

# CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

Southwest Airlines

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## **Organizational Background**

### **History of Southwest Airlines:**

Southwest Airlines was founded by amateur pilot Rollin King and his lawyer Herb Kelleher in 1967. King had a plan to launch a new airline that focused on low fares and efficient travel for passengers travelling between Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio. Southwest Airlines began service on June 18, 1971 with flights from Dallas Love Field to San Antonio and Houston.

### *Mission statement:*

“Dedication to the highest quality of customer service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and company spirit.”

### *Vision statement:*

“To be the world’s most loved, most efficient, and most profitable airline.”

### *Headquarters:*

Southwest Airlines’ Headquarters is located in Dallas, Texas, and offers services at 117 airports across 11 countries and holds the position of the top domestic carrier within the United States.

### **Services provided:**

Southwest Airlines provides domestic and international passenger air transportation services with flights throughout the United States and limited international flights to 11 countries. They also offer point-based rewards for frequent flyers and business travelers, as well as cargo and charter services.

**Employment opportunities:**

Southwest has a wide array of job opportunities with various operational, corporate, and support functions within the company. Job opportunities within the company include:

- Pilots: operate aircrafts and ensure flight safety
- Flight attendants: deliver excellent customer service and manage in-flight safety procedures
- Aircraft Mechanics/Technicians: Perform maintenance, repairs and inspections on aircraft to ensure proper aircraft function
- Ground crew: Ramp agents, baggage handlers; help ensure efficiency during boarding and deplaning
- Marketing/Sales: Promote the company through the development of marketing strategies
- Human resources: Managing employee relations, internal communications, hiring processes
- Accounting and finance: analyze business accounts, financial planning

**Civic/Philanthropic activities:**

Southwest Airlines shows their commitment to community involvement through several programs and initiatives including the Founders Scholarship, Points for a Purpose program, Medical Transportation Grant program, and College Transportation Assistance program. The company has also aided in disaster relief efforts following Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024.

**Public reputation:**

Southwest has a generally positive reputation amongst consumers due to its friendly, personable service, employee culture, transparent pricing, and customer-friendly policies. Of course there are situations that challenge the brand’s reputation such as flight cancellations and delays caused by operational conflicts and customer complaints about topics like the new seating policy.

**Potential Risks:**

Potential risks for Southwest Airlines include:

- Weather related disruptions: Aircrafts can be grounded due to severe weather and cause flight delays and cancellations
- Maintenance issues: Mechanical problems can cause aircrafts to be grounded until the problem is fixed
- Security Breaches: Cybersecurity attacks can disrupt flight operations, operational systems and cause customers personal information to be leaked
- Aircraft accidents: Failed mechanics/malfunctioning equipment can lead to crashes and other accidents
- Economic Downturn/Competitive pressure: pressure from competitors in the industry can lead to less sales especially in times when demand is low due to an unstable economy
- Health concerns: travel restrictions due to public health concerns such as pandemics like COVID-19

<b><u>Stakeholders</u></b>	<b><u>Expectations</u></b>
Investors	Investors expect the airline to have clear communication when it comes to sharing information about how their investments are being utilized. They expect to be able to have a voice when it comes to coming up with new strategies to help the company grow.

Pilots	Pilots expect the airline to communicate clearly about all safety protocols, flight cancellations or delays, and anything that may affect their work or any potential risks.
Customers	Customers expect clear communication from the company about information that may concern them such as flight departures, arrivals, and delays. They also expect to be notified of any issues that may affect them or their travel.
Communities	Communities expect Southwest to increase travel into their area, which can help improve the local economy through tourism. The communities also expect to be notified of any changes that may affect the community such as any economic or environmental changes.
Air Traffic Control	Air traffic controllers expect to be updated on any and all possible disruptions to operations as well as receive constant communication on weather, flight status, and air traffic updates.
Airports	Airports expect the airline to communicate with them regarding flight schedules, number of passengers, and flight crew information. They need this information to be communicated to ensure they can have resources available if needed and help navigate in times of crisis.
Media	The media expects the airline to share accurate information in a timely matter especially in times of crisis so they can relay the information to the public while reporting on the situation.
Government	The government expects the airline to adhere to all regulations to ensure safety of all passengers, flight crew, and ground crew.

