

Category: 11A Crisis Communications: Business
Title: Flight Plan for the Future: JetBlue Preserves Its Direct Relationship with Pilots
Client: JetBlue Airways
Agency: MWW Group/Budget (Confidential)

Situation Analysis

JetBlue, New York's hometown airline, is America's only union-free major carrier and believes its direct relationship with "Crew" is vital to culture and business strategy. When ALPA, the world's largest pilots union, filed for election to represent JetBlue's 2,108 Pilots, the stakes couldn't be higher. With interest cards campaigns ongoing in other workgroups, an ALPA victory would open the door to unionization carrier-wide.

JetBlue hired MWW Group one week after ALPA filed with one objective: **win the election**. However, it was made clear we must do so without damaging the culture or precluding a constructive working relationship in the future. Additionally, protecting the brand and operational integrity was paramount. Secondary objectives included:

- **High voter turnout** with 50% +1 of actual voters voting "no" to ALPA. Estimated 80% turnout or better to win.
- Engage Pilots and families **at work and home**
- Website (JetBlueFacts.com) goals:
 - 4,000 unique visitors, more than one visit/visitor, and 4-5+ page views per visit
- **100% compliance** (to prevent interference case).
- **Active dialogue** at crew room base visits.

Research

ALPA is legitimate, respected, and rarely loses. In history, ALPA losses can be counted on one hand. What's more, federal law changes in 2010 made it easier to unionize with a simple majority of voters now deciding outcome. (Before it required majority of eligible employees – low voter turnout favored companies. Today, low turnout favors unions.) ALPA has won elections at 49 carriers, and many JetBlue Pilots were ALPA members previously. Odds were in ALPA's favor:

- **62% of Pilots** signed interest cards, and **2nd time in 2 ½ years** JetBlue pilots filed for election.
- Pilot schedules create dispersed, transitory workforce – very difficult to engage.
- Lengthy periods in cockpits heighten peer influence. ALPA organizing committee was 200+ Pilots.
- **The average Pilot commutes 585 miles** to their base, flying to work from another city in the jumpseat (requires Capt. permission), and ALPA has history of blacklisting opponents' access.
- From filing to voting close, NMB elections run only eight weeks, and a Company's actions are highly restricted. Anything deemed "interference" by the NMB **allows the union to call for a new election**, with additional advantages provided (e.g., access to employees on JetBlue property during work hours).

Our primary target was the 2,108 Pilots eligible to vote. Sounds manageable, but Pilots are transitory – flying several days then "off the grid" – and diverse in experience. They range from 30-year airline veterans flying with JetBlue since its start in 1999 to nearly 200 Pilots joining in the past six months, some who only flew previously for the military.

With only six weeks to create and run a campaign, speed was essential. Research and planning included:

- **Analysis of recent employee surveys, and interviews and weekly feedback** from Chief Pilots to understand demographics, momentum, and hot issues.
- **Analysis of ALPA campaign "playbook" and track record** vs. JetBlue policies, procedures, and contracts.
- **Creation of a "core team"** process for expedited approvals and execution.
- **Establishment of a continuous feedback loop** from executives attending base visits and Chief Pilots.
- **Analysis of intranet metrics and flight schedules to determine best times** for releasing new content and deploying tactics. (e.g., data showed "stickiest" time for website content was between 12-3 pm Tues/Wed.)
- **Planning around legal restraints** since there are restrictions on normal, more reliable means of measuring audience sentiment. It is illegal per National Mediation Board law to conduct any surveys or formal feedback.

Planning

Unlike many companies facing unionization, JetBlue has a track record of listening, treating employees fairly, and continuously improving quality of life. With 10,000+ furloughs and nearly 20 bankruptcies and mergers in the industry over the past decade, economic conditions sparked job security fears, particularly among experienced Pilots arriving at JetBlue after furloughed by legacy carriers. Pilots are intelligent, educated, and considered leaders. We treated them accordingly, utilizing infographics, managerial-style communications, and favoring substance over sound bites.

We recognized three imperatives for success: 1) engage, 2) educate on what's at stake, and 3) motivate to vote. Offense was our best defense, and keeping ALPA on its heels – detailing their track record and broken promises – forced ALPA to defend its record instead of spreading misinformation. Key strategic elements included:

- **Dialogue vs. one-way, and voting** – Create engagement through intimate conversations, utilizing the CEO and COO via in-person visits, Q&A, and videos. Emphasize turnout and focus on undecided votes.
- **Go where Pilots are** – Multi-channel approach in the cockpit, crew room, at home, mobile-optimized website. Integrate messages into existing comms (e.g., weekly Chief Pilot emails, monthly COO calls).
- **Factual discourse over emotion** – Aggressive, but rigorous fact-based messaging, contrasting track records. Acknowledge where JetBlue can improve, and confront misinformation directly.
- **Support Chief Pilots in “hand to hand combat”** – solicit feedback and deployed rapid response
- **Strategic choice *not* to use social** – Keep channels for customers/brand separate from contentious election.

Execution

Given the volatile nature of the campaign and compressed time frame, we utilized a rolling three-week plan, enabling nimble reaction and weekly adjustment of strategy. Utilizing a robust communications calendar and weekly theme, we implemented a detailed campaign to reach all Pilots, and address the burning issues. Campaign tactics included:

- **Digital platform for content** – Launched a robust, mobile-optimized website within 10 days of initial engagement at www.jetbluefacts.com. Content was updated daily, including interactive Q&A.
- **Rapid response to tough questions** – Answered 100+ questions within 48 hours of submission, including openly hostile ones.
- **Dynamic, engaging video** – Created and posted 15 videos, including responses by COO to difficult FAQ.
 - Video was used effectively to educate on complex issues of law and process like dangers of write-in voting and debunking rumors driving fear like M&A protection (accumulated over 1,500 views).
- **Using infographics to simplify complex issues** – Produced two infographics per week distributed through posters and flight information display screens in crew rooms, postcards to homes, and v-files (airport mailboxes). We also supplemented these with well-timed letters to home from the CEO.
- **Face-to-face with Pilots** – Conducted 35+ informal CEO/COO crew room base visits in all 5 JetBlue bases.
- **Chief Pilot support** – Weekly one-on-one coaching sessions and feedback meetings with Chief Pilots.

Results/Evaluation of Success/Measurement

By every possible measure, the campaign was a resounding success:

- **17 point victory** (58-41, with 1 percent write-in)
- **97.24 percent election turnout** – NMBelection record (Source: Daily Labor Report)
- From launch to Aug. 31, JetBlueFacts saw **7,001 unique visitors**, far exceeding goal of 4,000 and key audience of 2,108 Pilots. **Note, Pilots use crewroom PCs, meaning countless Pilots counted as a single unique visitor.**
- The website accumulated **1.59 visits per visitor, average length of visit of over 7 minutes.**
- **ALPA did not file interference charges** challenging the election despite public statements indicating they would, presumably due to the overwhelming victory and lack of content justifying filing. This saved JetBlue high costs associated with litigation and a second election, eliminating an ongoing distraction.
- A side benefit, in Jan 2012, **Transport Workers Union discontinued an organizing drive for flight attendants.**

On the first day engaged, June 9th, there was no plan and a team that was pessimistic about the chance for victory. In 65 days, we worked with exceptional discipline, collaboration, and flexibility to turn the tide and effectively reverse the fortunes of one of America's most celebrated airlines.