

Crisis Response Plan

Assignment Overview: This assignment was a collaborative assignment for a course on Crisis Communication. The assignment required that teams of four choose a public crisis from the past and write a response and a plan to handle a similar future crisis. My team chose to research the 2017 United flight 3411, which involved the harsh removal of a passenger from a United Airlines plane.

What I learned:

- I learned through this assignment the methods and strategy a brand must take to properly manage and prevent crises.
- Through the analysis of this case, I learned the urgency of crisis response as well as the importance of the tone, message vehicle, and public perceived image.
- Through the writing of the response objectives and strategies for future crises, I learned the cruciality of brand image and proper planning for public communication and media communication.

United Airlines Case 2017- United flight 3411.

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Background of the Crisis

On April 9, 2017, United Airlines overbooked flight 3411. The airline attempted to bump four passengers off the flight from O'Hare International Airport to Louisville Kentucky. The goal of dismissing four passengers off the flight was to make room for four United employees to board the flight. The airline added incentive to the deal by offering any passengers willing to take another flight a \$400 flight voucher. There were no initial takers for the flight vouchers and so the airline offered to double the flight vouchers. After there were no passengers willing to take the flight vouchers, four passengers were involuntarily bumped. One of the four passengers, Dr. David Dao, refused to be kicked off the flight because he was working in the hospital the next day. The airline called airport security resulting in Dr. David Dao being violently assaulted and removed from the flight. Dr. Dao sustained injuries such as a broken nose and missing teeth. United Airlines did not know the damage they would be faced with after Dr. Dao was removed from the flight, until a video taken by another nearby passenger began to go viral showing the violent series of events. The video circulated on Twitter and Tik Tok with people sharing their distaste for the series of events.

Hook

We care about this United Airlines crisis because a situation like this could unfold quickly, happen often, or even to someone you know. Dr. David Dao was volunteered to get off the plane due to overbooking. Refusing to get off the plane, led Dr. Dao to end up in a hospital instead. United Airlines presented a divided front using many different responses to the crisis. This crisis and United's response helps us understand how time sensitive cases are and how fast information can spread on social media. These responses resulted in negative backlash towards the company expressed through the media. Through studying this crisis, we are hoping to craft

better ways for larger corporations to address frontline issues that directly affect their consumer base.

Industry

United Airlines is the third largest airline in the industry. The airline currently has 84,100 employees and 721 aircraft. Throughout the years the airline has achieved great success through international and domestic flights. The current revenue of the airline industry is unpredictable. In the fourth quarter of 2021 the airline industry lost 2.2 billion dollars and continued in a downward spiral into the first quarter of 2022 with a loss of \$5.1 billion. The revenues from the second quarter of 2022 spiked with a net gain of \$2.2 billion. (Statista) According to the Fortune 500 ranking, which pulls data from Refinitiv, an online business analytics site, United Airlines was ranked 4th in the business world for global competitiveness and 6th in the airline industry. United Airlines remains closely behind competitors such as American Airlines and Delta. The revenue for United Airlines has continued to be typical with the gross statistics of the industry. (Fortune 500)

History of United Airlines and Crises That Have Shaped the Company Image

United Airlines was formed from the consolidation of the four main companies that emerged from commercial aviation. The four companies included, Boeing Air Transport, Pacific Air Transport National, Air Transport and Barney Airlines, all four pioneers of air manufacturing and air mail. After the creation of United Airlines in 1931 the company faced its first large-scale crisis in 1934. The airmail crisis of 1934 gave United Airlines the reputation of holding a monopoly on the airmail business and leaving little room for smaller airmail companies to thrive in the industry. The other part of this crisis revolved around the way airmail companies would collect revenue. At the time the airmail industry based the price of service on the weight of the

aircraft rather than the weight of the mail. This encouraged United Airlines to begin to include passengers on flights to increase the weight of the aircraft. The crisis was resolved with the Airmail Act of 1934. The resolution dismantled United Airlines into other businesses separating airmail from air travel. United Airlines became the commercial airline for travel and grew because of the familiarity of the airmail routes that served the most populated cities of the U.S.

Because of the well-established and long history of United Airlines, many crises have occurred throughout the company's history. One key crisis includes the strike of 1985. This strike lasted 29 days and it consisted of United pilots who were standing against a management group determined to force ALPA pilots into accepting a two-year pay scale. The strike was mainly about unfair labor including wages and work rule reductions demanded by United management. This caused United to have a bad taste in people's mouths. There was tension for weeks after this incident, but now it is looked on as a celebration for those pilots who chose to strike.

