

Is This High-Flying Business Recession-Proof?

Desert Jet, a private aviation service, has soared in good times and bad—literally—thanks to a low-overhead business model.

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Few among us get to build a career out of our favorite pastime, let alone twice. Denise Wilson, 45, president and CEO of [Desert Jet](#), has done just that—literally rising from the orchestra pit to fly the friendly skies.

In 1992, after studying music at the University of Southern California, she became a professional oboe player, performing with orchestras for operas, chamber music ensembles and symphonies. After seven years of teaching during the day and playing at night and on weekends, [Wilson](#) decided she wanted to do something else. “My life as a musician was wonderful, but it was for the artistic satisfaction,” she says. “Playing and paying your way through life in Los Angeles is not that easy.”

During her years as a musician, Wilson had taken up flying lessons as a hobby. She loved it. By 2000, a second career as a professional pilot took flight, but it got rocky shortly after liftoff. “I would go work somewhere for a year or two and the company would fold or the position would be eliminated, so I decided not to put all my eggs in someone else's basket,” Wilson says. “I

saw that I could only be a pilot long term if I took the reins and created my own role."

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So, in 2007, she founded Desert Jet in Palm Springs, California. The company specializes in aircraft management, acquisitions and sales of jet aircraft, and provides pilot and charter services. Now, it might seem like any business related to airplanes would require a healthy amount of capital, but that wasn't the case. A private owner let Desert Jet use his plane for an hourly rate and Wilson paid for fuel out of the charter fees they charged. All expenses were paid for by cash flow. The company had little overhead, since it started in Wilson's house, and she bartered whenever she could. In exchange for a [corporate video](#), she let photographers take pictures of jets to sell as stock photos and videos. Her company has never even had a bank loan.



Desert Jet founder Denise Wilson

By the first year's end, Desert Jet was leasing three airplanes and had revenue of roughly \$1 million. Wilson realized her service was much more recession-proof than commercial airlines. When plane owners need to cut back, they sell their private jets and take charter flights—they don't all of a sudden start going through LAX. And, of course, in better economic times, more people can afford business aviation. Ironically, Wilson says the perception that private planes are only for fat cats has long been a problem in the industry, but she believes that preconceived notion is finally changing

because it's practical (eliminates time spent at commercial airports and on crowded highways) and surprisingly affordable (Desert Jet charges roughly \$4,000 for a roundtrip flight for up to six people.) Because planes aren't grounded and can be used all day long by other customers, passengers only pay for the planes when they're in the air, so in many instances, it makes financial sense.

"It use to be that people in the industry were most concerned about their client's privacy, not letting regular fliers peek behind the elite curtain, but we've gotten much better at explaining all the good business aviation can do," says Wilson. "For \$4,000 roundtrip, we can load six people on a plane for a one-hour flight that would take six hours each way to drive, which then requires hotels and travel expenses, and amounts to two days of lost productivity away from the office, not to mention time away from family and not sleeping in your own bed. It's a huge tool for successful companies." If Desert Jet is taking four people to their farm in the Central Valley, or a tech conference in the Bay Area, it will be a grand apiece. That's probably more than the commercial airline price, but not egregiously so, plus there's the peace-of-mind that comes with not dealing with airport security lines.

Desert Jet isn't a fractional ownership or membership program—it's open to anybody. But even with 21 employees and a projected 2015 revenue of \$15 million, the company still doesn't own any aircraft (although Wilson does have a personal plane). Desert Jet will continue to manage aircraft for private individuals and corporations, and lease planes at an hourly rate as needed. Wilson still pilots, but more strategically than in the early days, so she might fly with a client to touch base. The majority of her days are now spent coaching employees, interviewing new candidates, improving processes and trying to better her leadership skills. Currently, her biggest challenge is



transitioning from the person who built the business to teaching others how to run it, so she can focus on larger growth initiatives in the tech space. For advice and commiseration, she joined the Women Presidents' Organization to have a safe space to talk through problems with an objective group of her fellow business titans.

Wilson might expand in the desert southwest, but she's not interested in opening new locations anywhere beyond a short flight. She loves Palm Springs and isn't interested in jetting off to the east coast on a regular basis. Her growth plans include the addition of services around the business-aviation

industry because she knows it works. Two years ago, she started a second company, **Desert Jet Maintenance**, for scheduled and unscheduled work. It's been wildly successful because the nearest mechanic was a hundred miles away, so if someone broke down in Palm Springs, they were stuck. In the future, Wilson wants to help everyday people have better access to private planes as, on average, **flights remain 40 percent empty**. She's working on an app that enables private flyers to find the closest available private jet and book a trip. Filling those seats presents a huge opportunity because, as she notes, once people fly private aircraft, they never want to go back.

And why would you? Private planes may be practical, even reasonable, but they will always carry somewhat of a rock-star status. Wilson knows firsthand, having had her share of celebrities on board. One time she piloted a major pop star and her boyfriend to a resort in Mexico. Wilson was photographed by the paparazzi while waiting outside the plane with the boyfriend and was mistaken for the singer in a popular celebrity rag. "I have nice blonde hair, so I don't know how that happened," Wilson says. "But I was in a magazine as that celebrity." She may not have been the actual starlet, but in owning a successful private aviation company, it's Denise Wilson who is flying high these days.

Photos: Ethan Kaminsky / Courtesy of Desert Jet

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