

Unit III Case Study: United Airlines Flight 3411

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In Case Example 3.2 United Airlines Flight 3411, Annmarie Hanlon (2019), explores how United Airlines responded to videos released on social media after an incident on April 9th, 2017. The videos showed Chicago Aviation Security forcibly removing Dr. David Dao, a paying passenger, by dragging him out of his seat and down the aisle. After no one volunteered, Dr. Dao was one of four passengers selected by United Airlines cabin crew to be rebooked on the next flight to make room for airline staff. Using both theory and practical managerial thinking, this case study will address ethical aspects, digital marketing tools, specifically the website, alternative actions/ recommendations, and the marketing mix.

Ethical Aspects from the Standpoint of the Passenger and Company

The ethical aspects from the standpoint of the passenger include respect and a right to fair, honest and truthful behavior on behalf of the company. The day after the incident, United Airlines CEO sent a letter to his staff that said the passenger “defied Chicago Aviation Security,” and was politely asked to deplane (Hanlon, 2019, p. 67). Not only did the CEO disrespect the passenger and alienate customers, but the letter was also leaked to social media by someone on staff. “Whistleblowing indicates ethical concerns within an organization,” (Hanlon, 2019, p. 67). Ethical aspects from the standpoint of the company include the needs of their employees. “Business ethics contributes to the overall morale and productivity within the organization, (Columbia Southern University [CSU], n.d., p. 2). In this case, albeit late, United made policy changes and statements that support ethical behavior.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Digital Marketing Tools

Digital marketing tools used by the chief executive officer (CEO) included the social network, Twitter or X, and United’s website. Twitter allows people to “find the latest news,”

(Hanlon, 2019, p. 82). A strength to using Twitter includes the ability to conduct sentiment analysis and identify positive or negative conversations about United. In this case, social media content, specifically, reputation, was a weakness. Businesses want to cultivate engagement based on a favorable reputation. After the internal letter was leaked, the CEO's first tweet to the public lacked empathy and did not include an apology to the passenger. Before the CEO could apologize, Twitter users developed hashtags like, "We seat you, then we beat you," (Hanlon, 2019, p. 68). By using a website, United could disseminate information, however, by posting that information over several pages, United did not make it easy to use. With their last press release, the CEO did focus on the necessary visuals by including a two-minute video.

Reinforcing a Positive Message using the Website

The CEO could have used the website to reinforce a more positive message by following best practice and setting up a dedicated web page (Hanlon, 2019). As Hanlon states, scattering the response over several pages demonstrated a lack of control over the message and a website is one digital marketing tool that an organization has complete control of. With a dedicated information site, or non-commercial website, the CEO could have provided information with regular updates. The CEO could have also utilized a blog on the dedicated web page that would echo corporate culture.

Alternative Marketing Tools

Some alternative actions I would have taken in regard to using digital or traditional marketing tools in this situation would have been search engine marketing. Once a dedicated web page had been set up, search engine marketing would ensure this website ranks higher in the search engine results. Another digital marketing tool I would recommend is social media. Along with the traditional method of PR that United utilized by convening a press conference, I would

have also used Facebook and Twitter to livestream the event. Online PR is another digital marketing tool I would recommend. A livestream can generate engagement from customers and would allow United to provide monitoring to see what is being said.

Using the Marketing Mix to Create a Positive Perception

Aspects of the marketing mix I would change to create a more positive reception through United's digital marketing would be to heavily promote their new policy that "passengers take priority over staff in over-boarding situations," (Hanlon, 2019, p.70). Digital marketing methods, like television, would help United communicate this new policy. Advertising all their business operation changes would help United's brand.

Conclusion

When crisis strikes, organizations must get the facts right and respond fast to avoid brand damage. In this case, an apology from United's CEO came too late and affected stock prices. The Four Rs of crisis communications stress that customers must hear from organizations first before the media finds other sources (Hanlon, 2019). The CEO in this case alienated customers by defending employees (Varma, 2021). By leading with empathy, United could have launched a campaign that encouraged customer feedback to help change the negative narrative on social media. By utilizing digital marketing tools like social media, videos, and customer engagement, United could have better responded to this crisis.

References

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