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Southwest Airlines' Nonstop Culture: Flying High with Transparency and Empowerment

Kelsey Harper,ⁱ a budding leader at Southwest Airlines Co., was looking forward to another day on the job. Recently promoted within the People Department¹ (Southwest's equivalent to a human resources department), it was her first opportunity to be a part of the hiring process. Southwest valued those who wanted to make a career with the airline, placing a strong emphasis on hiring for attitude and training for skill.² Hiring at Southwest went beyond its group and phone interviews; instead, the interviewing process helped signal to recruiters the types of characteristics that the company sought to propel in its organizational culture.

Harper knew the importance of finding the right candidate for Southwest, but was nervous at how to appropriately identify candidates who fit Southwest's eccentric culture. Beyond the uneasiness in her new role, the job she was helping hire for was a coveted pilot position, which required the People Department to identify technical competencies, as well. To do so, she would be interviewing with an active Southwest pilot who could better facilitate technical questions to candidates.

Harper could easily recite the qualities desired in prospective hires, but the question remained as to how she could identify these traits in practice. As she joined her co-interviewer, five hopeful pilots filed in for the first of three phases of their group interview—the human resources aspect.³ Her role in this initial meeting was to find out more about who the interviewees were beyond the résumé: What were they most proud of? How had they achieved this accomplishment? What tone did they set with their crew before a flight and why?⁴ Harper smiled widely at the recruits as these questions buzzed in her head, hoping to instill confidence in them to ease the stiff looks on their faces, beginning the interview process by asking the pilots to loosen their collars and sit back.

i Kelsey Harper and the recruiting scenario were fictitiously developed by the author for the purposes of facilitating a learning scenario and does not necessarily reflect the views of Southwest Airlines Co.

Company History

Air Southwest Co. was established by Rollin King and Herb Kelleher in 1967. The company was developed with a vision of moving travelers from point to point at the lowest fare rate possible so that anyone had the luxury of traveling. After encountering tremendous start-up difficulties, Kelleher changed the name from Air Southwest Co. to Southwest Airlines Co. in 1971, officially establishing the aircraft carrier brand that has since been envied and mimicked by competitors. Southwest was based in Dallas, Texas. With a fleet of only three Boeing 737-200s, the only model aircraft flown to date, Southwest first took flight in June of 1971.⁵

The birthing pains from Air Southwest Co. transcended into the Dallas-based airline's initial year of operations. Despite heavy losses during the first year of operations, Southwest persevered, posting its first profitable year in 1973.⁶ Since then, Southwest has been profitable every year, making it the only aircraft carrier to remain profitable for 41 and counting consecutive years (see **Appendix A**).⁷ Southwest channeled a business strategy of achieving high performance from its employees by addressing their work-related needs to create highly satisfied and fulfilled workers and by increasing aircraft productivity to reduce flight turnaround times at the gate, ultimately leading to more on-time flights with boarding and deplaning efficiencies.⁸ This rapid gate turnaround concept helped Southwest achieve the lower cost structure its founders strove for.

With its origins at Dallas Love Field Airport, the airline wove the love theme into its operations via its stock ticker symbol NYSE:LUV and many of its “fun-loving”⁹ operational traits. As of 2004, Southwest was the largest domestic airline carrier in the United States.¹⁰ It flew an average of 11 million travelers monthly and was ranked second in the domestic airline industry in offering lowest-cost fares.¹¹ Southwest was the largest domestic airline because it operated significantly different from its competitors by placing an emphasis on its employees' well-being and a strong focus on serving customers, all while maintaining a low-cost model. By 2014, Southwest was servicing 96 locations within 41 domestic states, along with a small sampling of nearby international destinations (see **Appendix B**).¹²

Leadership

Herb Kelleher

Kelleher, a charismatic and outspoken trailblazer, established a fun and quirky way to conduct business, truly believing that employee fun and happiness transcended into a positive, loyalty-building experience for Southwest customers.¹³ Kelleher brought a unique leadership approach to Southwest. Having a simple set of values for the Southwest family to stand behind, a defined vision to steer goals toward, and a mission that was attainable and relevant seemed a no-brainer for Kelleher as he kept ideals for Southwest short and to the point.¹⁴ People were the root of Southwest Airlines' ideals—whether it was its employees, its board members, or its customers. Without people, Southwest amounted to little. “It’s very important to value people as individuals,” was a motto that Kelleher enacted at Southwest to differentiate itself from the competition.¹⁵

Capitalizing on the power of people, Kelleher established a company-wide standard that every person relating to the company was important and that, in return, Southwest had to do what was right by them in order to truly be successful.¹⁶ This unconventional notion meant that maintaining positive relations with those who worked for and transacted with Southwest was the competitive advantage not easily replicated by its counterparts in the aviation industry. Cutting costs to become a lower-cost carrier was easily duplicated, as was upgrading technologies, but Kelleher stuck to his belief that the power of its people was not replicable.

