

Making the Connection

Social Media in the Airline Industry

by



Intentionally Left Blank

Executive Summary

Situation: The airline industry has always been looking for ways to salvage its generally accepted bad customer service reputation. In the pursuit of this goal, the industry has been desperately looking for another way to connect with passengers that would be personal but at the same time would not pose a high cost to an already cash strapped industry.

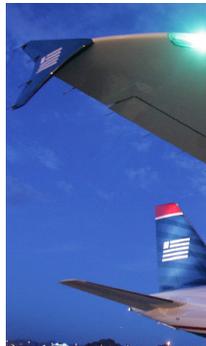
Problem: The airline and airports industry have frequently struggled to put together a successful social media program. While most are started to build better relationship with passengers, the majority of those programs established lead to major failures due to lack of staffing and the established an unachievable goal.

Solution: The key to a successful aviation based social media program that successfully attracts passengers and meets their needs is to develop a holistic approach that will not only address their customer service needs during times of crisis but also allows an audience to have a dialogue with the company and draws a deeper interest about the company.

Result: with a more defined goal that is holistic in approach and balanced in application, the airline industry can expect to see a rise in interest in not only the companies product but also a decrease in complaints, as passengers feel that under this approach they are kept well informed and exposed to the company in a unique way that will aid in the building of brand loyalty or at the very least help set the foundation for communication.

QUICK FACTS

170
Airports
on
Twitter



69
Airports
on
Facebook

Introduction

According to Condé Nast Magazine, only one legacy airline, Continental, was recognized for its customer service. Every other airline that was rewarded by Readers choice of Condé Nast was a focused, low cost or a new innovative airline. Recognizing the shortcomings of airline customer service, many major airports and airlines have been struggling to find ways to re connect with their customers, at the same time trying to shave off cost from an industry that is notoriously known for high initial capital and operational cost.

One of the most popular is the world of social media. Airlines such as Southwest, jetBlue, United, American, US Airways, and Delta all have a very active presence on Facebook and Twitter.

Not only are the airlines jumping on board, but so are airports. San Francisco, Orlando, Los Angeles, Boston, and Las Vegas are all examples of airport that have embraced social media as a way to connect with passengers and showcase new concessions and any operational changes. These leaps into social media in the last couple of years have played a major role in airline and airport customer service. It has forced airlines to re-evaluate everything from tracking complaints, updating passenger on operational crisis situations to major press releases of new service. Despite the airlines concentrated efforts on Social media, there is no denying that the airline industry is struggling to capitalize on Social media.

Conde Nast Airline Rankings

US Ranks

1. Virgin America
2. jetBlue Airways
3. Hawaiian Airlines
4. Alaska Airlines
5. Frontier Airlines
6. Continental Airlines
7. USA 3000 Airlines
8. Southwest Airlines
9. Horizon Air
10. Air Tran Airways

Global Ranks

1. Singapore Airlines
2. Ethihad
3. Emirates
4. V Australia
5. Virgin Atlantic
6. Cathay Pacific
7. Korean Air
8. Air New Zealand
9. ANA
10. JAL



Previous Approaches

The Problem:

Airlines are struggling to capitalize on Social Media because new entrants have set unrealistic goals, are unable to handle criticism or let passengers get involved, and finally have no plan on how to handle crisis situations.

Unrealistic Goals

San Francisco



When San Francisco Airport joined the social media world in early 2009, they had high hopes of connecting with passengers and being able to listen and address their needs. When San Francisco launched its Twitter site, immediately the airport was overwhelmed with complaints and comments about everything, as the airport's mission statement declared they were there to assist the passengers. SFO neither had the staffing nor the knowledge on how to handle all the passengers who constantly tweeted about flight delays and bad customer service. The problems that SFO suffered could be summed up one night when according to Adrianna Santo, after a flight from Hawaii arrived later than scheduled the airport was flooded with Twitter complaints about the airlines tardiness. San Francisco suffered from what many in the industry

described as the “if you give a mouse a cookie” syndrome. The failure behind San Francisco's approach was it had failed to properly staff, nor set expectations to its audience on how it would address problems and concerns. The airport immediately had to step back from its altruistic goal of being the servant of all passengers and instead taking upon itself a more traditional role of reaching out to passengers on occasion and advertising current exhibits and events at the airport.