## **Risk and Vulnerability Assessment**

### **Natural Disasters**

- Hurricanes disrupting operations at major airports in coastal cities (Florida, Houston):

Likelihood 7 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 63

- Winter storms affecting operations in northern regions

Likelihood 8 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 72

- Cancelled or delayed flights due to flooding on runways

Likelihood 7 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 63

### **Workplace Violence**

- Active shooter at corporate office

Likelihood 2 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 16

- Flight attendant and customer get into an altercation

Likelihood 4 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 28

- Physical altercation between flight crew or pilots

Likelihood 3 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 21

- Sexual violence between flight crew members or pilots

Likelihood 4 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 36

- Domestic violence involving an employee impacting workplace

Likelihood 3 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 21

### **Technical Error Accidents**

- Aircraft makes emergency landing due to hydraulic system failure

Likelihood 3 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 24

- Unsafe landing due to malfunction with landing gear

Likelihood 3 x Impact 9 = 27

- Engine failure causing fatal crash

Likelihood 4 x Impact 10 = Vulnerability 40

- Loss of communication or navigation during flight

Likelihood 2 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 14

- Design flaw in aircrafts causing flights to be grounded

Likelihood 2 x Impact 10 = Vulnerability 20

### **Human Error Accidents**

- Flight attendant makes an error during emergency landing procedures causing injuries

Likelihood 3 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 24

- Error by air traffic controller causes near miss or collision of aircrafts

Likelihood 3 x Impact 10 = Vulnerability 30

- Improper training for pilots on new flight procedures

Likelihood 4 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 32

- Improper fueling procedure causes low fuel levels during flight

Likelihood 5 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 45

- Damage to aircraft by ground crew due to miscommunication

Likelihood 5 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 40

- Improper repairs by maintenance crew causing unsafe flight conditions

Likelihood 4 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 36

### **Data Breach**

- Phishing attack targeting accounting department compromises customer financial information  
Likelihood 6 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 54
- Hackers get in the flight reservation system compromising customer information  
Likelihood 5 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 45
- Cyber attack on communication systems compromises flight information  
Likelihood 4 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 32
- Unauthorized access on mobile app or booking site hinders user accounts  
Likelihood 5 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 40
- Employee stealing credit card information from payments  
Likelihood 4 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 36

### **Organizational Misdeeds**

- Tax evasion/fraud  
Likelihood 3 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 27
- Discrimination during hiring processes or passenger treatment  
Likelihood 6 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 54
- Bribery of ticketing agents or gate agents  
Likelihood 2 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 16

### **Public Health**

- Employee works while sick and gets passengers or other employees sick  
Likelihood 6 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 42
- Food poisoning affecting passengers/flight crew  
Likelihood 6 x Impact 6 = Vulnerability 36

- Mislabeling of ingredients on food packaging causes allergic reactions among crew or passengers

Likelihood 4 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 32

### **Malevolence**

- Terrorists successfully hi-jack an aircraft and cause a fatal crash

Likelihood 1 x Impact 10= Vulnerability 10

- Passenger attempting to get into cockpit

Likelihood 4 x Impact 6 = Vulnerability 24

- Bomb threat on aircraft or corporate offices requiring evacuations and cancelled flights

Likelihood 3 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 24

- Contamination of food on aircraft by employee

Likelihood 2 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 14

### **Top 10 Vulnerabilities:**

1. Winter storms affecting operations in northern regions

Likelihood 8 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 72

2. Hurricanes disrupting operations at major airports in coastal cities (Florida, Houston):

Likelihood 7 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 63

3. Cancelled or delayed flights due to flooding on runways

Likelihood 7 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 63

4. Phishing attack targeting accounting department compromises customer financial information

Likelihood 6 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 54

5. Discrimination during hiring processes or passenger treatment  
Likelihood 6 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 54
6. Hackers get in the flight reservation system compromising customer information  
Likelihood 5 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 45
7. Improper fueling procedure causes low fuel levels during flight  
Likelihood 5 x Impact 9 = Vulnerability 45
8. Employee works while sick and gets passengers or other employees sick  
Likelihood 6 x Impact 7 = Vulnerability 42
9. Engine failure causing fatal crash  
Likelihood 4 x Impact 10 = Vulnerability 40
10. Damage to aircraft by ground crew due to miscommunication  
Likelihood 5 x Impact 8 = Vulnerability 40