Unlike many CEOs, Kelleher wanted to keep his hands out of Southwest's daily operational issues as much as possible, trusting that Southwest employees would be able to resolve problems on their own terms,

in their own way, with minimum leadership interference.^{17,18} Kelleher strongly emphasized that his role at Southwest was to stay out of employees' way when things were going well and be there to guide Southwest in overcoming its hurdles.¹⁹ This wasn't to say that Kelleher was not involved with his employees. In fact, the opposite was true. He was known to joke openly with Southwest employees, proliferating the fun Southwest spirit that airline competitors poorly tried to mimic. Kelleher was known to welcome his staff, treat them to corporate parties and barbecues, and create a strong sense of equality in position importance at all levels. As stated by Dr. Fathi El-Nadi, a human resources expert,²⁰ "Herb Kelleher encouraged informality and wanted staff to have fun at their jobs. Employees were valued, with Kelleher acknowledging births, marriages and deaths by notes and cards."²¹

Kelleher took his personable skills and applied them to a business model that has consistently outperformed its industry competitors in terms of safety, revenues, and workplace happiness. He was a man of strong personal morals, answering the question of what personal and business qualities he admired most with the same response—integrity.²² His strong belief that integrity built Southwest up has remained in today's corporate culture, even with Kelleher phasing out of the organization, beginning in 2007 when he was 76 years old.

Gary Kelly

Many questioned how a strong leader like Kelleher could be replaced at Southwest, with a resounding echo of concern voiced by stakeholders that a change in power meant a change in the respected corporate culture. "Power should be reserved for weightlifting and boats, and leadership really involve[d] responsibility," stated Kelleher.²³ Thus, Kelleher saw his transition from CEO and board member to retirement as the shifting of responsibility from one person to another. Fears over this transition lessened as 28-year Southwest veteran Gary Kelly took the helm as CEO in 2008²⁴ in his midfifties.²⁵ Kelly, like Kelleher, also believed that people were Southwest's best differentiator in the airline industry when he stated, "Our people [were] our single greatest strength and most enduring long-term competitive advantage."²⁶

Kelly possessed similar qualities to Kelleher, making the transition between leaders less bumpy. In his new leadership role, Kelly has already pioneered international travel offerings, a first for the carrier, and successfully integrated the AirTran merger into Southwest's people-centric culture.²⁷ The merger negotiations commenced in 2011, with the following three years acting as an absorption period to fully combine the two airlines into one. Kelly, who was aware that the merger took longer than originally anticipated, identified three areas that caused hiccups in the integration process. The first issue was overcoming steep fuel prices, followed by the retirement of AirTran's Boeing 717 fleet in favor of continuing the company practice of using a single aircraft model—the Boeing 737. The final identified hindrance was the decision to eliminate the hub-and-spoke system in Atlanta inherited from AirTran. Despite these hurdles, Kelly successfully addressed customer and company concerns to properly integrate AirTran into Southwest's organizational culture and customs.²⁸

Beyond the CEO

Beyond the great CEOs of Southwest, leadership extended greatly into daily operations. The airline carrier was named one of the 2014 best companies for leaders by the Chief Executive Group.²⁹ Senior-level leaders were promoted internally from entry-level positions.³⁰ Southwest desired to create an environment where people wanted to work and continue to work for the long haul. To do so, in 1986, Southwest began its University for People to develop technical skills and hone leadership potentials.³¹ The University for People acted as the training mechanism for all to access because every employee was given the opportunity to grow. This university-like learning environment reflected Southwest's understanding that learning was an ongoing process and that education needs changed as the company progressed.³²

A focus to develop internally from below to build up leadership quality above was a common theme throughout the programs offered at the University for People. The continuation of educational opportunities helped identify employee strengths to better match leaders, leaders-in-training, and leaders-to-be with the right opportunities that utilized their skill set.³³ The ultimate goal of these trainings was to breed employee happiness and retention, while fueling the airline's success through a customer-centric focus.

Southwest saw beyond a job title of an entry or midlevel employee and desired to retain the talent that fulfilled daily operations through goal setting. Goal setting, a common way to track growth within a company, was different at Southwest. To reinvigorate a not-so-novel idea, Southwest encouraged leaders to set goals and mentors were influenced to be highly involved during the process of goal achievement.³⁴ This concept stemmed from the company's drive to support employee development for a more fulfilling career.

Employees

Southwest saw its employees as the first and primary customers the company served. This commitment meant that employees were given the same attention to detail, respect, and care from leadership that was expected to be given to Southwest travelers.³⁵ Southwest encouraged employees to support one another, the community, and its customer base to create a fun and energetic work environment. Taking this concept to heart, employees volunteered more than 144,000 hours to the community in 2013 at an estimated value of \$3.2 million.³⁶

Known as a quirky and passionate labor force, Southwest employees had fun at work while being a leader in the industry, and they weren't afraid to showcase it. With the rise of the Internet and mobile devices, Southwest's employee personality started to shine through with passengers and coworkers filming and blogging about the unique Southwest flavor that workers brought to customers. For example, in 2014 a couple that flew Southwest weekly for work purposes coordinated with Southwest employees to have a surprise midair wedding.³⁷ While the couple brought 40 of their closest family and friends to the flight ceremony, the remaining passengers (about 100 people) were in total shock and excitement over the event.³⁸ Once the ceremony grounded, gate employees gathered waiting travelers to surprise the couple and wedding party at their terminal to cheer on and congratulate the newlyweds, whisking them away to their reception room at the airport.³⁹ These acts of entertainment and kindhearted surprises kept customers interested in Southwest and significantly aided customer satisfaction.

