

# woman

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## Delta is Ready For Joanne Smith

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boards have  
*a feminine  
touch?***

**Joanne Smith**  
Delta Air Lines



# The Woman Who Will ‘Defunkify’ Delta

By Mary Welch

Joanne Smith mixes a sharp marketing mind, fresh ideas, a passion for airlines – and martinis – to bring more customer service and satisfaction to Delta. Once a month, Joanne Smith gets on a Delta Air Lines airplane and helps passengers board, serves them drinks and talks to them. Even though she is a Delta senior executive and in charge of the 12,000 Delta flight attendants, the role comes easy to her. She started her career as a flight attendant.

It is as classic of a success story as the proverbial CEO who began his or her climb to the executive suite by starting out in the mailroom. The major difference is that Smith still loves the job done by flight attendants; rarely does the CEO return to the mailroom to re-enact the good old days of delivering mail.

“I love it,” she says of schlepping through the plane’s aisle with the drink cart. “The senior team here at Delta goes out into the field – or plane in this case – and does the job. It’s a great way to connect with the passengers, listen to their ideas. And our flight attendants have such a passion for serving that it inspires me. I love talking with the flight attendants because they’re with our customers every day. They know what works, what doesn’t and how to make it better. We get great ideas daily from them.”

Smith was recently named senior vice president of Delta’s in-flight service and global product development department, where she is essentially responsible for integrating the personalized service of flight attendants with a global product strategy to differentiate Delta from its competitors.

It’s a job that combines understanding and integrating the entire customer experience and developing new products to meet those needs. To Smith, it’s all about the customer. She puts it another way. “I am the customer,” she says.

Smith came to Delta as the vice president of marketing and customers for Song, Delta’s start-up experiment aimed at carving out a share of the cost-conscious leisure market. In 2002, John Selvaggio was



**Joanne Smith**  
Senior Vice President,  
In-Flight Service  
and Global Product Development  
Delta Air Lines

hired as president of Song, and he brought Smith along with him. They had worked together since 1987 when he was running a small regional airline and Smith was the vice president of marketing.

When he left Song in 2004, Smith was named president. “We were given this

incredible assignment at Delta to create a new airline,” he says. “We were going to be a small team and I needed someone – one person – who was smart, could wear many hats, was good with people and could get the job done. I needed my marketing person to be able to quickly define and

establish the brand. That was Joanne. She knows what needs to be done, and she knows the difference between great versus mediocre.”

“Song was the best three-and-a-half years,” she says. “It was so much fun. We were given permission to be this ‘un-

airline.’ It was really liberating. Ideas would come up and we’d say ‘That doesn’t sound like something an airline would do.’ And we’d go do it.”

Song quickly became an airline darling. It gained a foothold in cities like Boston and New York, and captured the attention of

customers. Within two years in Boston, the airline served 1.75 million passengers or 6.7 percent of Logan Airport’s total, according to Massachusetts Port Authority statistics. That put Song just after big sister Delta, which was ranked fourth with 2.1 million passengers or 7.9 percent.

Photography by Joseph Wong



“Within the first year it was named one of the top three regional airlines,” says Selvaggio, whose voice still reflects his pride in Song. “It got favorable reviews from customers and industry people. It still continues to get good reactions from people.”

The one-class airline featured healthy, organic food for sale, apple martinis, leather seats, roomier planes with 33 inches of legroom between rows, televisions with on-demand movies and games for each seat, and flight attendants wearing outfits designed by Kate Spade.

**Hometown:** San Luis Obispo, CA

**Husband:** Terry Smith

**Children:** Lauren, 11 and Aleigh, 14

**Favorite book, movie, music:** I love a variety of music, and literature so can't say that I have a favorite

**Hobbies:** Cooking and spending time with my family

“Every day we would go to work and look at every decision through the lens of being a customer,” she says. “Every decision had to be seen as benefiting the customer. It puts things in a different perspective.”

And the customer's perspective turned out to be female. One of Song's marketing realizations was that, with leisure travel, women were the decision-makers. Larger airlines traditionally covet and define their market as the male businessman. Song wanted to appeal to women. Its mantra was to be friendly, simple and approachable.

While Song was taking off, Delta's bottom line was sinking. As a cost-cutting measure, Song was melded into Delta. The move came six weeks after Delta filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and 31 months after Song made its first flights in April 2003. But its spirit remains. In fact, there are still some of the green-painted Song planes still flying.

Smith was named vice president of consumer marketing for Delta. At the time of the airline's closing, Delta's CEO Gerald Grinstein, who admittedly had reservations

about Song, said the airline was a “a great learning experience. It gave us the chance to test ideas and to bring them over [to Delta]. We want to apply not only the specific pieces, but the style in the approach, the creativity and the innovation.”

