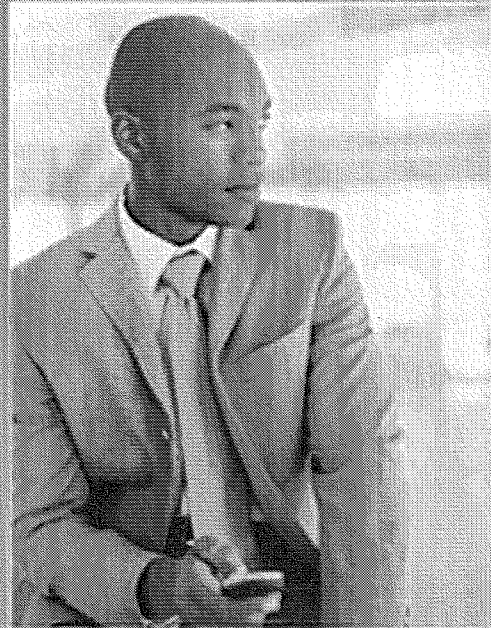


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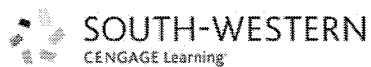
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# Communicating at Work Part 1

## Passengers LUV Southwest Airlines— Even When Flights Are Late

About 25 percent of the nation's 660 million airline passengers experienced flight delays last year. Many criticized the airlines for not providing information about flight status. Southwest Airlines' passengers, however, are less likely to be among the complainers. That is because Southwest takes a proactive approach, giving its customers timely and regular updates—even when the news is bad. An ice storm caused a several-hour delay on a flight leaving St. Louis. Southwest flight attendants and pilots walked through the plane regularly, answering passengers' questions and providing information on connecting flights. Passengers on that flight were pleasantly surprised when vouchers for free round-trip flights arrived a few days later. The vouchers were accompanied by a letter from the airline apologizing for the inconvenience.

Such practices are the norm for Southwest, whose stock symbol is LUV. The Dallas-based discount airline—known for its low fares, lack of frills, and efficient service—has become a powerful brand in a competitive industry since its humble beginnings in 1971. Founders Rollin King and Herb Kelleher had a unique vision for their new company: Get passengers where they want to go, on time, at the lowest price—and make flying fun for both employees and passengers.

Their formula worked. Today, Southwest is the largest carrier in the United States based on domestic departures. It currently operates more than 3,200 flights a day to 63 cities in 32 states. Whereas other airlines are struggling to cut costs and stay alive, Southwest recently reported its 34th profitable year.

Such high standards have won Southwest a spot on *Business Week's* ranking of the country's 25 best customer-service providers. Southwest consistently ranks lowest of domestic airlines in the number of complaints per passenger—and just as consistently leads the airline industry in customer satisfaction.

Like its peers, however, Southwest has its share of problems. Irate customers complain about lost baggage, weather delays, and canceled flights. The difference is its response strategy. Fred Taylor,



senior manager of proactive customer communications, tracks operating disruptions across the organization. He meets daily with departmental representatives to discuss possible problems and develop strategies to minimize difficulties before they happen. Regardless of his proactive efforts to minimize customer complaints, Taylor still must respond occasionally to disappointed customers.<sup>1</sup> Delivering bad news and responding to customer complaints are major responsibilities of his job. You'll learn more about this case on page 294.

### Critical Thinking

- Suppose you applied for a job that you really wanted, but the company hired someone else. To notify you of the bad news, the company sends a letter. Should the letter blurt out the bad news immediately or soften the blow somewhat?
- What are some techniques you could use if you have to deliver bad news in business messages?
- What goals should you try to achieve when you have to give disappointing news to customers, employees, suppliers, or others on behalf of your organization?

<http://www.southwest.com>

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## Strategies for Delivering Bad News

### LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1

*Describe the goals and strategies of business communicators in delivering bad news, including knowing when to use the direct and indirect patterns, applying the writing process, and avoiding legal problems.*

Receivers of bad news are less disappointed if they (a) know the reason for the rejection, (b) feel that the news was revealed sensitively, (c) think the matter was treated seriously, and (d) believe the decision was fair.