Employees also followed a set of values that encouraged innovation, perseverance, a focused work ethic, and impassioned customer service efforts beyond the industry standard; demonstrated a fun working environment; and centered on the goals and missions of Southwest.⁴⁰ These values acted as the framework for employee purpose that helped to empower decision-making capabilities to do what was right by the customer, for the customer. Without purpose, Southwest's business objectives became harder to define by employees and with limited understanding of objectives, the transparency that Southwest strove toward became too distant. Southwest recognized this lag in communications and in January 2013 reiterated a new purpose for employees to follow: "We exist to connect people to what's important in their lives through friendly, reliable, and low-cost air travel."⁴¹

Hiring and Training

Recognized as one of the best places to work in 2014,⁴² it was no wonder that when Southwest was hiring, the American workforce took notice. For example, in 2013, Southwest had 750 job openings and within two hours of the job postings, about 10,000 applicants had applied to join the Southwest team.⁴³ All in all, Southwest received 100,682 résumés in 2013, hiring 1,521 as new recruits.⁴⁴ As of 2013, Southwest

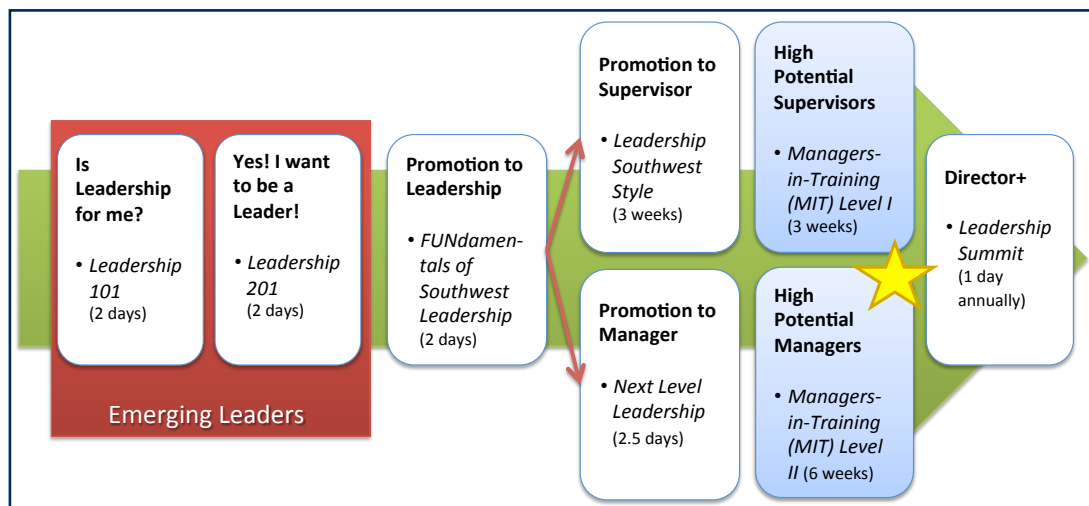
had 44,831 employees, 42% of which were employed in the flight division, 6% in maintenance positions, 35% as ground employees or customer service agents, and 17% in administrative and leadership roles.⁴⁵

The hiring process at Southwest started with the selection of candidates who had strong relational competencies along with the necessary skills foundation to succeed at job requirements.⁴⁶ In short, Southwest looked to hire personality and attitudes,⁴⁷ with the belief that skills were developable later through training.⁴⁸ The quality of the Southwest brand was directly related to the best-match philosophy that geared hiring away from technical skill analysis and drove the interview process toward exposing personal attitude. To better identify personal attitudes, Southwest conducted group interviews with multiple interviewers and interviewees assessed concurrently.⁴⁹

Its staff were known to be fun and energetic, something that drew travelers to repeat bookings. Southwest didn't become the good-time airline by hiring for efficiencies alone; it had to hire people who were "people people" and it had to train interviewers to identify this trait in candidates. To do so, the People Department focused on situational scenarios to gauge prospect employee competencies.⁵⁰ Situational scenarios helped identify the experiences, habits, and capabilities of candidates to determine whether these tendencies matched Southwest's culture. Those hired demonstrated a high sense of awareness of others and a strong work ethic that went above and beyond to ensure successful outcomes.⁵¹

The process of training was deemed to build on the core capabilities identified in the hiring process. Kelleher believed that hiring for personality meant that Southwest could make up for any shortcomings in technical skills by properly training new hires.⁵² There was a transparency in training that helped new hires understand how their role at Southwest affected the other functions of the airline. To promote that understanding, Southwest launched an online orientation program that helped immerse new recruits to the expectations and culture at Southwest before their first day on the job.⁵³

Exhibit 1 Southwest Leadership Development



Source: "Southwest Airlines: Developing Legendary Leaders, Southwest Style." Slideshare. Enspire Learning, 17 May 2012. Web. 11 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.slideshare.net/enspirelearning/developing-legendary-leaders-southwest-style>>.