Another crisis United has gone through was 9/11. United Airlines flight 93 was one of the four planes taken over by terrorists. This plane was hijacked and then crashed into a field in Pennsylvania killing everyone on board. United Airlines flight 175 was another one of the four planes hijacked by terrorists. This plane was deliberately crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center. United Airlines responded to this with a statement saying they will continue to secure their safety procedures and will work with the Commission to create more effective security measures. The airline did not receive that much backlash because the situation was recasting, and people wanted to heal.

United Airlines has faced several key customer service crises that give better insight on the crisis plan of the company. In March 2018, the company faced another crisis that spread to

the public through the use of social media. A puppy was found to have died in an overhead bin on a flight from Houston to New York. The puppy was traveling with a woman and her two children and was placed in a TSA approved carrier. Maggie Gremminger posted a photo to Facebook and wrote that the flight attendant forced the woman to put the puppy in the carrier in the overhead compartment of the plane. The placement of the puppy in the overhead compartment resulted in its death.

The story went viral on social media and angered many consumers who expressed their distaste for the actions of United Airlines. In a report released by the Department of Transportation, United Airlines had more pet deaths, injuries, and losses in 2016 than any other major airline. In 2016 there were a total of 14 injuries and nine deaths on United Airline flights. The airline released a public statement to Business Insider taking full responsibility for the tragedy stating: "This was a tragic accident that should never have occurred, as pets should never be placed in the overhead bin. We assume full responsibility for this tragedy and express our deepest condolences to the family and are committed to supporting them. We are thoroughly investigating what occurred to prevent this from ever happening again." The response from United took full blame for the event and the airline put out a statement that the actions of the flight attendant did not reflect the pet policies of the company.

Key people/Crisis Response Team

- CEO Oscar Munoz
- PR specialists for United Airlines

The Problem

Passenger, Dr. David Dao, was violently pulled from his seat on flight 3411, he suffered minor injuries including a broken nose, and missing teeth. The media caught the eye of this incident because people nearby were videotaping this violent act and uploading it to social media. United Airlines underestimated the power of social media and did not respond to the incident with a thought-out plan. Because of the increased use of social media, individuals have access to bad reviews, personal experiences, or violent videos that can damage the reputation of a company or organization. Another prodrome that can be found within this case study, is the system of booking and reserving a seat on a flight. Because people often miss flights, airlines overbook to ensure that the seats are filled. This is an irresponsible business model for an airline to follow because of the event that every passenger shows up for the flight and not enough seats are available for the passengers and the crew. This crisis falls in the accidental cluster of crisis identification. At the time that the flight was booked the airline did not plan to violently remove a passenger from the flight however, by calling airport security the passenger was injured.

Key Players

Some key people and organizations involved, include United Airlines CEO, Oscar Munoz who issued a personal statement that was put together with his crisis management team. The victim Dr. David Dao, who suffered from this event, spoke to many news stations telling his story on ABC. Twitter also played a large role in the crisis and became a source of commentary on the event as well as many news organizations that reported on the story.

Commentary

The theories that we applied in this crisis can be found in the text *Crisis Communications: A Case Book Approach* by Kathleen Fearn-Banks . The Apologia theory

elaborates on the way an apology is issued and the intent it holds in addressing the crisis. Three different approaches can be taken according to the Apologia theory. The redefinition approach allows for the company to ensure that its publics know all the facts that surround the crisis. The company takes a bilateral approach by taking blame for part of the crisis and by making known all the information that led to the crisis. The conciliation approach of the Apologia theory occurs when a company takes full ownership for the crisis occurring and sincerely apologizes.

We also applied the Image Restoration theory, which couples with the Apologia theory, to assess the image of the company through the eyes of the public. The final theory applied is the Marra and Excellence theory which drives the pre-crisis planning and the attempt of the company to reshape their reputation to the audience. The final apology released by Oscar Munoz followed the redirection approach coupled with the conciliation approach. He took responsibility for the overbooking of the flight and shared the ownership of the choice to partner with O'Hare security to address the overbooking. This approach revealed that United Airlines shared fault with O'Hare security. The platform of the apology was through social media where the negative company commentary was circulating which falls under the Image Restoration theory. The company has since launched a campaign to publicize the restructuring of their leadership in 2022. This rebranding falls under the Marra and Excellence theory.

