

## Masks are the New Boarding Pass: Delta Air Lines Implements Strict Mask Mandate



*Delta flight attendant greets customer and hands them hand sanitizer (Delta News Hub, 2020)*

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## ▲ Synopsis: What's the Flight Plan?

In March, Delta Air Lines led the way in its safety response to the COVID-19 pandemic by becoming one of the first airlines to require all passengers to wear masks while aboard Delta flights and also by publicly announcing the banning of passengers indefinitely who refuse to comply. Delta and other U.S. airlines began requiring passengers and crew members to wear masks on flights in May. However, flight crews initially had little ability or direction on enforcing the requirements. In June, most U.S. airlines, including Delta, said it would begin adding passengers who refused to cooperate to its internal no-fly lists. Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian said recently, "For political reasons, or other reasons, they insisted on not wearing a mask after being asked multiple times to put it back on. So they're not going to fly Delta. They're not going to have the privilege" (Slotnick, 2020).

This decision demonstrates a risk for Delta for several reasons. First, with masks being politicized following the COVID-19 pandemic and ahead of the U.S. elections, coming out strongly in favor of masks creates the potential to alienate potential customers. Meanwhile, this decision comes at a time when Delta Air Lines was losing approximately \$100 million per day in March at the beginning of the pandemic - a circumstance that would make many companies think twice before risking the loss of current and future revenue. Despite the financial ramifications, Delta Air Lines has won favor with its stakeholders - namely its employees and the majority of the mask policy-abiding passengers who appreciate a safe flying experience. Anticipating public reaction, the company has also implemented several layers of communication around mask-wearing expectations (and the consequences of non-compliance), so no passenger is surprised or unprepared.

## ▲ The Pilot: A bird's eye view of the corporation

Delta Air Lines Inc. is one of the largest commercial airlines in the world. Delta originally began in 1925 as a crop-dusting business and then transitioned into the first commercial agricultural aviation company. Founder C.E. Woolman purchased the company in 1928 and later moved the business to its current headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1941 (Gay, 2019).

In 2019, Delta carried 204 million passengers to 242 unique destinations, 52 countries, and six continents (Creedy, 2020). The company currently has nine domestic hubs and is partnered with Air France-KLM, Virgin Atlantic, Virgin Australia, WestJet, Korean Air, Aeromexico, China Eastern, and LATAM (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020k). The airline company was also a founder of the SkyTeam Alliance in 2000, which has partnerships with more than 20 additional countries (Gay, 2019).

Ed Bastian was named Delta's CEO in 2016 and remains in the position today. In 2018, Fortune Magazine named Bastian one of "The World's 50 Greatest Leaders." Shortly after becoming CEO, Bastian increased the donations to charity to 1% of the company's yearly net income. Bastian has brought financial growth, increased humanitarian efforts, and an emphasis on the company's core values (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020p).

Delta Air Lines' mission statement, vision statement, and core values are as follows:

- **Mission statement:** "we—Delta's employees, customers, and community partners together form a force for positive local and global change, dedicated to bettering standards of living and the environment where we and our customers live and work" (Mission Statement Academy, 2020).
- **Vision statement:** "To be the World's Most Trusted Airline."
- **Core values:** diversity and inclusion, honesty, integrity, respect, perseverance, and servant leadership (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020k).

In addition, the company provides a strong statement on its commitment to humanitarian work; "Delta believes our social responsibility lies at the intersection of our core values and core competencies, making a difference in communities where our employees live, work and fly by giving time, talents and 1 percent of the company's annual profits" (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020k).

In 2019, the company donated \$60 million and 80,000 volunteer hours to its communities. They also donated to and provided assistance to causes advancing education, improving global health and wellness, fighting human trafficking, and supporting armed forces and veterans (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020k). Also, after the George Floyd murder, the company released a statement pledging to double its number of Black Officers and Directors by 2025 in addition to doubling its spending with Black-owned businesses (Bastian, 2020d).

