

## Great PR can take your business to new heights

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A few years ago, to eliminate an item from my wife's (endless) bucket list, I agreed to a Hawaiian vacation. Our travel agent (a client) booked us on American Airlines. Who knew that a month later they'd be filing for bankruptcy, but you'd think the airline - for the sake of its image -- would provide at least a bag of peanuts on the 3.5 hours from Boston to Dallas.

Even more surprising, on the second leg of the journey -- some number-crunching genius decided that passengers deserved no food or drink during the six hours from Dallas to Honolulu. Whitey Bulger eats better in prison. That shoddy treatment left a bad taste in our mouths (pun intended). Lucky we brought our own refreshments. I looked back: In 1963 National Airlines (taken over by Pan Am in 1980) ran ads asking "is this any way to run an airline?" You need to feel very secure to ask such a rhetorical question in your own ads.

This year American is set to merge with US Airways. I hope they survive. But we won't be aboard. It's not easy to recover or repair one's reputation. That's why it's so important to protect your company's reputation - and using a range of marketing vehicles -- to constantly remind the public how well you do what you do.

A few years ago, as a singer-songwriter was changing planes in Chicago, he heard noise on the tarmac. United's baggage handlers were tossing his band's instruments as if it were standard luggage. His \$3,500 guitar's neck had been broken. Despite his attempts, United wouldn't pay \$1,200 for repairs. So the singer wrote a song and produced a music video "United Breaks Guitars." After 150,000 views, United offered to pay for repairs -- if he'd remove the video. But the singer said it wasn't about the money anymore. His video went viral, passing 10 million views in 2011, and subsequent versions have been seen two million more times.

United's stock price dropped by 10% within a month of the release of the video - a decrease in valuation of \$180 million. Many others have jumped on the 'bandwagon' (so to speak) with their own versions and parodies, adding another few million views. The decision not to pay a small amount for repairs is an ongoing PR nightmare costing millions in stock value, lost business and tarnished reputation.

Whether you're running an airline, a real estate business, a non-profit or a retail store, your image and reputation are built on simple things: How the phone is answered, if there are typos in a letter, is your staff courteous and knowledgeable? Do your promotional materials reflect an organization that is proud of its work? Do you treat people the way you want to be treated?

Using a variety of marketing tools, consistently let past, present and potential customers know that you deliver exceptional service and high quality products. Ask satisfied customers for positive reviews on social media sites and for testimonials. On occasion you'll receive a low mark from an unhappy customer, but you'll be armed with lots of five-star ratings already in place.

Success requires good management, but it also depends on innovation, new products and a steady

flow of highly satisfied new customers. Once you have these, you need to tell the world. It's all in the PR.

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