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LESSONS FOR LAWYERS AND FIRMS FROM SOUTHWEST AIRLINES AND HERB KELLEHER

Although he retired as CEO of Southwest Airlines 13 years ago, most of our readers will still recognize the name Herb Kelleher. He founded the airline and built it into the most profitable airline in the industry and one of the most admired companies in the world. By the way, he is also a lawyer and was one of the founding partners of a San Antonio firm.

Shortly after his retirement, I attended a televised conference for business executives at which Kelleher was the keynote speaker. Although few, if any, lawyers were in attendance, as I listened to him that day, I began to think of how much lawyers and their firms could learn from Southwest about management and marketing. Now, re-reading my notes of his remarks years later, I feel they are even more relevant despite – or maybe because of – the changes in the legal profession since then.

Strategy and Vision. Southwest's operating strategy had always been different from other airlines. When they started cutting prices and also reducing service – “giving less for less” as Kelleher described it – Southwest cut its already low-prices even further but provided more service – “giving more for less” in Kelleher's words. If he were addressing airlines' pricing and service strategies today, Kelleher might describe them as “giving less for more.”

- Lesson for lawyers and firms: Don't copy other lawyers and firms. Give your clients something different. Add value and service to your legal expertise.

Culture. Southwest's culture is something its people continue to work hard at every day. The airline has always hired for attitude and then trained for skill. It still expects its employees to think and act like owners of the business.

- Lesson for lawyers and firms: Develop a culture in your firm where everyone – including support staff – acts like owners and accepts responsibility for making the firm successful. Recruit lawyers and staff who have a client-focused attitude as well as legal or technical skills. Then continue to train and motivate them.

Vision. From the very beginning, the people at Southwest have had an uncompromising dedication to the vision Kelleher inspired: Not to be the biggest airline but instead “to provide great service at low cost.” That's pretty simple but it requires continuous hard work.

- Lesson for firms: Define the firm's vision, whatever it may be, and pursue it. Everything else – delighted clients who refer others, quality people who want to join the firm and profit will follow. The firm's vision will become the brand for which it is recognized.

Market niche. After finishing his prepared talk, Kelleher provided further lessons in response to questions from the audience. The first question was, “What is Southwest's market niche?” His answer: “People who want low-cost but dependable air travel because they're paying for it themselves. That means primarily vacationers, not business people.” The follow-up question was, “But aren't you ignoring a big niche?” His answer: “You don't have a niche unless you give up other niches and revenues.”

- Lesson for lawyers: Even a mega-firm can't be all things to all people and a lawyer certainly can't. Select a niche or possibly two – substantive area, industry or type of client – and focus your practice and marketing there.

Technology. Another audience member posed the question, “Is your technology strategy based on being leading-edge?” Kelleher’s answer: “We don’t have a technology strategy. We decide on our business strategy and then design our technology to help us implement it.”

- Lesson for lawyers and firms: If your technology isn’t improving the quality and efficiency of your work, project management and client service, then develop new technology.

Secret of Success. The final question directed to Kelleher was, “If you had to boil it down to one thing, what has been the secret of Southwest’s success?” His answer was short and quick: “The Golden Rule”.

- Lesson for lawyers and firms: Treat your clients like you want to be treated and treat your lawyers and staff like you treat your clients.

In the midst of all the talk about “The New Normal” and the changes in the legal profession today, many of the basics of a successful practice are either forgotten or overlooked. Whether or not you ever fly on Southwest, you may want to keep these lessons in mind.

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