

Thank You, Delta Air Lines

When the company's employees decided to express their appreciation for all the airline had done for them, they let their imaginations soar

BY LINDA LAWRENCE

IN THE SPRING of 1982, the airline industry was beleaguered by the weak economy, high fuel prices and the aftermath of the air-traffic controllers' strike. For the first time in 25 years, Delta Air Lines, one of the industry's most profitable companies, had posted a quarterly net loss: \$18.4 million.

In early August, Delta management sent a surprising message to the company's 37,000 employees: they would still receive a healthy pay raise—an average of 8.5 percent.

"We couldn't believe it," remembers Ginny Whitfield, a flight attendant for over 15 years. "We were just grateful to have our jobs, thanks to Delta's tradition of job security; we knew that 40,000 other airline employees had lost theirs."

A few days after the pay raise was announced, Whitfield and two friends, Jean Owens and Diane Carvelli, also flight attendants, were talking with other employees during a work break. "I wish there

was some way we could thank the company," said Whitfield. Another employee asked jokingly, "Why don't you buy the company, a plane?" "That's perfect!" the others replied. "Why not buy the first Boeing 767?" asked Owens, referring to the new line of mid-sized jet that Delta had announced it would take delivery of, beginning in October. "Maybe we could present the flagship plane as a thank-you gift."

Whitfield, Owens and Carvelli felt such excitement that they talked with every Delta employee they encountered the following week, sounding out their responses. Not all employees shared their enthusiasm. But what the attendants mostly heard was why employees, largely non-union, feel that Delta "cares." Some people found the idea overwhelming, but Diane Carvelli's husband offered encouragement: "The idea's so fine, you'd be crazy if you don't try."

On September 2 the three wom-

en decided to find out from management if a "gift plane" was possible. During a layover in Atlanta, the attendants took advantage of Delta top management's open-door policy and made an appointment with Robert Oppenlander, senior vice president of finance.

When Oppenlander heard their proposal, he was amazed: "Do you realize how much money you are talking? It's a thirty-million-dollar plane!" Actually, Ginny Whitfield was relieved. She thought it would cost more.

The three women told Oppenlander and his associate, Ron Allen, that they felt confident they would receive 80-percent employee support by the December flight-inaugural date. They mentioned their idea for a percentage-pay-reduction plan, so that the burden of paying for the gift would be borne easily.

As a money man, all Oppenlander could think of at first were the financial implications of the generous offer. He figured it would take 2½ percent of the new pay increase, averaging \$810 an employee. But the women's spirit was wonderful, so he promised to investigate the idea.

Two weeks later, Oppenlander and Allen informed the flight attendants that the company would be grateful for such a magnificent gift. But Delta president David Garrett had insisted that the program be totally voluntary. No records on individual giving could be kept by the volunteers, nor could

they create divisive "competitive" fund-raising drives.

Management agreed to convert an Atlanta storeroom into office space. It also provided access to Delta's communication system, including a B767 phone number; use of the payroll department for voluntary deductions and advice on technical and legal details. (Employees could take a pay reduction and not be taxed on the deducted amount.) "Now you're on your own," Garrett told the women.

"We don't want your help," Jean Owens told Garrett, "but we want your money!"

Eager to begin, Whitfield, Owens and Carvelli wrote a brief telex message for employee bulletin boards throughout the Delta system of some 90 cities. On September 21, they announced Project 767—a "grass-roots campaign by the employees to thank the company by buying a Boeing 767" and asked for volunteers to get the project "off the ground and into the air." And they left the B767 phone number.

Their dream plane almost crashed at takeoff. "Most people thought it was a joke," recalls Diane Carvelli. Then, when word leaked to the media, some Delta people were angry because they heard about the idea secondhand.

But many employees were encouraging. Byron Carroll, a mechanic for 18 years, remembers thinking, "That isn't a bad idea;

Delta's been good to me and my family. When my dad died, the company helped my wife and kids fly to the funeral, sent flowers, and several managers wrote letters. It meant a lot to me that they cared." Carroll called the B767 number and volunteered, eager to give something to Delta.

Another employee, Jeff Pruett, favored the idea, but was wary. He went to the president's office. "People want to know, did *you* start this?" asked Pruett. "No," Garrett answered. "But, as an employee, I'm behind it one-hundred percent." Later Pruett went to the flight attendants and offered his help.

The three women asked Carroll and Pruett to join their Atlanta-based committee of 16, dubbed the Project 767 team, which included representatives from most phases of Delta's operations. Though stung by early setbacks, the new committee planned a strategy meeting in Atlanta for October 11, confident that if employees heard more about the proposal, they'd support it.

A few days later, retired maintenance inspector Elmer J. Krebs dropped into the project office to write a check. A volunteer explained, "But you can't. We're not set up for donations, just deductions."