## Strategic Communication Action Plan

### Southwest Airlines Pilot Arrested For Operating Aircraft Under the Influence

Segment 1: A Southwest Airlines pilot was taken into custody last night after he was accused of operating an aircraft while intoxicated. During a pre-check screening, the pilot was pulled to do a breathalyzer test and blew twice the legal limit. In turn the flight was cancelled, and the pilot has since been released pending investigation by local authorities and the FAA. *What should your crisis team do/say at this segment?*

Segment 2: Passengers from the cancelled flight began posting videos on social media sharing their experience. Other users posted online questioning the safety culture of the organization and stories of alcohol and substance abuse in the industry. The pilot's friends and family made posts defending the pilot and asking for privacy while investigations continue. *What should your crisis team do/say at this segment?*

Segment 3: Major stakeholders are now demanding safety protocols be made public. Travel agents are navigating customer questions and concerns. Local news reporters wait impatiently outside the airport as speculation spreads online claiming that the airline is "withholding critical information." Customers of other airlines criticize the organization on various social media platforms. *What should your crisis team do/say at this segment?*

Segment 4: Local activist groups band together to stage protests against alcohol abuse and DUI. Protesters demand that the airline implements DUI policies as media gives heavy coverage over

the incident. Southwest passengers online share stories of past flights wondering if he had been their pilot before. The pilot's family releases a statement claiming the pilot has entered treatment and again asking for privacy during this time. *What should your crisis team do/say at this segment?*

## **Winter Storms Affecting Operations in Northern Regions**

Winter storms tend to have a major effect on the economy in northern regions. For airlines, it can cause unsafe travel conditions due to the ice and snow that lead to several delayed or cancelled flights. The low temperatures can also affect aircraft equipment due to equipment failures or broken equipment. Because of these possible situations, many key stakeholders for Southwest airlines are affected in many different ways.

### **Crisis Background**

1. The magnitude of this crisis can range from moderate to severe. There have been storms in the past that have caused lives to be lost, damage to property, aircrafts and equipment, as well as injuries. The organization could easily be impacted both financially and reputationally depending on how other airlines are operating during the conditions.
2. The reputation of Southwest as of now is positive. The airline has experienced many crises of this kind. The media is very likely to cover a story about flight cancellations and operational disruptions due to winter storms. Winter storms tend to be very common in the northern regions, especially states like Minnesota, Wisconsin, Maine, Montana, Washington, etc., that are known to have heavy snowfall during the winter. These storms affect millions of people, whether it's from dangerous travel conditions, equipment failures, or power outages, and so on.

### **Stakeholders:**

- Passengers

- Passengers should be made aware of any operational disruptions, whether its delayed or cancelled flights, unsafe conditions requiring safety measures to be put in place, or options to reschedule or rebook flights to help with updating their travel arrangements.
- Flight crews (pilots and flight attendants)
  - Flight crews should be aware of all changes in schedules, safety measures being put into place, updates on weather conditions, and any operational changes being made to ensure safety of themselves, passengers and the aircraft.
- Operational workers
  - Maintenance workers, and all ground staff should be updated on any safety protocols, operational changes, and weather conditions to be able to work effectively and maintain safety for themselves and other employees.
- Media
  - Media outlets, such as news channels, need to have timely updates on how the weather conditions are affecting different key stakeholder groups and how the organization is responding to the crisis so they can accurately report on the situation.
- Government (FAA)
  - The FAA requires communication regarding operational changes, compliance regulation, and any cancellations or delays to ensure a manageable air traffic flow.
- Airline/Traffic Control

- Air traffic controllers need updates on flight status, operational changes, and safety protocols to be able to coordinate with other airlines and aircrafts to ensure airspace safety.
- Airports
  - Airport employees need updates on flight capacities, cancellations and delays and any safety protocols or gate requirements to be able to effectively help and/or manage passengers and facilities.

### **Crisis Response Scripts:**

#### **1. Passengers/Customers Crisis Response Email**

Subject: Important Update About Your Flight

Dear loyal customers and passengers of Southwest Airlines,

Winter storms across the northern states have required us to adjust flight schedules to ensure your safety. These changes include delayed and cancelled flights from various airports as the weather is causing dangerous travel conditions.

We will be offering several options to help you adjust your travel schedule with no fees.