Opportunities for training were open to every employee with the company's University for People. The curriculum used at the University for People consisted of personal and professional courses that helped Southwest employees ultimately meet their goals.⁵⁴ Exhibit 1 details a sample trajectory of how an employee develops into a leadership role.

The Mangers-in-Training (MIT) courses for high-potential supervisors and managers were deemed a costly investment, coming in at \$25,000 per person. Because of the associated costs with upper-management development, employees were handpicked for managerial training. The MIT program involved guest professors and opportunities for shadowing executives. One of the last elements of the MIT program was a simulation exercise that helped MIT participants use and apply the skill sets developed. As Bonnie Endicott, senior manager of People Development at Southwest, said, "We encourage[d] employees to talk about what they learn[ed] because when you don't talk about what you learn[ed], and if you don't get additional assignments using what you learn[ed], you're going to lose it." The simulation acted as a capstone course for MIT students to apply their gained managerial skills in a generalized, non-industry-specific setting. Southwest and Enspire Learning, developer of Southwest's capstone simulation, emphasized the importance of delivering leaders of tomorrow with a fundamental understanding of business basics, which meant leaving industry-specific material at the door.⁵⁵

In addition to course offerings at the University for People, Southwest delivered leadership challenges to help further hone and build better leaders to equip them with the know-how necessary to manage and lead teams effectively. Challenges typically were tackled off-site on a retreat to help encourage team building among managers. See **Exhibit 2** for a breakdown of the three challenges leadership can take part in at Southwest. As a further reflection of Southwest's education commitment, the training hours for employees in 2013 consisted of 193,644 hours of pilot training, 115,900 hours for flight attendants, and safety and security trainings of more than 580,000 hours.⁵⁶

Exhibit 2
University for People Educational Challenges for Leadership

 Executive Challenge	 Business Challenge	 Management Challenge
Focus: Leadership, strategic thinking, cross-departmental collaboration	Focus: Business acumen, understanding drivers of financial success	Focus: Managing people, handling difficult conversations
Delivery: Blended, team-based, multiplayer	Delivery: Blended, classroom or virtual delivery, multiplayer, team-based	Delivery: Blended, classroom or virtual delivery, multiplayer, team-based
Outcomes: Personal insight, "big picture" mindset, effective cross-functional collaboration, behavior change	Outcomes: Better managerial decision-making, better communication using financial data and metrics	Outcomes: Confidence in handling difficult managerial situations, improved ability to manage employee productivity and engagement

Source: "Southwest Airlines: Developing Legendary Leaders, Southwest Style." *Slideshare*. Enspire Learning, 17 May 2012. Web. 11 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.slideshare.net/enspirelearning/developing-legendary-leaders-southwest-styleUnions>>.

Unlike any other airline carrier in the United States, Southwest aimed to work side by side with unions to develop competitive labor contracts. Southwest was known as the leader in unionization within the airline industry, with approximately 83% of its employees belonging to a union.⁵⁷ The airline regularly extended invitations to union representatives to negotiate contracts for its employees, seeing union representatives more like partners.⁵⁸ Historically, this mutually beneficial approach to unionization at Southwest has lessened employee-union conflicts with the company.⁵⁹

But of late, union negotiations were struggling to gain footing in favor of the employee—a first for the employee proponent Southwest.⁶⁰ While Southwest boasted that its strategic negotiations were aimed at being beneficial to its employees because of long-term job security and flexibility in scheduling,⁶¹ employees were singing a different tune as of 2014. With record profits anticipated for the airliner in 2014, the media speculated that Southwest's struggle to make an agreement with union representatives derived from its exploitation of loyalty from workers, which Southwest has assumed will be its cost-saving mechanism as it has struggled of late to maintain low costs.⁶²

To what extent had Southwest taken advantage of its employees to propel its brand's image of a fun-loving airline? In the eyes of its workers, the extent was becoming more evident because of prolonged contract negotiations that hampered their wish for more compensation. Workers wanted higher pay for their contributions to Southwest, arguing that it was because of their efforts that Southwest was recognized for its continued flair and enthusiasm. Employee unions recognized this important and pivotal role that workers brought to Southwest and handled the extensive contract negotiations to keep employees satisfied. Since negotiations were still in the works as of 2014, it was important to note that Southwest did have industry-leading wages for its workers by a large margin.⁶³ For comparison, a flight attendant at Southwest made an average annual salary of \$63,752,⁶⁴ whereas a flight attendant at Delta Airlines made an average annual salary of \$42,647.⁶⁵

Despite the backlash these negotiations brought, Kelly has remained transparent on Southwest's position. Kelly reminded the media and Southwest stakeholders that negotiations were actively conducted so that employees could maintain industry-leading wages and benefits, but that the aircraft carrier had to gain greater flexibility in other areas in order for these negotiations to come to fruition.⁶⁶ Regardless of Kelly's efforts to explain the company's position with union negotiation, employees were still left wondering how changes to their contracts would affect their role at Southwest and how, if at all, these boat-rocking movements could uproot the fun-loving nature of the Southwest Way.

