

# Airline PR disasters and the lessons you can learn

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An airplane is as close as we get to a perfect machine. Superbly designed and marvellously manufactured, this magnificent invention is a miracle of our modern world. Every single one of its millions of component parts has been deliberated upon, thoroughly tested, and installed with care. There are hundreds of kilometres of precise wiring, beautifully written software that takes care of every eventuality, and the most modern composite materials encasing everything. Every airplane is meticulously maintained and improved with loving care by dedicated engineers and technicians, and flown by highly-trained and committed pilots. It is the safest form of transport ever built and gives us a chance to expand our minds by visiting places only dreamed about in previous generations.

So will someone please explain to me why passengers have such awful experiences with lousy airlines?

Can you imagine an experience in your own business where customers that want to do business with you go through such abuse – and pay a small fortune – to arrive exhausted, frustrated and even physically beaten at the other end of the transaction?

The appalling videos of incidents involving mistreated customers that recently emerged in the social media – and then replicated by the traditional media – show shocking disregard for customer insights in this new world.



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Briefly, a few weeks ago United Airlines overbooked a flight from Chicago to Louisville. Needing four seats to accommodate their own crew, staff asked for volunteers to give up their seats in exchange for United travel vouchers and a rescheduled flight the following afternoon. Only two volunteers wanted to take up this offer, so unilaterally and randomly their cabin crew went the involuntary route... with disastrous results. Video emerged of a screaming 69-year old doctor being forcibly removed from his seat, lifted and violently dragged by his armpits like a rubbish bag as his face bounced off an armrest and his mouth started bleeding. He was traumatised, but many other passengers were also distressed by this awful episode.

Compounding this dreadful experience was United's initial and subsequent response to the uproar of disgust. The CEO hid behind a mundane press release in cynical corporate drivel, and taking no responsibility for their collective action. In addition, they also thought it would be great to kick the passenger while he was down, and started bringing up completely irrelevant historical "facts" about the passenger. The apology, when it came, was "for the overbook", and to other passengers regarding having to "re-accommodate" them – whatever that means.

The second incident, barely a week later, involved another gigantic airline, American Airlines. In this case, a woman travelling with her small children wanted to bring her pram on board, and instead of politely negotiating alternatives with her, the flight attendant violently yanked the pram from her, hurting her and almost injuring the child. The video footage shows her crying as she holds her sobbing baby. Another upset male passenger wanted to stand up for her, and walked to the front of the plane to demand the name of the flight attendant responsible for this.

But what happened next was the breathtakingly abysmal behaviour of another flight attendant on the flight. He aggressively strode up to the male passenger, and after a few seconds the passenger said: "You try that with me and I'll knock you flat!" The flight attendant then taunts him, saying: "Hit me! Come on, bring it on." Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, and perhaps remembering what had happened on United just a few days before, the passenger reluctantly backs down.

## **What are the lessons from these incidents for your business?**

1. Do you have a policy to deal with similar social media disasters? It cannot be the same as your traditional PR policy, with carefully worded bland statements cleared by lawyers being published whenever you feel like it (see below). It doesn't matter what the truth is, and it doesn't matter if you are right. It's what your completely irrational and emotional customers think – and they have the power today. They are also far more sophisticated than you think.
2. The truth about social media is this: You don't control the message. To quote from Chris Anderson: "For a generation of customers used to doing their buying research via search engine, a company's brand is not what the company says it is, but what Google says it is. The new tastemakers are us. Word of mouth is now a public conversation, carried in blog comments and customer reviews, exhaustively collated and measured. The ants have megaphones now."
3. Just about anyone who carries a smartphone also has an instant video camera at their disposal, and this video can be uploaded in an instant to any one of dozens of social media sites. Get used to it.
4. Have you trained all the people on your team about how to deal with incidents like this? Have you emphasised that such behaviour can never be tolerated – no matter what the circumstance? Do they fully understand the consequences? And do you constantly remind them of this? (There are definitely enough case studies that you can download and play.)
5. What do you do to make it go away? An instant, heartfelt, genuine and personal apology, oft repeated, is a given. Taking personal responsibility right at the top of your organisation is a given. Treating all customers with respect is a given. Offering freebies doesn't help: the aggressive flight attendants were "suspended", and the woman with the pram

was upgraded to first class for one flight – not really a big deal and nobody actually cares. However, showing your deep regret, sharing what your business will do to change what it does to prevent any future recurrence, and making a symbolic gesture like a substantial donation to a charity may help. And that's just the start.

Treating paying customers such as what happened in these incidents is a disgrace, and I know that businesses pay a very heavy financial and reputational price for this. It may take years (if ever) to recover from a few seconds of indiscretion. Don't let that happen to you.

## ABOUT AKI KALLIATAKIS

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