Southwest Airlines: Online Strategy Meets Corporate Identity

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Abstract

Southwest Airlines has managed to develop a brand image reflective of its corporate mission and goals statement unlike any other national airline. Southwest’s image was carefully crafted through a powerful corporate culture, and is now reflected in every post, tweet, comment, video, and image it produces. From the top, down, Southwest’s employees are expected to perform in a manner that reflects the company’s mission statement, which is based primarily on customer service and experience. Over time, Southwest has evolved its approach to reach out to its large customer base. Through its online strategy, Southwest Airlines has enabled itself to engage and communicate with its most critical public. The online strategy is not simply a tactic, however. Southwest utilizes social media platforms to connect with its customers and reach them on a personal level. Each message is crafted to reflect the mission statement, and further reinforce what has become one of the strongest brand identities among all national airlines.
Introduction

Southwest Airlines has long been known for its mission to provide customers the highest quality employees and customer service available among all large national airlines. This notion is reflected from the CEO, to each and every flight attendant on staff. Ranking among the top 10 overall, and second in customer satisfaction according to businessinsider.com, Southwest has developed and maintained a concrete brand image which parallels its corporate mission and vision.

The mission of Southwest Airlines is *dedication to the highest quality of customer service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and company spirit* (southwest.com). Also included alongside Southwest’s mission statement is a list of commitments to its employees, customers, suppliers, and environment. Below, I’ve included the commitment statements from southwest.com to serve as a reference for my discussion on how Southwest reinforces its image and mission both internally and externally, through its generation of online content.

To Its Employees:

*We are committed to provide our Employees a stable work environment with equal opportunity for learning and personal growth. Creativity and innovation are encouraged for improving the effectiveness of Southwest Airlines.*
Above all, Employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest Customer.

To Its Communities:

Our goal is to be the hometown airline of every community we serve, and because those communities sustain and nurture us with their support and loyalty, it is vital that we, as individuals and in groups, embrace each community with the Southwest Spirit of involvement, service, and caring to make those communities better places to live and work.

To Its Planet:

We strive to be a good environmental steward across our system in all of our hometowns, and one component of our stewardship is efficiency, which, by its very nature, translates to eliminating waste and conserving resources. Using cost-effective and environmentally beneficial operating procedures (including facilities and equipment) allows us to reduce the amount of materials we use and, when combined with our ability to reuse and recycle material, preserves these environmental resources.

To Its Stakeholders:

Southwest Airlines’ vision for a sustainable future is one where there will be a balance in our business model between Employees and community, the environment, and our financial viability. In order to protect our world for future generations and uphold our commitments to our Employees, Customers, and other Stakeholders, we will strive to lead our industry in innovative efficiency that conserves natural resources, maintains a creative and innovative workforce, and gives back to the communities in which we live and work.
Southwest’s commitments come directly from Gary Kelly, CEO of Southwest Airlines. Kelly believes whole-heartedly in the importance of customer satisfaction as a top priority for his company. "Our people are our single greatest strength and most enduring long-term competitive advantage." - Gary Kelly, CEO Southwest Airlines. That sentiment is carried throughout Southwest Airlines, and has become a key factor in its generation of online content.

According to Christi McNeill, Social Media Manager at Southwest, online and social media is expected to set the pace in terms of its overall communication efforts. Social media and online content generation as a whole, is not simply tactical for Southwest Airlines. The goal of Southwest’s online communication program is a combination of conveying news about Southwest, highlighting its culture, and engaging with its “fans,” according to McNeill (socialmediaexplorer.com). Social media allows companies big or small to communicate with its publics on a level unlike any other. The personalized messaging and honest approach to listening, measuring, and communicating (internally and externally) goes a long way in the eyes of the modern educated and informed consumer. Southwest has managed to master each of those critical factors in a way that aligns brilliantly with its overall brand mission and image.

According to McNeill, everything southwest does reflect its corporate culture. McNeill said, "everything we do in social media is rooted in the core company values of being fun loving, having a warrior spirit, and fighting to get things done; then having a servants heart to do the right thing at the right time. That all makes our social strategy work so well" (socialmediaexplorer.com).
McNeill also aligns with the communications team, works with a cross-functional team of marketers, customer relations, and communications, and manages social media efforts across the company. McNeill is demonstrating textbook management practices for public relations, not just social media.