A screenshot of the Twitter profile for @flySFO. The profile name is "flySFO" with the handle "@flySFO". The bio reads: "San Francisco Int'l Airport, San Francisco International Airport, Northern California's Airport of Choice" and includes the website "http://www.flyso.com". The profile shows 1,284 tweets, 449 following, and 2,647 followers. The "Tweets" tab is selected, showing a list of recent tweets. The first tweet is from @shelikespurple about flight delays. The second is from flySFO about an RFP for Marketing Services. The third is from flySFO about an RFP for Communications Services. The fourth is from flySFO about an art exhibition. The right sidebar shows "You and @flySFO" with a list of accounts to follow, including AirlineReporter, Flyingaround, and SFGovTV. There is also a "Following" section with a grid of profile pictures.

Previous Approaches

Don't Want to Hear It



U·S AIRWAYS

One company that has consistently been called the textbook example of bad customer service is US Airways. The company from the onset of its social media presence has somehow carried over its bad reputation from the real world to the cyber world. The airline makes it a practice to not respond to customer complaints but instead uses their Facebook and Twitter purely as another outlet to release information about travel deals and credit card offers. Passengers who do make a complaint are quickly directed to the US Airways website to file their complaint, without so much as an apology from the airline or even a superficial offer for the carrier wanting to listen. US Airways approach is reflective of not only a lack of desire to connect with passengers, but also the idea that by merely talking at their passengers the airline will somehow see a rise in profit or interest in the deals that they are presenting to the public. What makes the case of US Airways most interesting is how passengers in desperation to get the airlines attention will comment on the various deals that the airlines are releasing hop

ing for some sort of response. The true question for US Airways' public relations and marketing group is the understanding of why any passenger would read something proposed by the airline, if they are not even willing to answer a question regarding the deal they are proposing.

Orlando Airport



While US Airways, and the airline industry as a whole are known for their terrible customer service record, airports are usually not one that gets grouped in the mix. In this case with Orlando Airport, their choice to block passengers from commenting on their Facebook wall was not a decision based off of ignoring customers but rather the fear of being faced with the onslaught that airports like San Francisco faced: the mass anger and four letter riddled messages that plague many other sites. Orlando Airport's concerns are not unfounded, but their approach in joining social media,

Previous Approaches

yet restricting their travelers to comment, is a reflection of not only how concern organizations are about content posted on an open forum, but also the power of Social Media. It is clear in the actions of Orlando Airport, that the organization has no desire to engage with their travelers, yet still decided to join the Social Media world and follow the likes of fellow aviation companies and counterpart airports.

Inability to handle crisis situations



United Airlines

United in its attempts to join its other airline counterparts in the social media world quickly launched a traditional Facebook and Twitter page to get passengers excited about new products, services, answer any questions, and actively track passenger comments and complaints.

As hard as United tried, it could not keep up with the massive amount of complaints, and inquiries, leading the traveling public to believe that the airline was ignoring all comments, and in response the irritated passengers were going to do their best to trash the airline's reputation.

New announcements about airline service and passenger products were riddled with comments about how the airline is "failing today" and no amount of change will cause passengers to come back.

But the determining moment for United was in the Summer of 2011 when the companies entire computer network crashed leaving passengers all over the world stranded. Those who Tweet on the airlines behalf did the best they could to guide passengers, but with all lines of communication down, there was a limit to the amount of aid that could be provided. The result of what most analyst consider the most disastrous social media response lead to a change in United's social media goals, telling all passengers with complaints that they will not directly engage with them.



The Solution

The Solution:

Airlines should develop a holistic approach to Social Media by creating an experience to the audience by focusing on Products, Bringing passengers into the dialogue, and making passengers understand the behind the scenes events and feel a part of the company.