Delta is the world's most-awarded airline for both passengers and employee experience. It has placed first in the Business Travel News Annual Airline Survey for the past ten consecutive years (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020k). Delta works to ensure its passengers experience comfortable, reliable, and safe travel. They offer complimentary carry-on baggage, a variety of in-flight entertainment and dining options, and various levels of cabin seating, including Basic Economy, Main Cabin, Delta Comfort+ First Class, Delta Premium Select, and Delta One. The most luxurious offering is Delta One, where passengers enjoy a personal pod with a seat that lays completely flat (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020b). Also, they offer paid access to Delta Sky Clubs located in airports, and a Delta SkyMiles Rewards Program and credit card, which awards points that can be redeemed for free flights to enhance customer experience and loyalty (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020k).

Delta also actively works to prioritize its employees. In 2019, Delta had a team of more than 90,000 workers, 12,500 of which were pilots (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020a). The company's focus on employee relations has earned it multiple awards, such as one of the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For, for the past four years. Ed Bastian also values company culture, stating, "My most important job as CEO is taking care of our people. If you take care of your people, they take care of your customers, whose business and loyalty allows you to reward your investors" (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020c).

The company's commitment to core values and passenger and employee experience is paying off. Since declaring bankruptcy in 2008 and recovering, Delta has experienced steep financial gains in the last decade and showed no signs of slowing down (Gay, 2019). Delta's main competitors are United Continental Holdings, Southwest Airlines Co, and American Airlines Group (Neugarten, 2020). However, in 2019 Delta claimed the title of the world's largest airline based on revenue, edging out American Airlines for the first time. The airline company increased its revenue by 6 percent in 2019, for a total revenue of \$47 billion (Yamanouchi, 2020). For shareholders, the earnings per share were \$7.31, a 30 percent increase from 2018, and Delta returned \$3 billion and \$980 billion in dividends (Delta Air Lines, 2020f). A huge milestone for the company was the day after Thanksgiving, where Delta made \$200 million in one day (Yamanouchi, 2019). The company also provided employees with a record-breaking \$1.6 billion in profit sharing in 2019 (Delta Air Lines, 2020f).

Delta Air Lines had its best financial year in 2019, and the company showed no sign of slowing down in 2020. Ed Bastian stated in the company's annual report, "2019 was a truly outstanding year on all fronts - the best in Delta's history operationally, financially and for our customers. As we enter 2020, demand for travel is healthy, and our brand preference is growing, positioning Delta to deliver another year of strong results" (Delta Air Lines, 2020f).

### ▲ Lift-Off: The Coronavirus Takes Flight

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak first began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and quickly spread to the rest of the world, affecting public health, the economy, travel, and everyday life (Taylor, 2020a). Travel bans and many "stay at home orders" designed to prevent the spread of the virus, hit the travel industry the earliest and hardest. Worldwide, there was an 80 percent decrease in international flights at the onset of the virus (Santos, 2020). As of October 2020, airline passenger revenue loss is \$314 billion from United States' passengers alone (Mazareanu, 2020). Travel demand also currently remains low because of the coronavirus. In October, a National Geographic study found only 13 percent of Americans said they would feel comfortable flying before the end of 2020, with 24 percent saying they would fly sometime in 2021. For many, the ongoing pandemic makes it difficult to imagine traveling in a post-COVID future, with 32 percent of Americans not giving a date of when they would fly again, stating that they just "did not know" (Barger & Elliott, 2020).

There were critical points throughout the escalation of the Coronavirus pandemic where Delta Air Lines implemented changes to its policies and procedures to ensure its customers and employees' health and safety. Delta also took strategic measures to protect the interests of its financial stakeholders and the company's interests.



*Flight attendants talk in a nearly empty cabin on a Delta Airlines flight, amid concerns of the COVID-19, during a flight from Salt Lake City, Utah, April 11, 2020*

Mid-January 2020, when the viral outbreak was more of a looming threat of a larger medical emergency, the United States began running public health screenings for any travelers coming into the country from China at three major international airports, San Francisco (SFO), New York (JFK) and Los Angeles (LAX) (CDC, 2020a). Shortly after the public health screenings began, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global public health emergency and President Donald Trump suspended all international flight travel from and to China (AJMC, 2020). When the first case of COVID-19 hit the United States on January 20, 2020, and 87,000 global cases were recorded, Trump gave Americans a "do not travel" warning to Italy and South Korea (Taylor, 2020a). Delta was one of the airlines first impacted by this declaration, as it completely suspended its 42 weekly flights to China for eight weeks (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020g) and reduced its weekly flights to South Korea and Italy by about one-third (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020h).

