



# Working for the brand



**Injecting enthusiasm and** a sense of ownership among employees is a crucial first step in establishing a culture upon which strong brands are built. Southwest Airlines is regarded as an organization that has long excelled on this front.

“Putting people first is so important to any brand,” explained Ginger Hardage, recently retired SVP of culture and communications at Southwest Airlines, who delivered the keynote prior to the panel. “If you have happy employees, they will take care of your customers and your shareholders are going to be served.”

Hardage shared some strategies that underscore the philosophy that continues to drive Southwest (*see right*), but that can certainly be adopted by any brand.

“Make sure employees feel like owners,” she noted. “When they do, they build your brand from the inside out.”

## 1. Hire tough so you can manage easy



**370,000** résumés received  
**6,000** employees  
**2%** hired

“Last year, Southwest Airlines hired only 2% of the people who applied,” reports Hardage. “The lesson: hire tough so you can manage easy. Make sure you’re getting the best employees who have their values aligned with yours.”

## 2. Don’t be too prescriptive



A young flier left his most prized possession, Hanover Bear, on a flight from Jacksonville, Florida, to Kansas City, Missouri. After his mother called Southwest, one employee — totally of her own volition — not only made sure to find the teddy bear, but get it back to the boy within two days, complete with a handwritten note from Hanover Bear.

“If you’re too prescriptive,” advises Hardage, “your employees might not come up with these wonderful, creative ways for solving problems and surprising and delighting your customer.”

## 3. It is a calling



**71%** It is my calling  
**17%** It is a job  
**12%** It is a steppingstone in my career

“On our employee survey,” notes Hardage, “we ask how they would describe their work at Southwest Airlines. Is it a job? A steppingstone? A calling? For us, 71% said it is a calling. That’s something we all seek in our organizations to make sure employees feel that level of ownership. If you don’t ask this question in your employee survey, I encourage you to do so.”

# Key takeaways

### Start with your employees, don’t end with them

They shouldn’t be the afterthought in comms. You need a deliberate strategy to inspire their hearts and minds and make them feel connected to your organization.

### You’re nothing if you’re not authentic

Whether it’s the stories or the experiences, everything a brand does must be true to its character or consumers will see through it.

### Brand is a two-way street

Relevance is more important than volume in storytelling. You must meet stakeholders where they are. Your stories must be adaptable for different audiences.

### Brand and culture are two sides of the same coin

The brand you present to the world is heavily based on your organization’s culture. You can’t think about one without the other.

### Leaders must energize the team

A key part of engagement is ensuring staffers remember why the organization does what it does. It enthralls the workforce and enables them to best represent the brand.

### It starts with the right hire

Employees are the foundation of inside-out brand building, so it’s vital to bring in people who are good fits and to immediately create emotional connections for them.