"Listen, young lady," Krebs retorted. "I helped form the foundation of this airline before you were born. Don't tell me I can't be thankful." After a phone call, management approved, opening the door

for substantial support from Delta's retirees and other groups. Dozens of letters poured in from passengers and people outside of Delta's operations. A TWA pilot sent a check and wrote, "I want to share in your gift. I've always looked at Delta as a model for other airlines."

One afternoon five-year-old Adam Peppers, from the Christian City Children's Home, walked into the 767 team office. "Here's twenty-five cents to help buy the plane," he said. Later, a letter came from the home with a check for \$107.35. Delta shop groups have supported the children's home for years. The director explained that when the kids heard about the plane, they said they felt they were part of the "Delta family" and wanted to help. They earned the money through extra chores.

In the first flush of giving, around 25 percent of the employees pledged, but then the momentum slowed down. Realizing that an extraordinary effort would be necessary, committee members applied one of the basic management principles they'd learned at Delta: build faith and trust by keeping lines of communication absolutely clear.

To straighten out rumors and misunderstandings, the Project 767 team developed traveling "road shows," face-to-face meetings in cities served by Delta. The team also recruited 300 volunteers to help provide updated information.

As employees talked among themselves and heard the responses of the public, they recognized what a special opportunity this was for Delta's average worker to say thanks. "I wasn't going to give," admitted one employee. "But my friends kept telling me how lucky I was to work for the company. I guess I had taken it for granted."

By late November, over 50 percent of the employees had signed pledge cards. To spark enthusiasm, the Project 767 people urged employees to wear "Project 767" lapel pins. They displayed progress "thermometers" and sent out copies of letters from passengers and 767 supporters—including one from a company that offered to donate a main fuel manifold, valued at more than \$9000, for one 767 engine. They asked volunteers to plan a last-minute blitz in their cities before the deadline. Their efforts worked. Giving rose to 77 percent.

ON THE MORNING of December 15, 7000 Delta employees gathered at Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport to unveil the flagship of the 767 fleet. Ninety employees,



"The Spirit of Delta," tied with ribbon, at the dedication ceremony

representing cities in the Delta system, joined in lifting the curtains around the sleek silver-and-white jet, emblazoned with "The Spirit of Delta."

Jean Owens and Diane Carvelli presented Dave Garrett with a large, symbolic key to the airplane. Ginny Whitfield, a spark plug of the fund-raising campaign, spoke for the employees: "This is to show our love and appreciation and to say thank you to a company that has always met the needs of the employees."

"It was one of the most emotional times in my life," admits Garrett, when he saw "The Spirit of Delta," tied with a red-velvet ribbon. "I've never felt so much togetherness."

Adam Peppers, the boy from the children's home, was hoisted onto the tug that pulled the 210-passenger jet from the hangar. Then the

Project 767 team joined some paying passengers for the maiden flight to Tampa. TV networks in Europe as well as the United States covered this rare moment in American labor history.

Says William Batten, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of the New York Stock Exchange: "The gift is a dramatic, visible expression of an invisible spirit. It shows that Delta's employees identify their personal well-being with the company well-being. It's not a we-they attitude, but us together. What a symbol this is to American business."

Pledges are still coming in,

and people share a quiet pride in "their" plane. As a tangible thank you, Delta management presented each of the 37,000 employees with a poster of the unveiling of "The Spirit of Delta," together with a square from the red-velvet ribbon.

But it's the intangible that lies at the heart of the gift. Says Delta's Oppenlander, "The plane brought people together. During a difficult time in the airline industry, it united us again as a family." At Delta, there's no higher compliment.

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Carriage Trade

*A*UTHOR SIDNEY SHELDON recalls the following incident:

A few years ago I acquired a lovely blue Rolls-Royce. I parked in front of a shop in Beverly Hills, went inside, did my shopping, returned to my car and got behind the driver's seat of the Rolls. An arm reached through the window and grabbed my shoulder, and a voice said, "What do you think you're doing?" I looked out the window, and there stood an enormous Texan. "This is my car," he said.

"No, it isn't," I told him. "It's mine." To prove it, I started to put the key in the ignition, and it didn't fit. I realized what had happened. I said to him, "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm driving the same model and color Rolls, and I obviously parked right in back of you."

And as he stood there watching me, I got out of the car and walked in back—to my wife's white Volkswagen, which I was driving that morning.

—Robert Morley, *Pardon Me, But You're Eating My Doily!* (St. Martin's)



He's Only Just Begun. I sent a reader a second renewal notice for his subscription to the paper of which I am the editor/manager. The form concluded: "This is the last notice you will receive."

Returning the form with his remittance, the subscriber underscored that last sentence and added: "I hope not. I'm only 95."

—Contributed by George E. Simpson