Just six weeks later, on March 11, 2020, WHO Director elevated the viral outbreak of coronavirus to a pandemic. "WHO has been assessing this outbreak around the clock, and we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction. We have, therefore, made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic." (WHO, 2020) Then, on March 13, 2020, the President officially declared a "National Emergency," the WHO banned gatherings of 50 people, public schools across the nation closed, and many state governments enacted "stay at home" orders (Taylor, 2020a). Also, on March 13, 2020, airlines took precautionary measures, with Delta cutting middle seats and capacity on its flights by 40%, which was an unprecedented cut, and exceeded the company's cuts after the September 11 terrorist attacks (CNBC, 2020). Delta also reduced its active fleet by 600 planes, which is about half, and began retiring older

aircraft earlier than expected (Bastian, 2020a). Ed Bastian also announced he would be cutting his salary completely from March to September and reducing the salaries of all Delta officers and board of directors (Bastian, 2020b).

As Delta reported its first-quarter financials, the company lost \$8.6 billion in total revenue, an 18 percent decrease from the 2019 quarter. Chief Financial Paul Jacobson stated, "with the significant impact of COVID-19 on Delta's revenue, we were burning \$100 million per day at the end of March"(Delta Air Lines, 2020i).

Delta Air Lines' response to customers about this change in global public health emergency came quickly, as Ed Bastian issued a memo to customers on March 15, 2020. He announced Delta's plan, now known as "Delta CareStandard," to install HEPA air filtration systems throughout its planes and implement enhanced routine cleanings (Bastian, 2020a). One of the company's new disinfectant protocols was a new way to clean the cabins of its airplanes by the fleet, called fogging, where employees walk the isles of the plane in between flights and blast bacterial and viral killing fog blankets over all surfaces before a cleaning crew comes in to physically clean each surface (Pallini, 2020). Bastian also announced it would be easier for customers to change, reschedule and cancel their current flight reservations, and mentioned they would address questions about customer SkyMiles in the future (Bastian, 2020a).

About two weeks later, Delta made another addition to "Delta CareStandard," deciding to limit its inflight food and beverage offerings to only what was deemed essential. Whether customers were provided a beverage like individually bottled water with a small, sealed bag of pretzels or one of the pre-packed, non-perishable "Flight Fuel boxes" depended on the duration and distance of the flight, with the ultimate goal to "lessen the physical touchpoints on board" (Yasharoff, 2020).

### ▲ Turbulence: Anti-maskers

In addition to devastating economic effects on the travel industry, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic also led to polarizing beliefs in the United States about the legitimacy of the virus, and the effectiveness of wearing masks. According to a Pew Research study, five percent of Americans believe the coronavirus was definitely planned intentionally by people in power, and 20 percent believe this theory is probably true. The divide between beliefs of the coronavirus being a hoax falls in line with Republican and Democratic political parties, with one-third of Republicans believing this theory is true, compared to 18 percent of Democrats (Schaeffer, 2020). This is important because those who believe conspiracy theories about COVID-19 or who believe the virus is a hoax are less likely to believe wearing masks are effective.

In addition to the virus itself being polarized, a side-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is the emergence of a new movement: the anti-mask movement. Anti-maskers are individuals who do not believe in the effectiveness of wearing masks to fight COVID-19 (Collman, 2020). Anti-

maskers cite a variety of reasons for this belief, which range from mild to extreme. Mild anti-maskers may slightly believe masks are annoying, unfair, ugly, or just pointless, but they comply and wear them anyway. Extreme anti-maskers may additionally believe masks are a violation of freedom enforced upon them by the government, masks cause health problems from increased breathing of CO<sub>2</sub>, or that the coronavirus is a conspiracy theory. Extreme anti-maskers differ from mild anti-maskers because they speak out against masks and actively fight to wear a mask in public. There have been various forms of protests held by anti-maskers throughout the pandemic, from individuals personally refusing to wear masks in public spaces to groups of anti-maskers coming together for organized marches anti-mask shopping events (Stewart, 2020).



