Crisis and Image Repair at United Airlines: Fly the Unfriendly Skies

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Abstract
In April 2017, United Airlines had a passenger removed from one of its airplanes. Video of the bleeding man being dragged off through the aisle went viral the next day. United’s initial response attempted to downplay this offensive act (relying primarily on differentiation and mortification, but not really apologizing for this offensive act). This stance provoked outrage and ridicule. This study applies image repair theory (Benoit, 2015) to the discourse in this case study. United’s CEO, Oscar Munoz, was forced to offer a “do-over,” stressing mortification and corrective action that were actually directed to the offensive act. United finally arrived at the proper response, but it came too late to realize its full potential. This essay argues that corrective action can be an important strategy in crisis communication theory; it also explains that social media have changed the crisis situation (with nearly instant and widespread criticism) and compressed the time in which those accused of wrongdoing can respond.

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In Case Study #22 I take a look at the debacle United Airlines (Fly the UNfriendly Skies) found itself in when a customer was, literally, dragged from a flight by airport security. We all saw the videos (See link: https://youtu.be/dASATLLvGRM) and the images were shocking. It started when United offered four customers $1,000 in flight credit in exchange for being bumped from a flight, which happens in air travel. This Episode includes a “How to” case study on the 5-steps of crisis communications that you (and United Airlines) can use in the future: (1) The Impacted People Must Come First – Express sympathy and empathy. (2) Get Your Facts Straight – QUICKLY! “We’re United Airlines. We work hard to get you safely to your destination…” Damon said in a voiceover on top of footage of a series of happy passengers. Kimmel then interrupted Damon’s speech by inviting his audience to “fly the friendly skies… [because] in some cases, some people deserve to get bumped.” View Photos ABC/The CW Renewed Shows: New TV Season 2017 (Updating). Hot Videos. Image copyright Getty Images. Image caption Delta CEO Ed Bastian (left) and United CEO Oscar Munoz in happier times. In February, Sikh-American actor Waris Ahluwalia was barred from boarding an Aeromexico flight because he refused to remove his turban during a security check. The airline later apologised. And Southwest Airlines flew into a PR storm in 2010 after US filmmaker Kevin Smith was kicked off a flight after being told he was too big to fly. He ended his boycott of the airline six years later. So how could United have handled the situation better? John Bailey is a specialist in crisis communications and has handled public relations for many of the aviation industry's biggest players, including Malaysia Airlines following the disappearance of MH370.