There was only one woman for the job: Smith. It is now her charge to develop that same level of innovation and customer service that Song implemented so well. But she has to do it on a much, much larger scale with systems and employee mindset already well in place and engrained.

“Song was wonderful, but now we're able to bring that same spirit to Delta but acknowledging the differences,” she says. “Delta is global with 12,000 flight attendants. Song's uniforms were by Kate Spade [a younger, hip designer]; Delta's are by Richard Taylor [a more classic designer]. We are going to bring the energy, the youthfulness of Song to a 77-year-old air line.”

The changes will be coming fast and furiously. Smith is bringing back food for sale, as well as food in first class on flights farther than 1,500 miles. “Some of the Delta cutbacks were necessary because of the reality of the situation, but some of the cuts went too far – like taking away the food in first class on flights,” she says. “We're also bringing back fun cocktails so our flight attendants will be shaking martinis or margaritas. It creates some excitement, some energy, and it's another way for our flight attendants to interact with the customers.”

Not only are the 12,000 flight attendants under Smith's domain, but she is in charge of developing and marketing the entire flight experience. She is the highest-ranking woman in Delta whose job directly touches the customer. As she did with Song, Smith and her team will look at the entire customer experience – from the ordering of tickets to the check-in at the kiosks, to the Crown Room to the boarding process to the flight experience itself.

Her job, she says simply, is to enhance the customer experience in every way. She knows that the Crown Rooms, where club members have access to lounges, free drinks and business

services, are important and need remodeling. “I'm not sure that we'll be opening new ones in the near future as much as enhancing those we have. They are important to our customers.”

And for those who bemoaned some of the drink brands eliminated during the lean years, don't despair. “Yes, we are bringing back Bailey's [Irish Cream],” she says with a laugh.

Smith's acumen for marketing – and getting the details right – is admired by those who work with her.

Her boss, Jerry Grinstein, Delta's CEO, is a fan. “Joanne has the touch. She sees the airline from the prospective of the customer,” he says. “In her own words, she wants to ‘defunkify’ Delta — to do things for our customers' comfort and care that no other airline ever contemplates, much less delivers. At Song, Joanne created the top-ranked airline experience. Her mandate at Delta mainline is to do the same. As senior vice president for in-flight and global product development, she will combine her unique talent for integrating wholly new approaches with the ability to execute. Joanne brings dreams to reality.”

“She has a large team at Delta, and there's a large group of ad agencies – nine in all – who work on the account,” says Connie Birdsall, partner at the ad agency Lippincott Mercer in New York. “Part of the key to her success is that she's disarming. But she's also a big-picture person who sees things very clearly. She doesn't worry about the incremental details. She gets to the solution and makes it come alive. She's very visionary and is open to new ways. She's unique in that way.”

According to Birdsall, Smith is a strong decision-maker. “She good at consensus building, but once she's made her decision, that's it. She has a great sense of humor and she's so much fun. She so easy to work with that infectious laugh.”

**Best advice she's ever gotten:**

Take risks and enjoy the journey

**The key to being a good leader:**

Passion, commitment and integrity

**Favorite vacation place:**

Italy (great food and great people)

**How many days does she**

**travel:** Just shy of 100

For her former boss Selvaggio, Smith is the consummate multi-tasker. “I remember when she got married and came back from her honeymoon. I went into her office to welcome her back and (this was before email), she had 56 new messages on her phone. I would have been upset but she was like, ‘Oh well, time to get to work.’”

**Favorite power outfit:** I don't dress for power, but I dress to feel good – and right now dresses are my favorite (they are making a comeback!)

**Tips for a great airplane experience:**

A charged Blackberry, a charged iPod, and a good disposition

**Favorite city:** It's a tie – Atlanta and New York

**Secret to packing:** Good planning and pack just what I need

Selvaggio says the secret is that “she's very good at analyzing data. That may not come across to people at first but she's very good at looking at data and quickly telling you what it means. And, usually she finds things that don't jump out at you. Overall, she's just always thinking of the best interest of the mission and is a great team leader – plus she's a good mom.”

When she commits to something, her support is rock solid, say those who work with her. “Joanne was passionate about Song and its association with us,” says Myra Biblowit, president of The Breast Cancer Research Foundation in New York. “She jumped in with both feet. When she spoke about it, you could feel her excitement and dedication. She was inspirational.”

Song hooked up with The Breast Cancer Research Foundation to raise funds and awareness, and the pink plane with the logo pink ribbon on its nose is still flying. Smith has vowed to continue the relationship, Biblowit says. “We will now be working with Delta, and we are really indebted to Joanne, who sits on our board. She's wonderful, and her enthusiasm is infectious.”