Solution In Action:

The Product and Behind the Scenes



Southwest Airlines

It is no surprise that Southwest Airlines would be the airline that would champion the Social Media movement. The airline designated one individual, Kirstie Dey, as the spokeswoman who would walk Southwest's social media audience through new products, and changes to various airports; Kirstie Dey has become an icon to loyal Southwest fliers. Everything from the new boarding process to new coffee, new brands of snacks, and changes to the Rapid Rewards program Kirstie will be the one to tell you first. The consolidation of a whole companies Social media pro

gram that can be attributed to a face is a bold move on the part of Southwest Airlines. By presenting an easy going and fun individual, each product presented is not only given the press warranted, but is also being presented by an individual who can carry forward the airlines exuberant demeanor, making Southwest one of the best positioned carriers in the social media world.

jetBlue



Another airline that has developed an esteemed with its passengers is jetBlue. The airline has not only developed a cult like following for providing a high level of service and comfort but also a following for the airline's openness about its operation. For the last two years, jetBlue has documented every major event, good and bad in a flickr account. By showcasing everything from inaugural flights, an impromptu Taylor Swift concert in their terminal to an operational crisis situations, the company keeps their operations trans

The Solution

parent which for jetBlue during operational crisis's has garner the company thy sympathy of their passengers

Combination of All



Delta Air Lines

An airline that was once chided for being just big and no substance, Delta Air Lines has managed to “shrink itself.” Since the airlines merger with Northwest Airlines, it has done a full revamp of the new carriers image. Along with a powerful ad campaign entitles “keep climbing,” the airline has brought the passenger into the Delta world. The airline has showcased all of its new products to customers through video, allowing passengers to develop a high sense of familiarity with new seats, terminal designs, and lounges. Food recipes for inflight cuisine are being shared on Delta blogs, YouTube sites, and Facebook pages, which in turns gives passengers the curiosity about trying the food, and also allowing Delta to make a statement about common perception about airline food.

Delta has also gone as far as to create dedicated social

media pages toward passengers struggling to book flights, get a hold of a customer service agent, or file a

complaint or compliment. But one move that Delta has made which is the single most unique move any airline could have made is give their fiercely loyal customers who love the airline the ability to write on the airlines behalf and ensure that the airline. Delta's ability to introduce new products in a unique and eye catching manner, its ability to address the needs of its passengers and finally the airline's willingness to bring in its most fiercely loyal followers to speak on the companies behalf are all reason's that make Delta's approach to social media a model for the rest of the industry.



Conclusion

Conclusion

The airline and airport industry has always been plagued by bad customer service and a lack of connection to its passengers. With the onset of social media, the industry has used the medium as a lifeline to create that connection and hopefully in return will aid the industry in developing a steady profit. But ultimately there is no denying the fact that in the creation of a bad customer service reputation, the airline and airport industry would not be able to create a successful social media program that meets the needs of the various companies. It becomes clear that the only way to create a successful social media is to make a holistic approach that balances product showcasing, passenger interaction, and activities that draw in a companies most faithful. These points have clearly made a mark on successful airport and airlines, and they should be the guiding principle of social media in the aviation industry.



Works Cited

“Airlines and Social Media.” Simplifying Consultant.

“Airlines and Social Media.” 02 Dec 2010. Web. 06 Jun 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8t1AIKMfhU>>.

Brown, Lisa. Director of Social Media; Boston Logan Airport.

Personal Interview. 3 Jun 2011.

Harris, Jerry. Director of Social Media. Orlando International Airport.

Personal Interview. 3 Jun 2011.

Nigam, Shashank. “Airlines in Social Media.” Simplifying Consultant.

13 Sep 2011.

Santo, Adrianna. Director of Social Media; San Francisco International Airport.

Personal Interview. 6 Jun 2011.

Zander, Doug. Sparkloft Media.

Personal Interview. 29 Jun 2011