In all businesses, things sometimes go wrong. At Southwest Airlines, flights are canceled, baggage is lost, and weather diverts flights. In other businesses, goods are not delivered, products fail to perform as expected, service is poor, billing gets fouled up, or customers are misunderstood. You may have to write messages ending business relationships, declining proposals, announcing price increases, refusing requests for donations, terminating employees, turning down invitations, or responding to unhappy customers. You might have to apologize for mistakes in orders, errors in pricing, the rudeness of employees, overlooked appointments, substandard service, pricing errors, faulty accounting, defective products, or jumbled instructions.

Everyone occasionally must deliver bad news. Because bad news disappoints, irritates, and sometimes angers the receiver, such messages must be written carefully. The bad feelings associated with disappointing news can generally be reduced if the receiver (a) knows the reasons for the rejection, (b) feels that the news was revealed sensitively, (c) thinks the matter was treated seriously, and (d) believes that the decision was fair.

In this chapter you will learn when to use the direct pattern and when to use the indirect pattern to deliver bad news. You will study the goals of business communicators in working with bad news, and you will examine three causes for legal concerns. The major focus of this chapter, however, is on developing the indirect strategy and applying it to situations in which you must refuse typical requests, decline invitations, and deliver negative news to employees and customers. You will also learn how other cultures handle bad news.

# Communicating at Work Part 2

## Southwest Airlines

For Fred Taylor, Southwest's senior manager of proactive customer communications, delivering bad news and apologizing to customers is all in a day's work. He is the point person when it comes to informing employees of problem situations and providing them with an appropriate response. When Southwest falls short of satisfying its customers, he prepares personal apology letters to passengers—about 20,000 in an average year, covering more than 180 flight disruptions. The letters have his direct phone number, and many include a free flight voucher. As he explained to customers on a recent flight from Phoenix to Albuquerque, the strange odor in the plane was from a defective valve but not dangerous. "Erring on the side of caution, our captain decided to return to Phoenix rather than second-guess the smell that was in the cabin," he wrote. Southwest's apologies even cover circumstances beyond Southwest's control, such as an ice storm that delayed a St. Louis flight. "It's not something we had to do," he says. "It's just something we feel our customers deserve."<sup>14</sup>

### Critical Thinking

- What are the advantages to Southwest of its proactive approach to passenger problems?
- How might Fred Taylor use the four-part plan suggested in this chapter to compose his apology letters to passengers?
- Contrast the strategies Taylor would develop to deliver bad news to Southwest's employees and to its passengers.



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**When delivering bad news within organizations, strive to do so tactfully, professionally, and safely.**

fraudulent travel claims, consistent hostile behavior, or failing projects must be reported.<sup>15</sup> For example, you might have to tell the boss that the team's computer crashed with all its important files. As a team leader or supervisor, you might be required to confront an underperforming employee. If you know that the news will upset the receiver, the reasons-first strategy is most effective. When the bad news involves one person or a small group nearby, you should generally deliver that news in person. Here are pointers on how to do so tactfully, professionally, and safely:<sup>16</sup>

- **Gather all the information.** Cool down and have all the facts before marching in on the boss or confronting someone. Remember that every story has two sides.
- **Prepare and rehearse.** Outline what you plan to say so that you are confident, coherent, and dispassionate.
- **Explain: past, present, future.** If you are telling the boss about a problem such as the computer crash, explain what caused the crash, the current situation, and how and when you plan to fix it.
- **Consider taking a partner.** If you fear a "shoot the messenger" reaction, especially from your boss, bring a colleague with you. Each person should have a consistent and credible part in the presentation. If possible, take advantage of your organization's internal resources. To lend credibility to your view, call on auditors, inspectors, or human resources experts.
- **Think about timing.** Don't deliver bad news when someone is already stressed or grumpy. Experts also advise against giving bad news on Friday afternoon when people have the weekend to dwell on it.
- **Be patient with the reaction.** Give the receiver time to vent, think, recover, and act wisely.

### Delivering Workplace Bad News

Many of the same techniques used to deliver bad news personally are useful when organizations face a crisis or must deliver bad news in the workplace. Smart organizations involved in a crisis prefer to communicate the news openly to employees, customers, and stockholders. A crisis might involve serious performance problems, a major relocation, massive layoffs, a management shake-up, or public controversy. Instead of letting rumors distort the truth, they explain the organization's side of the story honestly and early. Morale can be destroyed when employees learn of major events affecting their jobs through the grapevine or from news accounts—rather than from management.

**Organizations can sustain employee morale by communicating bad news openly and honestly.**

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