Employment Security

In today's world, layoffs were seen as an easy fix to manage company costs. As the only domestic airline committed to never laying off its labor force, Southwest has created a culture of strong employee job security.⁶⁷ Job security drew talent to Southwest, helped retain workers, and kept employees satisfied and working hard. Many airlines used layoffs to remedy the effects of September 11, 2001, or to break free from Chapter 11 bankruptcy.⁶⁸ As Kelleher said, "Nothing kills your [organizational] culture like layoffs."⁶⁹ Southwest argued that while layoffs could have made the company prosper with higher profits in the short-term,⁷⁰ the goodwill found in its largest asset group—its employees—would not hold as much value.

Open-Book Management

Southwest practiced an open-book management policy.⁷¹ An open-book management policy meant that a company shared its financials with its employees and trained workers on how to interpret the information presented to help propel employees' sense of ownership, both physically and emotionally.⁷² Open-book management promoted a sense of employee ownership and, occasionally, led to employees gaining a stake in the company by means of a stock investment or coownership of business ventures.

At Southwest, employees were offered financial education, which was considered a critical initiative.⁷³ In true Southwest nature, the airline carrier partnered with Paradigm Learning to translate financial learnings into a board game—called "Zodiak: The Game of Business Finance and Strategy"—to channel Southwest's fun spirit.⁷⁴ Financial education at Southwest provided employees with the tools necessary to interpret the company's financial statements, better propagating employees' sense of ownership.

Setting financial training aside, Southwest's own culture cultivated the core concepts that were necessary for successful open-book management. Empowering employees to make day-to-day decisions helped employee morale and created a positive working environment. The emphasis on employee well-being also added value to the workers' ownership sense. Because employee efforts were often commended and recognized by management, workers were more motivated to perform their work productively and at a high-quality level, which increased Southwest's brand reputation with customers. This increased brand value drove many factors that related indirectly back to the financials of Southwest, thus propelling the need for financial training.

Customers

Southwest shared that while the company may fly airplanes, its true business was customer service.⁷⁵ Having operated more than 22 million flights and transported over 1.5 billion customers since its inception,⁷⁶ Southwest knew how to reach its customers to build loyalty. The airline has repeatedly maintained positive customer relations, as noted by an American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) rating of 78 in 2014, wherein JetBlue was the only airline with a higher customer service rating (see **Table 1**).⁷⁷ In addition, customers were greeted with a 76.7% on-time arrival rate, with no incidents that compromised passenger safety in company history.⁷⁸ Moreover, since 1987 the airline has received the lowest ratio of complaints per boarded passengers as compared with any other major U.S. aircraft provider.⁷⁹

Table1
ASCI Ratings for Selected Airlines, 2004-2014

Airline Provider	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Southwest	73	74	74	76	79	81	79	81	77	81	78
JetBlue	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	81	83	79
Delta	67	65	64	59	60	64	62	56	65	68	71
United	64	61	63	56	56	56	60	61	62	62	60
Airline Average	66	66	65	63	62	64	66	65	67	69	69

Exhibit was created by the author using the source: "Benchmarks by Industry, Airlines." *American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI)*. ACSI, 2014. Web. Oct. 2014. <http://theacsi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=147&catid=8&Itemid=212&i=Airlines>.

Since its inception, Southwest has been driven by the needs of its travelers. The airline believed that by focusing on its employees' happiness, fulfillment, and development that workers would return the treatment to Southwest customers; and, as Southwest's high customer satisfaction rate indicates, this philosophy has worked.⁸⁰ Employees were known to have fun at work and were encouraged to bring this fun atmosphere to travelers to boost their customer experience level. For example, in August 2014, a Southwest team in Baltimore held a paper airplane race with waiting customers to help pass the time during a delayed flight.⁸¹

But customer perks were not limited to small-scaled initiatives driven by employees looking to have fun while on the job. Southwest, as a company, was also known to participate in spreading the company "luv." In 2014, Southwest launched an in-flight fashion show to kick off fashion week, giving passengers a \$100 MasterCard gift card to extend the festivities from in the air to on the ground.⁸² Beyond actually disbursing freebies to passengers, Southwest was keen on empowering customer relation specialists (aka customer service representatives) to make judgment calls on correcting customer issues or complaints.⁸³ With enabled customer relation specialists ready to rectify complaints, it was no wonder that Southwest was a leader among airline carriers in customer satisfaction.

