

Mission Ready

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Offer 'Em a Challenge They Can't Refuse

Many of us think of Boeing as a conservative, button down company, whose business philosophy might reflect the patient, cautious bias characteristic of aerospace engineers. But just as mild mannered engineers often ride Harleys on the weekend, or skydive, Boeing has an adventurous side. The organization is not afraid to take a calculated gamble.

When United Airlines asked the three major airplane manufacturers—Boeing, Airbus and (then) McDonald Douglas—for an airliner for the 21st Century, the competition was fierce. United wanted a jetliner smaller and more economical than the 747, but bigger and with a longer range capacity than the 767. McDonald Douglas submitted its new, beautiful MD 80, Airbus its already famous A 330, and Boeing submitted a blueprint—a design vs. two proven, FAA approved state of the art airplanes. United liked Boeing's design but feared the lengthy FAA approval process, which normally takes years, would postpone United's ability to start flying the proposed plane, dubbed the "777." Boeing said, "Don't worry; our 777 will come out of the box with FAA approval."

This was a major gamble on the part of Boeing. The FAA, infamous for being a slow moving, conservative government bureaucracy, liked to take its time evaluating a new passenger jet. But Boeing offered the FAA a challenge, unprecedented in the aerospace industry: it would make the first 777 available exclusively to the FAA, for a torture test of non-stop take-offs and landings that would compress years of in-flight service into months—until the FAA was convinced of the plane's reliability. The FAA had nothing to lose. For an organization committed to air safety to have a plane dedicated to whatever tests it could devise was too good to be true. The FAA accepted the challenge, and ended up approving the new plane within six months.

All of us who are trying to earn the confidence of our customers should take note. When you offer a customer a challenge they can't refuse (such as "Suppose I can help you reduce your operating costs by 20 %?") they will listen. Your customer will have nothing to lose by accepting your challenge; you will have everything to gain.