Examples from Study

In our study, we found multiple quotes from leaders, press conferences/press releases, and other information for our analysis. Mr. Munoz's first statement placed the blame on Dr. Dao. In a statement on Monday morning, United said, "We apologize for the overbook situation," but made no reference to Dr. Dao or the video. Later Monday, the company released a statement from Oscar Munoz, its chief executive, calling the episode "an upsetting event." He

apologized to the other passengers on the plane but did not speak directly about Dr. Dao's treatment. On Monday evening, a letter from Mr. Munoz to United employees became public. In it, he told them that he stood by them. The letter included a recap of the events on the airplane, in which Mr. Munoz described Dr. Dao as having been "disruptive and belligerent." United changed course on Tuesday with another statement from Mr. Munoz, in which he said the airline took "full responsibility" for the episode. On Wednesday morning, Mr. Munoz appeared, solemnly, on ABC's "Good Morning, America," and said he felt "shame" when he saw the video of Dr. Dao being dragged from the flight. Later Wednesday, United said it would offer a full refund to every passenger on that flight. Later in the week, Dr. Dao's lawyer and daughter spoke at a news conference in Chicago. United responded again with an apology and a promise to "make this right." The statement repeated the assertion that Mr. Munoz had reached out to Dr. Dao to apologize, which the doctor's daughter said did not happen.

Recommendations for Action

The O'Hare Airport security should never have been that violent or physical with a passenger no matter what the situation was. United Airlines should never force the removal of a passenger due to the overbooking of a flight. The policies for overbooking at United Airlines ought to be changed so that there is never an urgent need for the removal of a passenger.

We recommend in the future that United Airlines only make one public statement/apology. The company made multiple statements and they were all received differently in the eye of the public, good and bad. Sometimes multiple statements can be seen as insensitive and offensive depending on the situation. United Airlines faced more negative backlash due to how they reacted. United Airlines and their CEO should have been more personal and sincere

with their apology. The initial statement made the public even more angry. It took United three apology tours to take full responsibility for the incident and to create a genuine apology.

United Airlines has restructured branding in 2022. The company has launched the first ad campaign since the nine-year advertising hiatus. The campaign aims to show the growth of United Airlines in the current years. The campaign tagline is “Good Leads the Way”, reflecting the push for diversity within the company, the commitment to the growth and betterment of the airline, and the desire to be a force of good within the airline industry. Through the work of the new CEO Scott Kirby, the work environment of United has been shifted to an attitude of pride. We encourage United Airlines in the push to continue advertising and enforcing the new business structure and commitment to providing safe and friendly air travel.

Methods

One similar case we found was with Southwest Airlines. April 17th, 2018, there was a terrifying incident where one of the plane's engines failed which caused the death of a female passenger and endangered the lives of the entire load of passengers and crew. Although United's crisis is different from Southwest's, Southwest had a well put together crisis plan in place for the incident. They examined the photos, videos and tweets being published by passengers to understand what was happening. CEO Gary Kelly issued a 40 second apology video on social media and Southwest issued multiple updates with brief facts about the situation. On the 2nd day, passengers received personal phone calls and emails offering resources and support. Each passenger was sent a \$5,000 check plus a \$1000 travel voucher for future flights.

We think with Southwest's case, they gave a great response to the situation, with a sincere and respectful apology. Unlike United, Southwest knew that this situation was

traumatizing and gave their best efforts to help the employees and the passengers. If United followed in Southwest's footsteps, they wouldn't have faced so much backlash. Some pros of how Southwest handled their crisis was the immediate and genuine apology, the way they offered resources and support, and the time they took to understand what the public was saying about them on social media. Some cons of Southwest's response include the amount of money that was offered to the passengers. If I almost had a near death experience, I would want a bit more compensation. Other than that, I believe Southwest did an excellent job with how they handled the situation.

Alternative Responses

Some alternative responses for United Airlines include taking full blame and accepting the consequences immediately. United could have diminished the problem altogether by bolstering the image of being a large industry leading airline. United could have also addressed the problem by casting all the blame on airport security and denying that the flight was overbooked.

Final recommendation

We first recommend that United Airlines and the airport security should never have been that violent or physical with a passenger who had a valid ticket on the plane. No matter what the situation is, United Airlines should have never resulted in physical and violent removal of the passenger. We also recommend that United Airlines only make one public statement/apology. The company made multiple statements and they were all received terribly. Multiple statements

that are seen as insensitive and offensive caused United Airlines to face more negative backlash than just the incident alone. We also recommend that their public apology should have been more personal and sincere. The initial statement made the public even more angry. It took United three apology tours to take full responsibility for the incident and to create a genuine apology. If the airline responded in those ways and accommodated them properly, they could have saved them from the extra backlash they got when CEO Oscar Munoz released his initial statement saying that Dr. Dao was “belligerent” and “disruptive”. We recommend a more unified approach to a crisis and a proper assessment of reputational damages for the future. We also recommend that United Airlines reassess leadership and internal communication to build stronger policies and a pre- crisis plan to prevent customer service problems such as overbooking.

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