*Anti-maskers are people who does not believe in the effectiveness of wearing a mask to stop the spread of COVID-19*

Partially, this divide between maskers and anti-maskers can be attributed to communications about the effectiveness of masks at the beginning of the pandemic and leadership support and enforcement of mask-wearing (Collman, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) did not recommend the general public to wear face masks to prevent the spread of the virus at the beginning of the pandemic. However, in early April 2020, as the number of positive cases continued to grow and the death toll continued to rise, wearing masks or other appropriate face coverings was being considered as a way to curb the spread of the coronavirus, or even as a possible solution. At the time, it was unclear whether masks were only needed to be worn by someone who was positive for coronavirus or if everyone should wear masks in public spaces.

Then, on April 3, 2020, the CDC reversed its position and recommended the use of double-layered, breathable cloth face coverings, especially in areas of significant community-based transmission. The shift of paradigm from not recommending to promoting the use of face masks was based on the rationale of pre-symptomatic shedding of SARS-Cov-2 and the presence of asymptomatic patients with high viral load in the community (Cheng, 2020). As noted in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention article from April 23, "...mechanistic studies found that surgical masks could prevent transmission of human coronavirus and influenza virus infections if worn by infected persons" (Chiang, 2020).

However, health organizations still differed on if masks were effective. WHO issued an interim guideline regarding the use of masks in the context of COVID-19 on April 6, 2020, stating no evidence that wearing a mask by healthy persons in the wider community setting can prevent the acquisition of COVID-19. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control issued a technical report on April 8, 2020, stating that the use of face masks in the community could be considered, especially when visiting busy, closed spaces, despite not knowing how much the use of masks in the community can contribute to a decrease in transmission in addition to the other countermeasures.

At the time, the CDC's new recommendation to wear a mask was voluntary and the national or federal governments did not enforce it. In reaction to the CDC's reversal announcement, President Donald Trump announced at a press conference that he would not wear a mask, stating, "you can do it. You don't have to do it. I'm choosing not to do it" (Lopez, 2020). The President's disapproval for masks set the stage for a divide between maskers and anti-maskers along political party lines. Many Americans who supported Donald Trump felt they did not need to wear masks since the President denounced wearing them many times and did not publicly wear a mask himself until July (Collman, 2020).

### ▲ Course Correction: Delta Takes Action

Even with the inconsistent information in April on what would be most beneficial to recommend, Delta Air Lines took pre-emptive measures and provided face masks to all employees based on the new CDC recommendations, and encouraged customers to do the same as of April 10, 2020. However, with the ever-changing situation of the coronavirus pandemic, the CDC again released new best practices guidelines at the beginning of May 2020, recommending all individuals congregating in an enclosed area to wear an appropriate face mask or face covering (Dwyer & Aubrey, 2020).



Between May to June 2020, United, Southwest, American Airlines, and other major airlines started enforcing face mask rules, making masks mandatory throughout the flight travel process. From check-in to baggage claim, customers were now required to keep one's mask in place throughout the travel journey, with the only exception of briefly drinking or eating (Taylor, 2020b). Communications of these changes, and the many more to come, have been handled through various methods like press releases that went live through print, online, or video, direct emails to customers, and published articles on the Delta News Hubs. The Delta News Hub hosts write-ups, stories, and videos covering a vast amount of information pertinent to any Delta customer. It also holds a plethora of details about rules and regulations the airlines has implemented during the pandemic. The initial communication of the mandatory mask policy was sent via email to all existing Delta customers and published to the



Delta News Hub on May 5, 2020, where Delta CEO Ed Bastian outlined three major, temporary, changes to "Delta CareStandard" in an Ed Bastian Customer Update:

- **Requiring masks to keep everyone safe.**  
Temporarily implementing a requirement for everyone to wear face masks or face coverings - Delta employees included - in the check-in lobby, Delta Sky Clubs, gate areas, jet bridges, and onboard Delta aircrafts.
- **Giving more space on board with new seating policies.**  
To help limit the number and proximity of people while moving about the cabin, this new regulation started back-to-front boarding, and capped seating at 50 percent in First Class and 60 percent in Main Cabin, as well as created new seating policies that keep middle seats blocked. On planes without middle seats, select aisle and window seats are blocked. As a customer deplanes, reminders to create distance between one another occur.
- **Expanding efforts to keep space and surfaces sanitized.**  
There is now the use of electrostatic sprayers to sanitize every aircraft before each departure, in addition to extensive cleaning measures already in place to clean high-touch areas before every flight (Bastian, 2020c).

