



**1to1 Magazine**  
03/01/2008  
Issue: March-April 2008  
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Since our inception in 1986 ExpressJet has been one of the largest operators of regional aircraft in the world. We always flew under Continental and other airlines' brands—until last year when we launched our own regional airline under our ExpressJet brand.

This strategic shift posed three major marketing challenges. First, although we were well known among the investment and aviation communities, travelers did not know us as ExpressJet. Second, we were establishing a new model by offering nonstop flights between cities that had been underserved or ignored by other airlines. No other airline, for example, provided nonstop service from LA/Ontario Airport west of Los Angeles to Colorado Springs. Third, our internal management was largely operationally minded as opposed to being focused on consumer marketing. Each of these was made more difficult by our drive to initiate flight services within two months of our announcement.

Two key components of our marketing strategy targeted all three of these issues. First, we sought to simultaneously educate our internal managers on consumer marketing and brand-management techniques and enhance our credibility in the 24 markets where we initially operated. We chose not to send public relations or marketing spokespeople to those communities. Instead, we sent senior managers to each city to run the press conferences and talk to our external stakeholders.

Doing so drove home our commitment to serving each community—our vice president of maintenance, for example, was actually in Austin, TX, explaining to local reporters and community members our 20-year reliability track record. The experience also enabled senior managers to hear directly from their customers. They distributed their business cards, so when customers had subsequent questions or comments they voiced those directly to our senior management teams at each location. We wanted to avoid having the marketing team serving as an intermediary in that dialogue.

Second, we sought to differentiate ourselves from other airlines by taking untraditional, yet highly customer-centric, approaches to installing a back-end ticketing system and customer service infrastructure. Our new sales and reservations platform, for example, enables agents to locate flight information simply by entering a customer's last name. That's new; most, if not all, other airlines require a confirmation number or a flight number and date before a last name can be entered.

Deciding whether in-house or outsourced agents would use this system was challenging; reservationists represent a crucial component of airlines' customer service. We decided to outsource our call center, a model that initially ran counter to my 25 years of airline experience.

The model made sense for us for several reasons. It enabled us to go to market more quickly than a captive call center model. It was more advantageous from a cost perspective, which was not an overriding factor, but still important. The outsourced model also enabled us to be more flexible in our staffing—a key factor because our call volumes would be unpredictable until we were operating for several months.

We selected Alpine Access, because 1) they used an employee model as opposed to a contractor model, which gave us more control over managing and motivating our agents; and 2) they did not have airline experience. While some vendors promoted the fact that they had airline industry clients, we saw that experience as potentially hindering our drive to differentiate. We want to be known as a transportation provider, and Alpine Access's track record in industries known for higher levels of customer service appealed to us.

Within days of launching the call center, I overcame my outsourcing reluctance. Our vendor's technology, which offers such capabilities as allowing us to send instant message to agents, gives us as much control as we would have using a captive model, but with greater staffing flexibility at a lower cost.

Our customers agree: 10 percent of the comments our call center receives are compliments. Based on my industry experience, that's a lofty figure, and it's one of the prime illustrations of the success of our launch.

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