In a 2014 study of the best consumer experiences with an airline provider, Southwest scored highest among its competitors with a customer experience score of 71%.⁸⁴ Always looking to further enhance the customer experience, Southwest developed a Listening Center to better hear the needs of its two primary customers—its employees and its travelers.⁸⁵ “The best companies [we]re innovating at the speed of the customer,”⁸⁶ a notion that Southwest took to heart. The Listening Center, launched in 2014, was developed to be a centralized efficiency hub that brought together real-time data from traditional media, social media, and its own operational results to streamline the airline’s efforts to address its ever-changing needs.⁸⁷ A new concept, the Listening Center acted as a reinvented way to hear what Southwest’s two customer groups needed or wanted so that mistakes or inefficiencies weren’t repeated. Just as Southwest wanted to grow its own leaders, it also wanted to grow the quality of its customers’ experiences and its brand worth.

The Southwest Brand

Southwest further propagated its brand beyond the efforts of its transparently crafted organizational culture by actively marketing and promoting the company to reflect its core crux of values. With a heart as its logo, Southwest sought to place its company heart in the messaging that it gave to customers.ⁱⁱ Southwest strove to develop advertisements and methods of branding that reached its clientele. The average age of its travelers was 48.6 years old, with an average household income (HHI) of \$85,500.⁸⁸ Leisure travelers made up 65% of its audience base, with the remaining 35% as business travelers.⁸⁹ See **Appendix C** for a breakdown of Southwest’s 2013 customer profile. Southwest identified that in addition to traditional advertisement and brand-recognition activities, it could now reach its customers via social media.

Connecting Beyond the Terminal

With a first-mover advantage in social media usage to reach out to customers and stakeholders, Southwest has established a secure foothold into the realm of social awareness. The airline began its social media outreach in 2006. Southwest developed brand recognition by using social media platforms to communicate its vision, mission, values, and fun attitude to the world. Southwest had presences on Facebook, Twitter, a blog, Flickr, and YouTube.⁹⁰ Its social media campaigns were successful because the messaging was simple and the content was written with enthusiasm.⁹¹

Southwest’s blog, “Nuts About Southwest,” an inductee to the PR News Hall of Fame, has helped connect and inform employees, stakeholders, and interested community members about the happenings surrounding Southwest.⁹² What differentiated the blog from other companies seeking a similar response from its customer base was that the content was formulated by real-time Southwest employees. The peppy, short posts drew readers in without creating a staged feeling to the content. Content authenticity sparked a better brand reputation because readers did not feel that the wool was being pulled over their eyes.

Social Media Blunders

As with any up-and-coming method of outreach for businesses, social media has provided customers with the opportunity to make or break company reputation by word of mouth—or in a recent incident at Southwest, by word of tweet. In 2014, a father with his two children were asked to deplane after the unsatisfied customer tweeted out, “Wow, rudest agent in Denver. Kimberly S, gate c39, not happy @SWA.”⁹³ Ultimately, all three passengers were allowed to reboard the plane, but it came at the cost of deleting the angered customer’s comments from Twitter. While the agent who was tweeted about felt that she was in danger⁹⁴ and that her action to remove the customer and his family from the plane was the correct decision, many have criticized the response, calling it an over-exaggeration and an unnecessary series of events.

ii A 2014 commercial showcasing the importance of the Southwest heart can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQdBAGDzHHA>

What followed the incident was a plain message to the media and Southwest customers—if a customer speaks out about a positive experience, great! But beware to speak out about a negative experience; you could be grounded for it. To rectify the situation, Southwest attempted to control the damage by issuing a statement that took neither side of the argument and, instead, tried to defuse the seriousness of the issue. The company claimed that the customers were deplaned to continue and “...resolve the [previous] conversation outside of the aircraft and away from the other passengers.”⁹⁵ The airline also offered a \$50 voucher to each guest for the inconvenience the issue brought.⁹⁶ While this response was met with a similar disapproval from the public as the deplaning incident itself, Southwest did exemplify that it stood behind its employee’s decision, while attempting to appease the negative experiences of its customers.

In another incident with good intentions that turned catastrophic, a Facebook airfare sale meant to celebrate a monumental milestone for the company—3 million likes to its fan page—reared the ugly head of a system overload.⁹⁷ The system failure led to some excited customers exercising the sale to be charged multiple times and, in some instances, this resulted with up to 50 charges for the single fare purchase.⁹⁸ Here, Southwest discovered the issue immediately and worked to correct the problem promptly. The takeaway from this was that social media was an effective method to spread the Southwest gospel, but perhaps it might have unforeseen consequences.

Community Presence

Beyond its core business objectives, Southwest held high importance for its community representation wherever it flew. “We may be an airline, but we do some of our best work on the ground.”⁹⁹ A strong community presence sent the message that Southwest went beyond fun, atmospheric travel accommodations and extended into a wealth-building organization for the communities that it served. The aircraft carrier sought to develop relationships with nonprofit organizations both locally and nationally¹⁰⁰ to express its devotion of doing what was right—a core value commonly expressed by the company’s mission. Southwest donated 44,019 tickets and raised more than \$780,000 in 2013 alone to further realize its goal of giving back.¹⁰¹