This new mandatory regulation allowed for an exemption for individuals with medical conditions that may prohibit them from wearing a mask. However, those individuals were required to complete a rigorous pre-boarding process to earn 'Clearance-to-Fly' with Delta, which could take over an hour to complete and required reservations in advance (Fox, 2020). While most major airlines have eliminated any medical exemptions to these rules, Delta Air Lines has not, stating in a CNN article,

**"We encourage customers who are prevented from wearing a mask due to a health condition to reconsider travel. If they decide to travel, they will be welcome to fly upon completing a virtual consultation prior to departure at the airport to ensure everyone's safety, because nothing is more important" (Muntean & Silverman, 2020).**

As of June 16, 2020, the United States death toll surpassed 100,000, and the global death toll over 200,000 (Woodward et al., 2020). Delta Air Lines took its "Delta CareStandard" policies one step further, announcing that individuals who chose not to comply with the mandatory mask policy, implemented just a few weeks prior, would risk future flight privileges and being placed on its internal 'No-Fly' list (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020j). This included individuals who made any false claims of a disability or health condition to acquire an exemption from wearing a mask or face covering through the 'Clearance-to-Fly' process. (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020e)

**"We take our mask requirement seriously. That's why customers are not allowed to board a Delta aircraft without wearing a mask and must follow crew member instructions to properly wear a mask in flight. Those who choose not to comply with this or other safety requirements risk future flight privileges with Delta, which is in keeping with the face-covering enforcement policies\_Airlines for America recently announced" (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020l).**

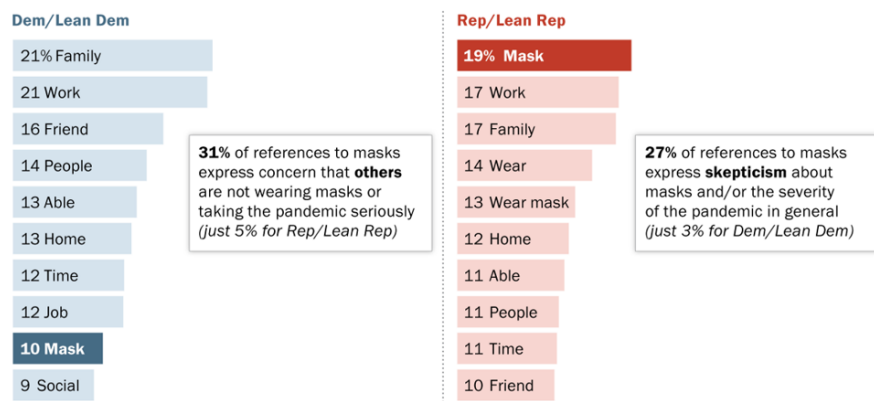
Another method of communication of these rules and regulations and the severity of not abiding by them has been through public interviews with Bastian on major news broadcasting stations like CNN, CBS, and The New York Times. Bastian reported in an interview with CNN Business on July 20, 2020, "Masks are mandated on Delta, and for any customer who's not wearing a mask will not gain access to the airplane. If a customer does not choose to keep their mask on that customer's going to lose their right to fly Delta for a period of time. We warn them several times during the flight, we've had some customers we've had to put on those lists but generally speaking, compliance is pretty good" (Muntean et al., 2020).

Although public opinion of masks had shifted throughout the summer, and 70 percent of Americans believed people should wear masks in public places most of the time, the anti-masker movement continued to grow along partisan lines. According to a Pew Research study, by June, "Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents are about twice as likely as Republicans and Republican leaners to say that masks should be worn always (63% vs. 29%). Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to say that masks should rarely or never be worn (23% vs. 4%)" (Pew Research Center, 2020). In addition, when asked about the hardships the pandemic has caused, Republicans are more likely to mention wearing masks and mask mandates than Democrats (Kessel & Quinn, 2020).

