

JetBlue customers found little solace by calling the airline's reservations hotline or visiting JetBlue.com on the World Wide Web. By Friday, February 16, many callers who dialed the company's telephone number were greeted by a recorded voice that said, "We are experiencing extremely high call volume. . . . We are unable to take your call." Additionally, JetBlue's website listed flights as on schedule for departure, when the carrier had already cancelled many of those flights.²⁰ Widespread instances of lost baggage would only further infuriate JetBlue customers whose travel plans were disrupted by the Valentine's Day storm.

JetBlue soon discovered that many of its planes and flight crews scattered across the rest of the country were out of place due to the disruptions at its New York hub. The carrier was forced to cancel more than 250 of its 505 daily flights scheduled for Valentine's Day.²¹ JetBlue called off 217 of its 562 scheduled departures for February 15 as well.²²

"We had a problem matching aircraft with flight crews," said Jenny Dervin, JetBlue's director of corporate communications.²³ Company leaders quickly settled upon a strategy designed to "reset" the airline's operations. "Sometime in the afternoon [of February 16], it just fell apart," said Dervin.²⁴ "The folks running the operation [were] just exhausted. We said, 'Let's stop the madness.'" The plan to reset operations came at a steep price: JetBlue was forced to cancel approximately 1,200 flights between February 14 and February 19.

David Neeleman cited multiple operational failures that compounded the crisis. Among the primary culprits: inadequate communication

protocols to direct the company's 11,000 pilots and flight attendants about where to go and when; an overwhelmed reservation system; and a lack of cross-trained employees who could work outside their primary area of expertise during an emergency.²⁵

"We had so many people in the company who wanted to help who weren't trained to help," Neeleman said.²⁶ "We had an emergency control center full of people who didn't know what to do. I had flight attendants sitting in hotel rooms for three days who couldn't get a hold of us. I had pilots e-mailing me saying, 'I'm available, what do I do?'"

The cancellations during the five-day period cost the airline an estimated \$20 million in revenue and an additional \$24 million in flight vouchers given to customers who were impacted by the disruptions.²⁷ Within days of the storm, JetBlue lowered its operating margin forecast for the fiscal quarter and the year; investors immediately responded by selling off their shares of Jet Blue stock.²⁸ As the losses mounted, Neeleman became obsessed with finding a way to restore JetBlue's sterling reputation and win back disillusioned customers.

MISERY LOVES COVERAGE

"Call it the perfect storm, the imperfect storm, the Valentine's Day Massacre," said one JetBlue vice president.²⁹ Regardless of the label that the public affixed to the crisis, JetBlue officials knew the media interest in the story would be sky high. The company's corporate communications department fielded roughly 5,000 telephone

²⁰ M. Daly, "How Two Pilots Put Silver Lining in JetBlue Clouds," *New York Daily News*, February 18, 2007, p. 12.

²¹ Bailey, "Long Delays Hurt Image of JetBlue."

²² Strickler, "Stormy Weather."

²³ Lee, "JetBlue Flight Snarls Continue."

²⁴ J. Bailey, "JetBlue Cancels More Flights, Leading to Passenger Discord," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2007, p. A31.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ P. Korkki, "Investors Mostly Glum in a Short Trading Week," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2007, p. C10.

²⁹ B. Capps, "Management's Misjudgment Gives JetBlue a Black Eye," *Advertising Age* 78, no. 18 (April 30, 2007). Retrieved November 10, 2007, from Business Source Premier database.