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BUSI

Southwest execs say customer service key to success for airline

By Elwin Green
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The lovefest welcoming Southwest Airlines to Pittsburgh continued yesterday morning with company President Colleen C. Barrett opening a breakfast meeting with the African-American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania by declaring, "I am in love with your city."

Barrett said she's been overwhelmed by the friendliness of the people she has encountered here, an apropos segue into a key theme she and others repeatedly mentioned when

discussing Southwest's success — its emphasis on customer service.

"We fly airplanes but our business is customer service," explained Beverly Carmichael, vice president of labor and employee relations and one of three senior female executives who accompanied Barrett at the meeting.

Barrett told the story of an experienced and highly recommended pilot who spoke rudely to a reservation agent when making arrangements for a job interview — they told him not to even bother coming in.

In other comments during

what was more a question-and-answer session than a presentation:

- Donna Conover, executive vice president of customer operations, said the airline should be safe from the run-up in and volatility of oil prices because it has locked in low prices on its fuel supply for several years. Fuel is the airline's second-largest expense.

- Barrett said the company would "concentrate on what we're doing first" before seeking to add flights to more locations, as some in the audience had hoped would occur. But, she added, "The chances of our growth here are wonderful." Southwest began operations at Pittsburgh International on May 4, with 10 flights a day — four to Philadelphia; four to Chicago's Midway Airport; one to Orlando, Fla.; and one to Las Vegas.

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