Currently, Delta's mask enforcements can only be applied to customers before boarding and take-off. The company has no power to enforce customers to continue to wear masks while in the air (Singh, 2020). Delta believes a federal mandate enforcing masks or appropriate face-covering across all airlines would help the company continue to require mask-wearing once in the air, but it does not appear likely to happen. As of December 2020, there still is no federal mandate. In a different interview with the Washington Post LIVE on August 3, 2020, Bastian stated, "the airline will continue to enforce its mask mandate, even if the federal government doesn't make a regulation. So far, Delta has placed about 130 people who have refused to wear masks on a no-fly list" (Caren, 2020). The interview continues to go into a bit more detail about how individuals who end up on that no-fly list are greeted upon exit of the plane, given a

**Republicans mention masks or mask wearing more often than Democrats when asked how COVID-19 pandemic has made their life difficult or challenging**

*In an open ended question, % in each group who mentioned the following words or terms*



Note: Each list contains the 10 words or phrases that appeared in the most survey responses from members of each party. Terms have been reduced to their root form (e.g., "wearing masks" to "wear mask"), and 339 common English words (e.g., "and," "from") were excluded. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

card, and told they have had their flight privileges with Delta Air Lines revoked until further notice.

Throughout the summer and the fall, Delta Air Lines continued to add passengers who refused to wear masks to the "no-fly list." However, despite anti-maskers and growing protests, Delta stood firm on its decision. In addressing anti-maskers, Ed Bastian said, "For political reasons, or other reasons, they insisted on not wearing a mask after being asked multiple times to put it back on. So they're not going to fly Delta. They're not going to have the privilege" (Slotnick, 2020). Currently, as of November 12, 2020, there are 550 passengers on Delta's "no-fly list" (Manskar, 2020).

### ▲ Tailspin: The Risks and Negative Reception

Delta Air Lines took a vocal stance on its mask-wearing policy enforcement, knowing it would receive a mixed reaction among its stakeholders. As of June, when Delta made its first announcement about banning passengers who refuse to comply, mask-wearing had already become politicized, with many seeing it as a political statement or an infringement of their personal liberties. According to the Associated Press in May, masks had already become "a visual shorthand for the debate pitting those willing to follow health officials' guidance and cover their faces against those who feel it violates their freedom or buys into a threat they think is overblown" (Weissert & Lemire, 2020). As of July, there was already an increasing number of instances of public health officials being vilified for their roles during the pandemic, according to the American Hospital Association (Pollack, 2020).



*Robert O'Neill was banned from Delta Air Lines shortly after taking a mask less picture.*

In fact, this sentiment did play out to some extent among Delta passengers and was further amplified on social media and alternative media sources. For example, as reported on the New York Post and Fox News, Robert O'Neill, the former Navy SEAL credited with killing

Osama Bin Laden, created a media uproar when he took a mask-less selfie aboard a Delta flight as a "peaceful protest" and was subsequently banned from the airline (Myer 2020).

O'Neill's social media attack on Delta following his banning gained the attention of Fox Business News anchor David Asman, who opened a segment on the cable news program "Cavuto Coast to Coast" stating, "Now to the not-so-friendly skies where an American hero is saying Delta Air Lines is banning him for not wearing a mask" (2020). By his word choice alone, Cavuto signaled to his viewers which side of the mask dispute they ought to be on.

While disgruntled customers unhappy with a policy are nothing new, there are several coexisting conditions that made Delta's verbal commitment to its mask policy a risk at this particular time. First, as described above, wearing a mask has become, for some, a political statement in what is potentially one of the most polarized political environments in history. The New York Times recently observed that, "Seven months into the pandemic in America, with Trump leading the way, coronavirus skeptics continue to mock masks and incorrectly equate the virus with the flu" (Bazon, 2020).

Secondly, this is happening at a time when there is a significant amount of misinformation in our media environment. Media scholars Michael Miller and Cristian Vaccari (2020) recently observed that, "Since 2016, it has become clear that...successful campaigns are waged by domestic purveyors of disinformation and, indeed, depend heavily for their success on networks of communication that include traditional media organizations." For example, an article in the conservative website The Daily Wire claimed that, "A memo sent by Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian alerted employees that 460 people have been added to the no-fly list for refusing to comply with mask mandates from the airline. The no-fly list is typically reserved for suspected terrorists" (Prestigiacomio, 2020). While partially true (which is often the case with mis- and dis-information), the "no-fly list" is, in fact, an internal list and is not shared airline-to-airline.

