

Fasten your seat belts.Flying high with Kevin Krone, Vice President & Chief Marketing Officer, Southwest Airlines

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Date : November 24, 2015



Kevin Krone is Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Dallas-based Southwest Airlines Co., the nation's largest airline in terms of domestic Customer enplanements. He oversees and provides direction to many facets within the organization including brand development, advertising, promotions, online strategy, Rapid Rewards loyalty program, distribution strategy, sales, Customer insights and research, as well as product development and revenue generation. In his role, he is tasked with fostering brand loyalty for one of America's Most Admired Companies while looking toward future growth and revenue opportunities. He has a pulse on the Customer's experience from the web site to the plane to the baggage claim. Brand Knew engaged with him and below are excerpts from a freewheeling talk:

BK. Yours has been a long, high flying career at Southwest, could you please tell us a bit about that journey, turbulence included?

I've enjoyed more than twenty years at Southwest formally taking on the title of Chief Marketing Officer, in addition to vice president, in 2013X. I've seen the brand grow from a small airline that served three cities to one that now employs more than 48,000 People. Throughout my career, I've had the privilege of overseeing some incredible projects including launching the airline industry's first website that we called the Southwest Home Gate. Some other big projects I've worked on include our famous Bags Fly Free concept, revamping our Rapid Rewards loyalty program which is consistently ranked one of the most consumer-friendly programs in the airline industry, and most recently overseeing our new bold visual identity which is a multi-phased project aimed at bringing a bold, new look to our airplanes, cabin experiences, and Customer touchpoints.

While I've worked with Southwest to build and develop all of these programs one that we're particularly proud of is this fall's campaign which highlights Southwest's winning service formula—Transfarency.

BK. The low cost airline model seems to be under threat (except in some cases)- what is your take on that?

On the contrary, the low-cost carrier model is thriving, but what we're seeing is a sea of sameness. No other low-cost carrier offers the benefit of up to two bags that fly free. All of this matters. For example, no change fees give our Customers much needed flexibility. If you need to make a change to your plans at the last minute we won't penalize you because why should you pay more if your plans change? That's just a normal part of travel. This is a great offer for all of our Customers because it lets business travelers come home earlier when they are done with work or come home later because a deal is taking longer to close. And for our leisure Customers, why wouldn't you want to spend more time on the beach?

BK. Has Southwest contemplated going beyond US borders? If not, the strategic reason behind it?

We were proud to launch international service on July 1, 2014. Today, we operate international flights to 11 cities in seven countries. That's pretty incredible growth in a year and a half. This adds to our incredible network of connecting more than 100 million Customers annually to what's important in their lives with our more than 3,600 flights a day to a total of 97 cities.

BK. What is the one thing that you adore most about the Southwest brand? And something that you admire in any of your competitor brand?

The thing I adore most is how much we care about service and doing the right thing for our Customers. The heart of the Southwest brand is the no-surprises fee-free philosophy we call **Transfarency**. Everything we do revolves around that viewpoint, but it is our People and our Customers who have made us the great brand we are today. Southwest exists to connect People to what's important in their lives. Our People make that happen with a smile on their faces. Our Customers, and more importantly, our own Employees, have had a voice into building our brand. That's rare for a brand. Our brand is simple and different in that we don't nickel-and-dime our Customers for things that should be free. Customers don't want to be charged for things that used to be a normal part of flying so that's exactly what we don't do.

BK. Talk us through your new campaign Transfarency (excellent name that!)-the objective, the inspiration, the process, and the on ground feedback?

Transfarency is quite simple. It's about doing the right thing. The inspiration is hearing our Customers tell us they are tired of being nicked-and-dimed so they're sticking with Southwest. Our fee-free philosophy is our differentiator in the airline industry and the reason Customers continue to come back to Southwest. Since launching the campaign in early October we've experienced incredible feedback in social media. The word is designed to be an easy-to-remember way of saying 'don't be fooled by the complex tricks others play – go with the only airline that has low fares that stay low.'

BK. BOS (Bums on Seats) at any cost or at some cost- what is the model you prefer and follow?

We welcome all Customers on board! We want as many People to fly us as possible. To this end, Southwest works tirelessly to create and deliver low fares everyday so that as many as

possible have the freedom to fly. This formula results in lower fares and more people flying that is our model and what we do in every market we serve!

BK. What is the most significant aspect when you are doing brand communication for an airline?

The most important part of Marketing and brand communication is telling a completely consistent 360 degree story. This story will only work if it is based on the Customer Experience. So really, the most important thing is to have a great product and experience that drives loyalty. Then, the communication's job is to bring that story to life in an engaging and emotions way that brings in Customers. Standing out, the way the Southwest Heart does, from a sea of sameness is also immensely important. With more than 20 years at Southwest Airlines I believe we do this better than any other airline.

BK. What are your thoughts on the future of air travel and how is the Southwest brand gearing up for that?

Travel is part of the “engine” of us as humans. We want to reunite with family and friends. We want to take our families to new places. We want to experience things for the first time. We want to connect with a business prospect in person. Travel makes all of this, and more, possible. There will always be a need for in-person travel, despite, what I can see coming, the amazing technological improvements in our lives. Air travel will also evolve. We will have tools that take friction out of the process so we all can relax and enjoy the journey. Technology will help, not hurt.

As friction is removed, demand will increase and we will take more people to more (and farther) places than ever before. This will be exciting times for our Customers and a great opportunity for Southwest to continue in its purpose of connecting people to what is important to them with friendly, reliable, low-cost air travel!

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