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DELTA MEETS “CHANGE”

■ By Lynne Clark | *Ascend Staff*



Social media opens several lines of communication between Delta Air Lines and its customers. It's a significant part of the airline's "Change" campaign, designed to hear the voice of customers and find ways to enhance their travel experience.

Traditional network carrier Delta Air Lines is looking decidedly "new school" these days. Barely one year out of Chapter 11 restructuring, the 80-year-old airline tells customers it's not the same old airline. Underscoring the message is its delivery through 21st-century social media technology including podcasts, animated videos and blogs.

Customers seem to be getting the message. In February, Delta reported record load factors for January. Load fac-

tors for international (76.3 percent), Latin America (82.3 percent), domestic (74.9 percent) and system (75.4 percent) were higher than any previous January on record for the carrier.

While much of the company's new success is due to international market expansion, many analysts credit Delta's marketing initiatives. Last May, it launched a multi-million-dollar re branding campaign to mark a new era; introduced an updated, boldly modern corporate brand; and show-

cased a reinvigorated customer experience. The campaign, entitled "Change," honors Delta's strong heritage with a renewed sense of vitality and focuses on the airline's effort to rethink every moment of the travel experience from trip planning to arrival.

A key component of the campaign is the use of social media. Modem Media created a new Web site for Delta, dubbed delta.com/change, which launched last May. The site enables travelers to partici-



pate in a dialogue about their travels, share ideas and travel tips, and provide feedback. Today, the site is home to the company's "Under the Wing" blog, where customers can hear directly from Delta leaders about some of their most passionate and inspiring ideas, as well as some upcoming changes.

"What Delta is doing is positioning the airline in the right way from a marketing standpoint," Henry Harteveltdt, principal analyst at Forrester Research Inc., said during a social media conference last year. "They're doing all these things to show John Q. Public that this is not your father's or your grandfather's Delta, that they are serious about changing. Marketing a product plays a role in how an airline is investing in itself."

Kristen Manion, Delta's general manager of relationship marketing, said the "Change" campaign opened the door to social marketing opportunities.

"Delta wanted to show customers that we had taken our time in Chapter 11 to change and that we were truly a new airline," she said. "Part of what we wanted to do was to open up conversations with customers. Social media provided that opportunity."

Jacob Morris, product manager of delta.com, said, "We were looking for opportunities to connect with customers in an open, human and meaningful way. Our challenge was how do you take that 'Change' brand message and communicate it online. That translation for us was social technology, which allowed a two-way dialog."

What Is Social Media?

Wikipedia defines social media. "Social media describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with each other. A few prominent examples of social media applications are Wikipedia (reference), MySpace (social networking), YouTube (video sharing), Second Life (virtual reality), Digg (news sharing), Flickr (photo sharing) and Miniclip (game sharing). These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis and vlogs to allow users to interact."

Andy McDill, Delta spokesman, said that social media takes consumers behind the scenes.

"It makes for a nice middle ground for getting your message out and also creating buzz," he said. "It's not mass communications like an ad or press release. But it's not one-on-one either. It's a middle-of-the-road way to communicate."



Photo courtesy of Delta Air Lines

Delta Air Lines' refreshed brand — a three-dimensional, red "widget" icon flying across a blue background and the result of months of employee and customer research — will appear on more than 900 Delta and Delta Connection aircraft, in more than 300 airports, on Delta's award-winning delta.com Web site, and in all advertising and printed material.

Social-networking Web sites represent an important media channel for reaching a diverse demographic, including teens and young adults, women, moms, affluent consumers, and older individuals. According to a report last May by *Market Wire*, experts expect U.S. ad spending on social networks to grow approximately 200

percent by 2011. That's because consumers respond less to traditional media and advertising and are moving toward consumer-to-consumer communication such as blogging, mobile messaging, comparison shopping via sites, word-of-mouth marketing and peer-to-peer networks. Researcher Chris Ward states that 80 percent of con-