Finally, the prevalence of social media creates the potential for misinformation about Delta. As most social platforms allow mis- and disinformation to spread unchecked, this can create a media environment where articles, such as the one from the Daily Wire, are shared and circulate quickly. Jun et al. (2017) found that "people are less likely to fact-check in social situations, like platforms that are inherently social (e.g., Facebook) and instead let their guard down when consuming news obtained in social settings, such as social media."

## ▲ Gaining Altitude: The Positive Reception Among Key Stakeholders

### Key Stakeholder: Travelers

Despite these challenges of our current media environment and the coverage of a small number of these isolated-yet-high-profile incidents, Delta has received a chorus of positive responses from one of its key stakeholders - travelers - as reflected by recent recognition within the travel and hospitality media. *TripSavvy*, an online publication covering travel,

recently honored Delta with its 2020 Industry Leaders Award, announcing that "Delta's new CareStandard sets the bar for health and safety while flying." Well-known travel blog *The Points Guy* also awarded Delta with its Editor's Choice Award in the "Spotlight on Safety" category. Meanwhile, *Business Travel News* reported that Delta remains the top choice of airline among corporate travel buyers. According to the Delta News Hub, this year's *Business Travel News* survey asked participants to rank how well each airline responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, including overall response, effective communication, and flexibility. Delta earned its top marks for pandemic response, including rigorous mask compliance, customer service, and communication, while also improving its score substantively in all other categories.

"It's always an honor to earn our customers' trust and respect, but to receive this award in 2020 - when the stakes have never been higher - is incredibly gratifying," said Delta CEO Ed Bastian. "In the face of historic challenges, we've stayed true to Delta values and have put our employees and our customers first. This recognition tells us we're on the right path, and I could not be more thankful or more proud of the Delta team" (Delta Air Lines, 2020n).



*The mother of the Detroit Mayor's chief of staff, Alexis Wiley, tweeted about her mother's experience on the flight.*

Among mainstream media, there continues to be periodic reporting of the growing list of banned passengers. While the coverage takes a neutral tone on Delta's policy, it does signal to potential travelers that the airline is taking its safety precautions seriously, which could ultimately help Delta build trust in its brand among prospective travelers. For example, NBC 25 News in Detroit reported that a flight from Detroit to Los Angeles returned to the gate after a passenger refused to wear a face mask, forcing everyone to deplane. Aboard the flight was the mother of the Detroit Mayor's chief of staff, Alexis Wiley, who tweeted about her mother's experience on the flight, saying she was thankful for the flight attendants' commitment to the mask policy. While social media had an amplification effect for negative news surrounding Delta's enforcement of its mask mandate, this is an example where a positive response was amplified on social media, building trust in the brand as the story picked up momentum first in social and then in traditional news media (Baratti, 2020).

### **Key Stakeholder: Employees**

As reported by CNBC, about 18,000 Delta employees, about a fifth of its pre-pandemic workforce, accepted buyouts, and early retirement packages (Joesephs, 2020). In late November, Delta pilots

agreed to accept reduced pay in exchange for job security until 2022. This comes in contrast to American Airlines, which furloughed 16,000 pilots (Sider, 2020).

"Pilots, as long-term stakeholders in our company, have stepped up to the plate once again to help Delta weather this crisis," First Officer Chris Riggins, a spokesman for the union that represents Delta's pilots, told the Wall Street Journal.

Meanwhile, Delta has demonstrated its commitment to its employees by recently announcing it would give two free travel passes to each employee to use at peak travel times. Called "Delta Difference" passes, employees can use them to fly anywhere Delta flies with a confirmed seat (Pallini, 2020).

"Delta people have risen to the challenge and led the way to a brighter future," Bastian wrote in an internal memo and published in Business Insider. "During a time of deep divisions, seeing the Delta family come together in unity over the past nine months toward a common purpose has been awe-inspiring" (Pallini, 2020). As of January 2021 there has been no mention of Delta employees having reservations or disdain for the implemented mask mandate.