Mosaic

With typical Southwest flair, the airline issued a quarterly e-newsletter, titled “Mosaic,” that focused exclusively on how Southwest impacted its communities. Like most everything in the organization, “Mosaic” provided a transparent look into how Southwest reached out to make an impact beyond a positive travel experience. The e-newsletter highlighted success stories and upcoming projects. For example, in early 2014 Southwest developed a new company program, Southwest Airlines Heart of the Community.¹⁰² This new program came from a partnership with the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) organization, with a mutual goal of reengineering public spaces to better serve the community.¹⁰³ Other initiatives Southwest joined in 2014 included raising awareness to Chinatown, San Francisco, to bring better wealth-building opportunities in, supporting the arts at Duke Ellington School of Arts at its annual show, and a partnership with the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy—which raised more than \$1 million to alleviate illiteracy.¹⁰⁴

Planet Impacts

As a mission statement, Southwest articulated that it strove “to eliminate waste and conserve resources.” In order for Southwest to remain a top competitor in an ever-evolving technology arena, it had to look beyond investing in the latest technology upgrades and delve deeper into what its company values were in regards to upgrading. Striving for minimal environmental impact, Southwest started to engineer new processes and equipment to mitigate negative environment effects. In 2013, the atmospheric airline recycled 660 tons of industrial waste. It also generated less hazardous waste at 15 tons in 2013 versus 22 tons in 2012.¹⁰⁵

Southwest overhauled several planes in 2013 by adding winglets to its design so that the aircrafts created less noise pollution in the communities it flew over.¹⁰⁶ The Green Plane, an airplane with a high recyclable material content, was revealed to be lighter and therefore consumed less fuel and released fewer greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁰⁷ While the Green Plane remained in its testing phase in 2014, the outlook for its implementation into the airline's fleet seemed promising.

Safety Forward

Safety was a defining difference for Southwest. Southwest ranked as one of the safest airlines in the United States.¹⁰⁸ In a safety and security release, Southwest reiterated that its commitment was "to foster and support a Safety and Security Culture at Southwest Airlines that identifie[d] risks to the operation and workplace and proactively deal[t] with these issues before they [became] injuries, accidents or incidents."¹⁰⁹

Table 2
Selected Aviation Safety Information, 1970-2005

Aircraft Provider	Number of Fatal Crashes	Year of Last Crash	Number of Flights Flown (in millions)
Delta Airlines	7	2006	24.8
United Airlines	11	2001	21.9
American Airlines	13	2004	25.08
Southwest Airlines	0	NA	15.26

This exhibit was created by the author using the source: "Airlines with No Fatal Plane Crashes Since 1970." *AirSafe.com*. AirSafe.com LLC, 14 Jun. 2010. Web. Oct. 2014. <<http://www.airsafe.com/events/nofatals.htm>>.

Southwest had never had a plane crash.¹¹⁰ While the United States was considered one of the safest markets in the global aviation industry, incidents were known to occur (see **Table 2**). Beyond aviation crashes resulting in fatalities, Southwest was also a leader in minimal safety-compromised incidents that did not result in a crash. In 2014, back-to-back malfunctions on Southwest flights that led to smoke-filled cabins were reported.¹¹¹ Both planes immediately landed and were put out of service until safety reviews were conducted, with no injuries recorded for either situation. This prompt response to a potential safety issue was a defining difference in Southwest's culture. Keeping its people and customers safe and secure was the ultimate goal of its operations—without a strong commitment to this, the company might have failed.

Hiring with Harper

The candidates exited the room to begin the next phases of interviewing—a logbook review of hours charted by another Southwest flight officer and a line-oriented interview, facilitated by at least two captains, where on-the-spot problem-solving competencies were tested.¹¹² These additional interviewing layers helped recruiters better separate candidates based on multiple facets of attitude, practical application, and skill set to culminate in the hiring of the best-fit pilot. Once the phases were completed, all interviewers would meet and discuss whose talents balanced the needs of the corporate culture with the required technical skills.

Harper reminded herself of her top two selections to fill the position. These prospective employees answered questions candidly, which helped Harper identify several traits that she thought would fit well within Southwest's culture. Both candidates had responded to situational questions in a manner that reflected what Harper saw as the Southwest Way, but would her interviewing counterparts see the interviewees in the same manner? As she debriefed her thoughts to her co-interviewer about those they just met with, Harper wondered if the traits she honed in on were the right focus for the future of the company.

Appendices

Appendix A Selected Financial Information, 2009-2013

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Sales/Revenue	10.35B	12.1B	15.66B	17.09B	17.7B
Cost of Goods Sold (COGS), including D&A	8.93B	9.68B	12.78B	14.24B	14.37B
COGS, excluding D&A	8.32B	9.05B	12.06B	13.4B	13.51B
Depreciation & Amortization (D&A) Expense	616M	628M	715M	844M	867M
Depreciation	-	-	-	819M	848M
Amortization	-	-	-	25M	19M
Gross Income	1.42B	2.42B	2.88B	2.85B	3.33B

This appendix was created using data from the source: "Annual Financials for Southwest." *Market Watch*. Market Watch Inc., 2014. Web. Oct. 2014. <<http://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/luv/financials>>.

