Don't get lovesick               |
| 4.  | Do reward teams and individuals |    | Don't criticize groups           |
| 5.  | Do reward success               |    | Don't allow entitlement          |
| 6.  | Do recognize winners            |  | Don't play favorites             |
| 7.  | Do facilitate problem solving   |  | Don't be a savior                |
| 8.  | Do expect results               |  | Don't fail to inspect            |
| 9.  | Practice MBWA                   |  | Don't hide in your office        |
| 10. | Do celebrate success            |  | Don't take your team for granted |

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