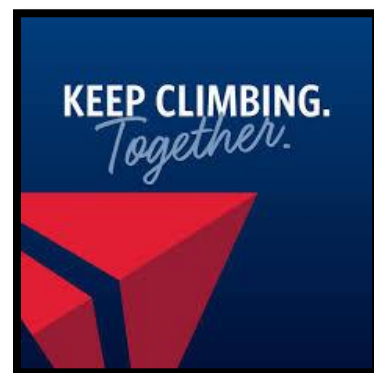
### Key Stakeholder: Shareholders

Delta's safety measures do have an intrinsic tradeoff with profit. In March, at the beginning of the pandemic, Delta Air Lines was losing approximately \$100 million per day (Joesphs, 2020). This circumstance would make many companies think twice before risking the loss of current and future revenue. According to a Morningstar Equity Analyst Report, in 2020 passenger revenue declined 83 percent from 2019.

Despite the present financial challenges, Delta's commitment to its mask mandate has the potential to build trust - and ultimately financial returns - as travel begins to normalize. Boston-based brand architect Larry Gulko told the Boston Globe that he "expects Delta will reap the benefits of its approach when the pandemic is finally over. The airline...is selling trust and confidence. That's an important distinction from those selling discounted vacations to the tropics. Putting people over profits is not P.R. spin, but integral to Delta's culture."

### ▲ Delta Air Lines: Keep Climbing

"Keep climbing" appears to be more than just a tagline for Delta Air Lines. Climbing ahead of its competitors to stake its claim as the leader of coronavirus safety, Delta is continuing to lead the way with its Delta CareStandard policies. On November 18, the airline announced it plans to continue to reserve the middle seat through the end of March, a policy its competitors have recently abandoned. According to Chief Customer Experience Officer Bill Lentsch, this was a decision based on customer feedback. He stated in a Delta NewsHub article, "We are listening and will always take the appropriate



steps to ensure our customers have complete confidence in their travel with us" (Delta Air Lines Inc., 2020o).

Delta's early action may have also normalized stricter air travel standards, paving the way for additional safety policies by domestic and international carriers alike. For example, according to CNN, Australia's national carrier Qantas recently announced its intention to require future international travelers to prove they have been vaccinated against Covid-19 before flying (Regan & Watson, 2020). There have been 5.9 million people in the United States that have received the COVID-19 vaccine as of January 7, 2021 (Zraick, 2021). "I think for international travel, it will become a requirement, whether it's the airline that does it, or some international authorities do it. We're going to strongly encourage that airline employees all get vaccinated" said Ed Bastian in an interview with NBC News (TODAY NBC, 2020). Which begs the question if Delta Airlines itself will require passengers to be vaccinated prior to future travel and carry a vaccine passport, whether international or domestic flights. In addition, how will the progression of these events impact Delta's corporate culture and behavior if they implement these new possible mandates. After observing a significant backlash among those who view Delta's mask mandate as a civil rights violation, Delta can expect a similar reaction - if not a more extreme reaction - to a vaccine requirement.

As of January 2021, although there have been 21.5 million cases of COVID-19 in the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University, and there is still no national enforcement of masks (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, 2021). Thirty-seven states have implemented mask mandates, the exceptions being Alaska, Arizona, Idaho, Wyoming, Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Missouri, Tennessee, and Mississippi (Schumaker, 2020). With an administration change on the horizon, a federal mandate is a possibility but not a given. Therefore, Delta can expect to continue facing challenges implementing its Delta CareStandard and the brand and financial risks that come with it for the foreseeable future.

This case raises questions about how a company can enforce a polarizing policy intended to protect its key stakeholders' safety and the ramifications of potentially alienating a group of customers. The impact of Delta's decision to ban more than 500 passengers has been shown to have had a ripple effect - both positive and negative - on the brand's reputation. While many have seen Delta's hardline stance on masks as an indication of trust and transparency, others have seen it as an infringement of civil liberties. Going forward, as travel begins to normalize, it remains to be seen if the mask mandate becomes a distant memory or if Delta has bifurcated its audience down political lines.

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