Smith's disarming nature is frequently mentioned; it seems to catch many off guard when put up against her accomplishments. Even her mother is surprised by her success. “Well, we knew she was smart and would do well,” says Rosalie Dowty. “But

## Delta Air Lines Stats & Facts

**Founded:** 1928, Monroe, LA

**Headquarters:** Atlanta, GA

**CEO:** Gerald Grinstein

**2005 Revenue:** 16 billion

**Employees:** 47,000+

**Delta Daily Flights:** 1,534

**Delta Connection Inc. Daily Flights:** 2,533

**Daily Flights + Partners:** 6,795

**Delta Destinations:** 461 worldwide destinations in 96 countries

**Passengers Enplaned in 2005:** 118,853,189

### Delta Connection Carriers:

Atlantic Southeast Airlines (ASA@)

Chautauqua Airlines

Comair®

Freedom Airlines

Shuttle America

SkyWest

### SkyTeam Alliance:

Aeroflot

AeroMexico

Air France

Alitalia

Continental Airlines

CSA Czech Airlines

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines

Korean Air

Northwest Airlines

### Codeshare Partners:

Air Jamaica

Alaska Airlines

Avianca

China Airlines

China Southern

El Al Israel Airlines

### Major U.S. Hubs:

Atlanta

Cincinnati

New York (JFK)

Salt Lake City

### Major International Gateways:

Atlanta to Europe and Latin America

Cincinnati to Europe and Latin America

Los Angeles to the Pacific

New York (JFK) to Europe

*Source: Delta Air Lines Website. September 2006*

did we ever think that Joanne would go as far as she has? Frankly? No.”

Smith herself doesn't remember having strong career goals. “My mother suggested I go into public relations and marketing because I like people and I'm creative,” she says. “I didn't even know what marketing meant.”

Her father taught auto mechanics in a state correctional facility in her hometown of San Luis Obispo, California. He retired and went to work with American Eagle airlines. “We mostly still travel on American,” Dowty says. “My husband stayed at the airline long enough to get flying benefits, so we do that.”

Adding quickly, “We also fly Delta, and they are very nice also.”

Although she worked since her early teens, Smith was in college at California Polytechnic State University when she accompanied a friend who wanted to apply for a job as a flight attendant. Smith also filled out an application and soon was flying up and down the California coast working for Swift Aire. Even after she graduated in 1982, she continued working at the airline until it went out of business. She joined another regional airline, Wings West, and worked as its sales representative until it was purchased by American Airlines. It was the first time that she and Selvaggio, who came in as president, worked together.

It was also about the time she met Terry Smith who was living in London and working for British Airlines. They married and had a bicontinental weekend commuting relationship. “The first three years of our marriage I didn't even know what he looked like on a Wednesday,” she jokes.

She started working at bigger airlines, including DHL Airways, as well as Smartware Systems and Travelbyus.com. When their younger daughter was born, her husband decided to stay home and operate a web-design business from the house. “I travel so much and, while I hate being away from the kids, it's great that he's home. He's really

wonderful and so involved with the girls. He can still help them with their homework. I'm more like that show about being smarter than a fifth grader. Well, I'm not!”

When she's not away from home, she says her life “sounds boring but it's really wonderful just being with my family. I like spending time with them. I like gardening and cooking. My specialty is Italian. I make homemade pasta and different sauces. I don't like to bake and make desserts.”

There is a new era at Delta with its emergence from bankruptcy and the takeover attempt by US Airways foiled. “It's a great time to be at Delta,” she says. “The energy is there and there is a sense of pride. The company is able to invest in its people and in serving our customers. There's a sweet spot where you find the model where you can sustain the company through good and bad cycles. You just have to be smarter.”

As for the take-over attempt, Smith said it had a positive affect on the employees. “It really got everyone fired up to fight it,” she says. “Now if we can capture all that energy and turn it into productivity, it'll just add to our success.”

Of CEO Grinstein who has vowed to retire in the upcoming months, Smith says she admires him for “giving back to the company. I respect what he's done. He's a remarkable man.” As for his successor, chief operating officer Jim Whitehurst, and chief financial officer and executive vice president Edward Bastian are often named as possible heirs. “Either one would be good,” she says simply.

Regardless of who is actually in charge at Delta, Smith will be hard at work coming up with innovative ideas to bring a higher level of customer – and employee – satisfaction to Delta.

“I just love the airline business,” she says. “It's a constantly changing business – with the stress on changing. I don't really know what a ‘normal’ routine is. I have such passion for the business and for flight attendants.”

Adding, “I still think flying on an airline is glamorous. ♀