Southwest Net Income, 2000-2013

Year	Total Net Income, in thousands (USD)
2000	603,093
2001	511,156
2002	240,969
2003	441,639
2004	313,369
2005	548,383
2006	499,080
2007	644,674
2008	178,241
2009	99,372
2010	458,908
2011	200,662
2012	428,408
2013	745,468

*The figures shown represent profits from the domestic market only.

This appendix was created by the author using data from the source: "Net Income (in Thousands of Dollars \$000) Southwest Airlines—Domestic." *Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA)*. Bureau of Transportation (BTS), U.S. Department of Transportation (US DOT), 2014. Web. Oct. 2014. <http://www.transtats.bts.gov/Data_Elements_Financial.aspx?Data=6>.

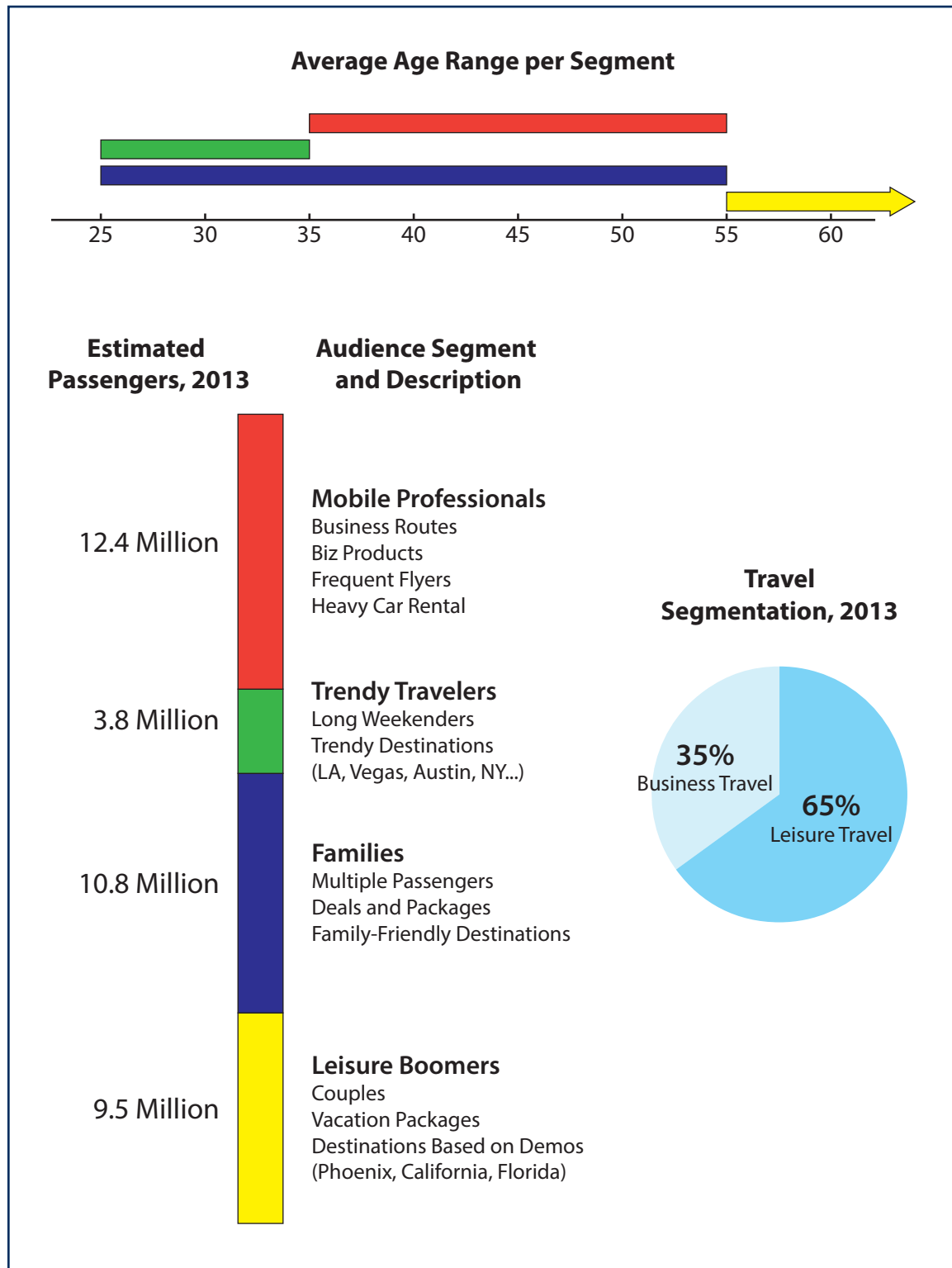
Appendix B

2014 Cities Served



Source: "Where We Fly." *Spirit-Southwest* (2013): 4, PDF file.

Appendix C Southwest's 2013 Customer Profile



Source: Created by Globalens using data from Larmer, John, and Kristy Shoulders. "2013 Media Kit—Southwest Airlines." Southwest Audience Network, 2012. PDF file.

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Notes



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