Options include:

- Rebook: Choose any available flight within 14 days of your original flight with no additional cost
- Cancel: Full refund to your original payment method
- Travel Credit: Receive a travel credit for future travel

To make changes:

- Visit us online at [Southwest.com](https://www.southwest.com) or log on to our mobile app
- Visit us at any Southwest ticket counter
- Call us at 1-800-I-FLY-SWA (1-800-435-9792)

If you are already at the airport, our ground team members can assist with rebooking for cancelled flights, as well as meal vouchers for delayed flights over 3 hours, and hotel accommodations if no flights are available the same day and overnight stay is required.

We apologize for the inconvenience as we understand this disrupts your travel plans. We are doing everything we can to minimize the impact, but weather safety is non-negotiable.

We look forward to working with you soon. Thank you for flying with Southwest.

-The Southwest Team

## **2. Flight Crews Email**

Subject: URGENT: Crew Scheduling Changes Due to Winter Weather

Southwest Crew Members,

As severe winter weather continues to impact operations, we are making adjustments to ensure your safety.

Current Situation:

- 34 flights cancelled across the Northwest states

- Delays due to runway de-icing averaging 50 minutes

Crew Schedule Updates:

- Check your flight details as significant adjustments are in progress.
- Do NOT report to the airport without confirmation of your trip.

Please note that our passengers are frustrated and worried at this time. Please acknowledge their concerns and direct questions about rebooking to Customer Service.

If you have questions, please contact your supervisor immediately.

Safe flying,

Southwest Operations Command Center

### **3. Media Holding Statement Script**

#### **HOLDING STATEMENT - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Southwest Airlines Responds To Operational Disruptions Caused By Winter Storm In Northern Regions

Current Status:

- 34 flights cancelled across 4 states
- 57 flights experiencing delays
- Airports affected include: BOI, BZN, EUG, PDX, SEA, and GEG

## **Viral TikTok About Southwest Employee Discriminating Against A Passenger**

A social media post like this one could cause a huge impact on the company's reputation because of the possibility of the post changing the way the audience views the company's ethics and values. This can create tension between the company and its customers and cause a decrease in profits due to customers switching to another airline.

1. Southwest has a negative reputation when it comes to alleged discrimination. There have been several lawsuits and incidents related to discriminatory actions such as racial profiling.
2. The media is definitely likely to report on the situation due to the fact that it was shared on a social media platform in which users can share the videos with others in a quick manner.
3. Affected Stakeholders
  - a. General Public/Customers
  - b. Customers of Southwest are the main stakeholders for the company and it is important that they be addressed appropriately and quickly to prevent the crisis from affecting sales and a change in the reputation of the company.
  - c. A recorded public response shared to the company's social media platforms would be sufficient in reaching the targeted audience, especially since it started on social media.
    - a. Media
    - b. Media organizations will likely report on this situation and a statement to the media could help control the narrative of the situation at hand.
    - c. A holding statement would be necessary for this group with the situation at hand. It would allow Southwest to share with the public that they are taking measures to ensure the crisis does not happen again and that they are conducting a thorough investigation.

### **Crisis Response Scripts:**

1. General Public/Customers Video Response Script

We are aware of a post made regarding a passenger who experienced discriminatory treatment by a Southwest employee. This is unacceptable and we do not tolerate that kind of behavior.

To the affected passenger, we are truly sorry for what you experienced and we have launched a formal investigation and placed the employee on suspension pending the outcome of the investigation. We will be conducting a mandatory review of our anti-discrimination policies for all employees.

## 2. Media

### PRESS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

#### Southwest Airlines Addresses Viral Video Regarding Discrimination Against Passenger

DALLAS, TX - Southwest Airlines addressed a video shared on social media of a passenger claiming she was discriminated against by an employee on Thursday, December 4, 2025 at the Houston Hobby airport and announced the actions being taken to prevent future incidents.

The airline has apologized to the affected passenger and has announced that they will be conducting a formal investigation. The employee involved has been placed on a suspension pending the results of the investigation.

“What happened in Houston on Thursday was wrong, and we take full responsibility for it,” said Robert E. Jordan, CEO of Southwest Airlines. “We do not tolerate discrimination of any kind. It is unacceptable and it does not reflect our company’s values. We are determined to learn from this and take the right steps to prevent this from happening again.”

## **CONTRIBUTOR**

This crisis communication plan was supervised by Professor Rebecca Escamilla and completed by Shaeleigh Mower enrolled in COMM 4335 - Crisis Communication (Fall 2025) at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.