**Southwest Airlines’ Online Presence: by the Numbers**

Southwest stands on firm ground in terms of its place atop the online leader board. Amongst national competitors like United, JetBlue, Airtran, Delta, and American, Southwest finds itself number one in nearly every major platform. YouTube and Twitter remain the only platforms in which Southwest does not hold the number one spot. The Following data was gathered via each company’s social media profile.

**Southwest’s Online/Social Media Breakdown**

- **Southwest.com**
  - Visits: Over 12 Million/month (socialmediatoday.com)
- **Facebook**
  - Likes: 4,222,325 “Talking” About SW: 13,945
- **Twitter**
  - Followers: 1.65 Million
- **Instagram**
  - Followers: 73,189
- **Youtube**
  - Subscribers: 9,653 (Southwest’s lowest ranked platform)

**Second-Place National Competitors’ Social Media Breakdown**

- **Facebook** (American Airlines)
  - Likes: 1,506,403 “Talking” About American: 15,052
- **Twitter** (JetBlue)
  - Followers: 1.81 Million (Highest among national competitors)
Southwest was also the first U.S. airline to establish a home page. By 2010, Southwest.com boasted more unique visitors than any other airline, and ranked as the second largest travel site (examiner.com). Clearly Southwest is doing something right. While raw numbers don’t always tell the tale, staggering numbers like those listed above have plenty to say. Southwest has been able to develop and implement a social media plan that not only energizes and informs its publics, but it also provides those publics a voice to openly engage in a dialogue. Facebook has become a social media staple for many companies, but the way in which each company engages its publics is critical to long-term success. Southwest Airlines has nearly triple the amount of “likers” as its nearest rival, American Airlines. The main reason; Southwest’s unique approach to listening and responding to each claim or comment in a manner succinctly aligned with its corporate mission and values.

Corporate Mission Meets Online Content

As stated previously, Southwest Airlines holds strong commitments to its employees, communities, planet, and stakeholders. Each of these commitments is represented in Southwest Airlines’ online and social media content. Below I’ve developed a list of ways in which Southwest’s online and social media efforts reflect both its mission statement, and commitments to its publics.
Southwest TRULY Cares About Its Employees

The Nuts About Southwest blog serves as forum for all employees to vent, discuss, rant, or rave about anything related to work life as a Southwest employee. The blog consists mostly of employee posts regarding anything from memorable customers, fun pictures taken while at a particular location, or even the occasional rough day.

There are about 30 regular bloggers, but more appear to jump in on occasion, such as the recent 40 year anniversary campaign (socialmediaexplorer.com). Different employees have been writing about their unique experiences over the years, including some who’ve been with the company for decades. The Nuts About Southwest blog allows employees to discuss topics in an open, honest format. One employee even recently posted his favorite photos from the early 1970’s, long before Southwest Airlines had ever imagined social media.

McNeill says they motivate employee-bloggers with “little perks, goodies.” “But mainly these are people who love their jobs, and they love to talk about it” (socialmediaexploerer.com). Southwest airlines allows its employees basic freedoms to discuss any topic under the sun related to their employer, and because of it, Southwest is rewarded with brand ambassadors that have a true passion for their company, which they honestly feel cares about them. Showing care for its employees and allowing them a forum to discuss as peers directly aligns with the company spirit notion within Southwest’s mission.

Southwest Allows Online Honesty
It’s one thing for a disgruntled employee or customer to throw a fit, and post comments riddled with obscenities, but it’s another to be legitimately frustrated over a service error or poor management efforts. Southwest allows its employees and customers to comment freely on all social media and blog posts within guidelines, which reserve the right to remove obscene commentary. Too many times, companies have witnessed negative feedback regarding a product or service, and removed the comment, only to have it blow up in their faces via public scrutiny. Allowing an honest flow of commentary helps to show transparency, and displays a level of openness with Southwest’s publics. Southwest uses such comments to its advantage to prove how helpful and reactive it is on social media.