Photo courtesy of Delta Air Lines

As part of its US\$10 million re-branding effort announced April 2007, Delta Air Lines repainted its planes to reflect its new modern corporate brand. The airline rolled out the first Boeing 757-200 painted in the new livery at an employee celebration in Atlanta, Georgia, shortly after the announcement.



sumers trust advice from friends online, representing three times as much trust than via traditional media. Further, one in three Internet users visits Web sites containing user-generated content to help make purchase decisions. It's not surprising, then, that companies such as Delta are successfully leveraging their marketing communications via social networking Web sites to achieve one or more objectives, including:

- Improve customer understanding,
- Promote issues of social concern,
- Promote products and services,
- Facilitate internal knowledge sharing,
- Increase brand awareness.

Adventures In Cyberspace

Delta is focusing its social networking in three primary areas:

1. "Under the Wing" blog,
2. Video logs (vlogs) including "SiteSeer Travel Cast,"
3. "Planeguage."

The narrow focus keeps the resource impact manageable. Content is provided by internal employees. Morris moderates the blog with help from an outside firm that fills in when he is unavailable. Manion manages content for the video logs. In terms of the number of comments, "Under the Wing" averages five to 20 comments daily. Employees always respond the same day.

"We get content, good and bad," said Morris. "We're open to whatever people want to discuss. One minute we'll be talking about in-flight entertainment and then someone comes into the conversation and turns it into a discussion about the kinds of drinks we offer on board. It's never boring."

One of the company's most popular sites is "SiteSeer Travelcast," a mini travel show featuring Delta employees at different locations around the world. One recent post showcased shopping in Mumbai, India, with Cindy and Smita. The pair took viewers to a shoe market where they bought beaded shoes; a vegetable market where a local shop owner mixed an after-meal breath freshener, "an acquired taste," according to Cindy; and a flower market where they bought jasmine.

"SiteSeer Travelcast makes travel real for customers because they see our employees — not actors — who give insider tips on places to eat, where to stay, local customs and other things travelers want to know about," Manion said. "Any of our employees can provide content."

Customers were the content experts for a widely popular "SiteSeer Challenge" that ran late last year. Contestants were chosen from among 500 video applications submitted by customers who were asked

to tell why their team was a perfect travel pair. Five teams were chosen to travel together to an international destination where Delta captured their travel adventure on video. Videos from each of the five teams were then posted onto the SiteSeer Travelcast Web site and viewers voted on the best team. Those who received the fewest votes were eliminated. The grand prize winners — a retired couple from Salt Lake City, Utah — won 1 million frequent flyer miles.

"Planeguage" — the language of traveling by plane — is another very popular social media venture by Delta. The humorous series of animated short videos

their travel woes. The videos are also posted on YouTube and iTunes.

Not An Easy Sell

At first, it wasn't easy to get Delta executives to launch social media sites. However, the idea had many proponents who saw it as a natural fit with the corporation's "Change" campaign.

"At first there was a lot of hand-holding and acclimatization," said Morris. "But we got it out there and everybody realizes it's not that bad. For corporations this size, it's very hard to want to let go of control of the conversation. We've done that. We started to dip our toes into it and



Photo by shutterstock.com


As part of its strategy to turn its attention more closely to its customers, Delta Air Lines has made numerous changes, including leveraging social media such as blogs, message boards and podcasts. This interactive approach enables the carrier's customers to share views and express what's most important to them during their travels.

highlight universal truths in travel. For example, one called "Domino" was the result of a passenger complaint about fellow passengers who aggressively, without warning, recline seats into their laps. Domino reflects the mayhem that could ensue if an entire row fully reclined its seats simultaneously without warning.

"These are tongue-in-cheek animations that highlight those irritating, yet often times humorous, moments we've all experienced while traveling," said Morris. "These tell our customers, 'yeah, we're with you ... we understand.'"

Planeguage is posted on Delta's blog where customers are encouraged to share

everybody sees it's a good thing and our customers love it. So many people spend so much time debating on whether or not to do it. I say, just do it. The value you get for your brand can't be matched with other media."

"Customers are talking about you anyway," Manion said. "You might as well insert yourself into the conversation." 

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