

Humor Helps Profits Soar

By John Wagner

Can humor, laughter, and fun help you laugh all the way to the bank?

Some businesses are already discovering that fun at work isn't simply a catch-phrase; it is a way to empower people and to boost revenue. Kevin and Jackie Freiburg detail a case in point in their book about Southwest Airlines and its CEO, Herb Kelleher, entitled Nuts. They observe, "Fun is taken very seriously at Southwest Airlines, and the company's recruiting and hiring practices are built upon the idea that humor can help people thrive during change, remain creative under pressure, work more effectively, play more enthusiastically, and stay healthier and more positive in the process."

The Southwest philosophy is simple yet effective. Think funny, adopt a playful attitude, be the first to laugh, laugh with people – not at them, and take work seriously but not themselves. The CEO, Herb Kelleher, lead the way in nuttiness and truly encouraged risk-taking by showing up at a company meeting dressed like Elvis riding in on a Harley. He settled a legal dispute with a competitor with an arm wrestling event which was covered extensively by the news media. Can you say "free publicity?"

Southwest employees are encouraged to have fun and bring their personalities to work. According to an article in *USA Today*, flight attendant, Larry Edwards, made this announcement when he saw a few passengers uptight about a rough take off, "The captain can get the plane off the ground all by himself, so those of you gripping the arm rest can stop lifting now."

Cute but does this fun stuff boost the bottom-line? Southwest Airlines has turned a profit every year for 26 years. They are an industry leader in on-time departures and arrivals, and have the fewest customer complaints. They have the best safety record in the industry. Southwest was even picked the number one best company to work for by *Fortune* magazine in 1998.

Businesses succeed by doing more, faster, with higher quality, and using fewer resources than their competitors. Being a success in business can create stress. Business people need to lighten up. Just like the shock absorbers on a car, which keep rough roads from shaking the car apart, humor can keep the challenges of a livelihood from rattling us into a quivering mass of protoplasm. Taking ourselves lightly and our work seriously is an effective business strategy. I am not talking about goofing off but playfulness with a purpose.

The Container Store was number one in the year 2000 *Fortune* survey, Southwest Airlines is number two. The Container Store also works to create a fun atmosphere and managers empower employees to use humor to keep positive energy flowing. The Seattle Pike Place Fish Market's motto is "work made fun gets done". Imagine a fish market where the employees throw fish to each other to expedite orders, and to entertain customers. This is another great example of an organization using positive humor. Learn more about their philosophy by reading the book Fish, a Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results by Lundin, Paul and Christensen.

In my work as a humorist and professional speaker I have helped people in various organizations learn how to use the positive power of humor to enhance cooperation and teamwork, to improve communication, to eliminate conflicts, to supercharge creativity, to boost morale, to take responsibility, to improve relationships, and to build self-esteem through recognition and celebration. Humor can help positively change people's attitudes and actions, and energize organizations.

If positive humor can improve results in the serious airline industry how might it help boost your business? Not to mention it will increase the laugh lines on your face as you make your way to the bank. See you are already smiling just thinking about it.

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