At times, the *Nuts About Southwest* blog has a bit of a rah-rah cheerleader feel, but Southwest employees have been known to get heated within topic discussions. McNeill retains that it’s important for the customers and employees to vent frustrations, but those frustrations must remain clean and free of obscenity. Other than those basic guidelines, discussion topics are relatively open, and accessible.

*Southwest Tells Stories*

From a preview of the program’s history, to a day-in the-life story, Southwest manages to utilize social media very well to connect with customers on a personal level. Storytelling is a critical factor in online engagement. Social media requires the ability to tell a story, and keep an audience with compelling information. Southwest Airlines might have some of the best stories online. Many of the employee posts on *Nuts About Southwest* are personal stories.
One pilot talked about his early days in 1973 when Southwest had only 3 planes and a handful of employees, a “David & Goliath” story (southwestblogs.com). This story started out as a blog post, but evolved into a wildly popular Facebook post. Fans of southwest flocked to the post; sharing comments about their own early experiences flying Southwest when it was still a growing company. Facebook’s largest growing demographic comes from the 50+ age bracket, so the post fared quite well in terms of engagement.

You know you’ve got a truly compelling story when others WANT to join in. The “David and Goliath” story generated thousands of likes and hundreds of comments on Southwest’s Facebook page. Many of those comments were quite lengthy, and full of personal experience. Few companies have the ability to engage customers and employees as successfully as Southwest. The true reason for such high involvement is successful storytelling.

The 40th Anniversary marks another great story opportunity, which Southwest capitalized on brilliantly. To celebrate its 40th Anniversary, Southwest teamed up with the Student Conservation Association (SCA) to take its commitment to volunteerism and the environment on the road, literally (blogsouthwest.com). Hundreds of Southwest employees, including CEO Gary Kelly, joined the volunteer effort. Southwest volunteered in Saint Louis, Dallas, Albuquerque, Phoenix, Los Angeles, San Manchester, Francisco, Las Vegas, Arches State Park in Utah, Denver, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Chicago, Manchester, Providence, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Greenville, Orlando, Panama City, and Houston.
What made this event even more impactful for Southwest were the “stories from the road.” Each city visited was another addition to the original thread in the 40th Anniversary blog post. The following grew significantly as the campaign built up steam. The post received over 1800 likes within the blogsouthwest.com community, and earned 64 social media shares between both Twitter and Facebook. The general tone of the blog, and the actions taking place, supported Southwest’s commitment to the environment, and the communities it operates within.

**Southwest Listens**

The Southwest social media team operates from a web COE (center of excellence) model with McNeill’s group enabling social media activities across Southwest (socialmediaexplorer.com). McNeill only has five people on her staff, including one editor who manages all of the content. Three of them rotate to monitor conversations and respond to comments. The team does very little editing, so employee bloggers retain their true voice, which as discussed above, has paid off tremendously.

Southwest was hit hard by the media in early 2010 when it kicked off an overweight passenger who didn’t fit in one of the seats. Unfortunately for Southwest, it turned out he was a budding filmmaker with a large Twitter following. The filmmaker started blasting Southwest. Southwest’s communications team immediately responded with tweets and phone calls to see what they could do to rectify the situation. The effort won a “commendable” nod from Mashable (socialmediaexplorer.com).
The situation eventually faded away, but had the issue festered in the social media groundswell, Southwest could have experienced a major discrimination crisis. Listening and communicating online directly reflects Southwest’s corporate mission to serve customers fairly, and in the best way possible.

Southwest does a good job listening and providing relevant tweets and posts via Twitter and Facebook. Customers are encouraged to contact Southwest via Twitter for immediate assistance. Harsh weather conditions affecting flight schedules, discount deals and so on are tweeted and posted regularly by Southwest. By listening to the needs and concerns of customers, Southwest allows itself a swift recovery, and minimization of damage in a given problem scenario. The end result: customer satisfaction.

**Conclusion**

Whether it’s listening or engaging with its publics and employees via social media, Southwest leads the way within its industry. Southwest has managed to become an informative, humorous, and sometimes charming online presence among large brands. What makes Southwest’s social media presence even more profound, is how the messaging parallels Southwest’s overall mission and commitments. Southwest has placed itself in a position for long-term success by staying ahead of the curve in terms of communication, both internally and externally.
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