



## **PURPOSE**

Our client is Southwest Airlines (SWA). SWA began as a small Texas airline and has grown into one of the largest airlines in America. Today, SWA is renowned for its low-cost flights, which fly over 104 million passengers and year to 64 cities across the country.

SWA should monitor online conversation about its company because the airline is facing detrimental economic pressure. SWA lost \$176 million during the second half of 2008. For the first time, the airline has been forced to retreat by cutting flights and slowing its flow of new airplanes after years of steady expansion. SWA should be informed if these economic challenges are affecting the way people view the airline.

SWA began test flights on Feb. 10, 2009, which include in-flight Internet connectivity called Row 44. If the tests prove successful, Southwest will offer the connectivity to its passengers. SWA should know what past, present and future customers think about this implementation.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

To search for online conversation about Southwest Airlines we first identified our key search terms. We used the terms: Southwest, Southwest Air, Southwest Airlines, and Gary Kelly (the company's CEO).

We found personal blogs by searching for our terms on several Web sites. We found the most useful results from [www.blogsearch.google.com](http://www.blogsearch.google.com). We not only found blogs but also found many useful conversations on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and The Consumerist.

We selected online conversations from ranging from Jan. 4 through Feb. 10, 2009. We wanted to know the latest topics being discussed about the airline. We determined the credibility of our sources by gauging quantitative properties such as number of Web site hits, views, members, rank, and followers. We obtained these figures from Technorati and Quantcast. If a source had little to no readership, we did not count it as a credible source.

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## **RESULTS**

Overall, we found that people are speaking highly about Southwest Airlines on the Internet. The most common themes are that SWA is affordable, reliable, hospitable, and customer friendly. We found that Southwest customers are loyal to the airline because of its reliability and low cost.

From Twitter we learned that "Southwest Airlines rate high for on-time flights." It is good

that SWA has maintained its reputation for reliability and timeliness. From Twitter we also learned that people are noticing SWA's social media involvement. It is important that people notice this because it maintains a business-to-customer relationship. SWA uses its social media relations to know what its customers are thinking.

From Facebook we learned that people are so appreciative of SWA as a company that there is a group called "I LUV Southwest Airlines!" This group page contains several positive comments about SWA. Many comments are thanking SWA for great flights and service. On the Facebook fan page we found that customers are loyal to SWA. We know this because of comments like: "Once again you saved my butt," and "Keep it up and I will always fly when I can." Building customer loyalty is not an easy task, especially when faced with an economic crisis, yet SWA has managed to continually please its customers.

From personal blogs we found that people are talking about the low prices that SWA offers. SWA has been able to maintain its low-cost flights. Normally, cheap is related to poor quality, but SWA does not have that reputation. People are also discussing the upcoming availability of in-flight Internet access on personal blogs. Row 44 may be a new addition to the flights and people are spreading the word around quickly.

From YouTube we found responses to a video that were upbeat about SWA. The video is of a flight attendant singing a song about SWA to a plane full of passengers. The song is silly but the comments the video received are not about how funny the video is, but about how much people enjoy SWA. The video is available on the SWA YouTube channel. It is beneficial for SWA to know that people are seeking out videos about the company and taking the time to comment.

A comment on SWA's blog reveals that people may not like all of the perks of in-flight Internet access. One person said that he hopes this does not lead to in-flight phone conversations. If one person feels this way, many people might feel the same. This comment may help SWA set the limits to the in-flight Internet access so that people see it as an asset and not a negative addition to SWA.

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## Conclusion

We found that despite the economic challenge Southwest Airlines is facing, it has maintained a positive reputation in the social media realm. We found little to no negative feedback about SWA. We believe that SWA is setting the bar for social media relations. We think that SWA could do more to generate excitement about Row 44. A demonstrative video posted to YouTube or SWA's blog would help spread the word about this new feature.

Overall, Southwest Airlines is working hard to build relationships with its customers through social media relations. People are creating conversations with and about SWA through a variety of networks.

