



nerej

It's good PR turning lemons into lemonade

December 20, 2013 - Front Section

Your business deals with people. People like things to go their way - and like to be compensated when it doesn't. Depending on how you handle a specific situation, it can help to boost your brand - or break it.

You're sitting in the waiting room at your dentist's office and the receptionist announces the dentist is running late. Would you be willing to be delayed for an hour in exchange for a generous discount off your out-of-pocket cost for this visit? Schedule permitting, you probably would take the offer.

My wife and I were faced with the airline version of this on a trip to Las Vegas. During the Denver stopover, the Southwest Airlines agent announced: "Any passengers holding tickets for the next flight to Las Vegas and willing to be delayed until the next flight in two hours, please come to the desk." Our plane had a maintenance issue and had to be replaced with a slightly smaller one seating six fewer passengers..

This could have been a public relations fiasco, but kudos to the airline in the way they handled it, asking for volunteers who didn't mind being delayed, offering generous vouchers toward future trips, and making sure the other 200 passengers were not inconvenienced. A low-key solution. We took the generous vouchers for future flights and had a leisurely lunch. Positive PR.

Delta gets credit for the way they handled a bumping issue. Right after Thanksgiving - one of the busiest flying days of the year - the airline canceled a small commercial flight to accommodate the University of Florida men's basketball team. The team had to be in Connecticut for a Monday night game. Delta gave the bumped passengers a choice: Take another flight or accept vouchers toward future trips. A positive outcome on the PR side.

In another case that started years ago, Northwest (now owned by Delta) recently argued before the Supreme Court that they were within their right to refuse to honor a chronically-complaining passenger's frequent flier miles, take away the ones he had earned, and bar him from flying with them ever again. The customer had a history of complaining to get cash compensation. He also booked himself on already-full flights, knowing that he'd be bumped and get more vouchers. That gave him reasons to file more complaints. The airline argues it has the right to give out and take away frequent flier miles.

This customer complained 24 times in seven months. Before it took action, the airline awarded the complainer \$1,925 in vouchers, 78,500 bonus miles, a voucher for his son and \$491 in cash reimbursements. The Supreme Court will decide this case in June 2014. At first, most of us identify with the passenger - David vs. Goliath - but Delta believes anyone who hears the details of the case will side with them, against the complainer. Good advice from their PR team!

The Department of Transportation says only 19 of every 10,000 travelers get bumped; less than one in 10,000 involuntarily. But they can't bump people without first asking for volunteers. Even as airlines are doing everything to cut costs, they are generous with voluntary bumps, offering \$300 or

more in cash, vouchers, or free tickets. It's all about customer satisfaction, loyalty and image. Every business is faced with product or service-related issues. Do you have a well-thought-out policy? Do you make exceptions depending on the specific case? What do you do about a customer who is never satisfied? An experienced PR pro can provide advice to protect your brand - and help tell your story.

Stanley Hurwitz is president/founder of Creative Communications, Stoughton, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540