

Special guests

Engaged employees drive Canadian airline WestJet's success

By Marcy Woodhull



They succeed because they care. Owners care.

That is a mantra of the 8,300 WestJetters, otherwise known as employees of the Canadian airline WestJet. The company even made a rap video, on YouTube, timed with its November 2010 profit-sharing payout. Not only were employees featured in the video, but

president and CEO Gregg Saretsky was break dancing, decked out in full rap regalia, as was the rest of WestJet's executive team.

They may not take themselves seriously, but they take their jobs very seriously. Safety, passenger comfort and service are paramount to the Calgary, Alberta-based airline. In fact, WestJetters strive to offer all passengers, known as "guests" in WestJet parlance, what the company calls a "great guest experience"—every step of the way.

It pays off. WestJet has received praise for its corporate culture.

In 2010, WestJet was inducted into Canada's 10 Most Admired Corporate Cultures Hall of Fame, one of the highest honors a Canadian company can receive. Its flight attendants were named the best in Canada in a survey by the Flight Network travel website, and WestJet was named a JD Power Customer Service Champion, one of only two Canadian companies to receive the designation.

"These awards, in particular, speak to the way our culture of caring translates into a great guest experience," Saretsky said.

Founded in 1996 by a team of Calgary entrepreneurs, WestJet began as a regional carrier with three Boeing airplanes flying to five cities. Just 15 years later, WestJet has a fleet of 96 aircraft, all Boeing 737 Next-Generation airplanes, and flies to 71 destina-

tions in Canada, the United States, Mexico and the Caribbean.

Since its inception, WestJet has enjoyed sustained profitability and continued growth. The airline employs cost efficiencies that benefit WestJet employee owners, as well as airline guests.

"First and foremost, our WestJetters truly care about their company," Saretsky said. "And I say 'their' company because over 85 percent of our workforce owns shares in WestJet. When you own something, you have a vested interest in its well-being and, ultimately, its success."

WestJet and Boeing enjoy a mutually supportive and successful partnership, said Kevin Schemm, North America and Leasing Sales vice president for Commercial Airplanes. "We respect each other and have a collaborative working relationship."

Saretsky agreed. "We enjoy a great rapport on all levels, from the executive suite right through our line managers."

WestJet is looking forward to learning more about Boeing's new 737 MAX and the role it might play in the WestJet fleet, Saretsky said of the more fuel-efficient 737 now under development.

By next year, the WestJet fleet will number 100 Boeing 737s. The airline may add capacity on existing routes or announce new destinations and routes, according to Saretsky.

"It's important to take a long-term view of things," he said, "and continue to build this very young airline and reach our objective to be one of the top five international airlines in the world." ■

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PHOTOS: (Above) Gregg Saretsky, WestJet president and CEO. **WESTJET (Below)** A Boeing 737-700 in WestJet livery takes off from Boeing Field in Seattle. **JIM ANDERSON/BOEING**

