

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://blogs.wsj.com/riskandcompliance/2017/05/01/crisis-of-the-week-american-airlines-response-to-viral-video/>

COMMENTARY

Crisis of the Week: American Airlines' Response to Viral Video

By **BEN DIPIETRO**

May 1, 2017 11:41 am ET



American Airlines aircraft are parked at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in Washington, D.C. PHOTO: REUTERS/JOSHUA ROBERTS/FILE PHOTO

This is a weekly commentary by external experts.

New week, new airline in the glare of a crisis. This time it's American Airlines Group, which found itself in the spotlight after a flight attendant grabbed a stroller from a mother, almost hitting her toddler. With the woman sobbing, another passenger threatened the attendant, who responded aggressively. A video of the incident went viral.

American apologized for the incident and suspended the attendant, saying what it saw on the video "does not reflect our values or how we care for our customers." The attendant worked the flight and the woman and her children were given first-class seats on another flight.

The experts evaluate how well the airline did in its communications in dealing with this issue.

Scott Farrell, president, global corporate communications, Golin: "Either American Airlines went to school on United's handling of its earlier passenger incident or American's policies, procedures and instincts are simply more in tune with the proper way to deal with events like this. Either way, the company checked nearly every box when it came to the proper way to respond.

"First, it recognized an apology was the proper response, not a recitation of rules regarding the gate-checking of strollers or blindly supporting the flight attendant's behavior. American's response was timely, with a statement issued within hours of the incident. The statement clearly identified the transgression—a violation of the company's values of patience and empathy, and how it cares for its customers—and expressed an appropriate level of remorse. The company didn't issue a general apology, but one specifically directed at the passenger and her family and to any other customers who were affected.

"Finally, the statement addressed action, from the issuance of an upgrade for the balance of the family's international trip, to suspension of the flight attendant at the center of this incident, to the opening of an investigation into how and why this incident played out. The only box American left unchecked was the lack of a relevant executive to

whom the apology should have been attributed. Next, American needs to publicly share the results of its investigation and use this incident as means of reinforcing the way the company expects its employees to express its values and care for its customers.”

Andrea Bonime-Blanc, chief executive and founder, GEC Risk Advisory: “Though one might conjecture that American Airlines benefited from the United Airlines’ viral video, its response to its own incident provides a strong contrast. First, American issued a statement almost immediately and did not allow for a barrage of social media postings to derail the virtual conversation. Second, its statement contained all the right bells and whistles in terms of customer care, using phrases such as, ‘We are deeply sorry for the pain we have caused the passenger and to any other customers affected by the incident.’

“It adroitly tied the incident to company values of ‘patience and empathy,’ demonstrating preparation and corporate emotional intelligence in the age of social media and hyper-transparency regarding an airlines’ most important stakeholder: the customer. Third, American took care of the specific customer immediately, providing her and her toddlers with first-class seats for the remainder of their travel. It was the right thing to do from a crisis and reputation management standpoint and helped to quiet the story. Fourth, American made an unequivocal and critically important statement in the very first sentence of its statement, saying: ‘We have seen the video and have started an investigation to obtain the facts.’

“The key to crisis management success for any organization is to have a tone from the top that empowers employees to do the right thing under duress as well as to maintain a well-oiled risk and crisis management machine ready to spring into action within minutes. That requires more than good public relations and crisis planning—it requires a deep and thorough understanding of the types of risks a company is exposed to and the development and readiness of mitigating strategies well in advance of a particular crisis.”

Mike Paul, The Reputation Doctor: “I give American Airlines a ‘B’ for its crisis communications regarding the stroller incident, thus far. It still has more work to do. If American Airlines were my client, I would emphasize emotional intelligence as the most important crisis communications and reputation management tool in the toolbox for this situation. Listening matters. Attitude matters. Patience matters. Empathy matters. Showing anger toward a customer is never OK and the airline was right to suspend the flight attendant.

“The flight attendant should have volunteered to help and been much more patient to first help the mother and her twin babies to their seats to be properly safe and secure. Then he should have, calmly, discussed the rules of the weight and size of the stroller separately. Videos such as this one should be used to further train flight attendants on how best to defuse and solve issues more patiently, professionally and with satisfaction the customer can accept.

“The issue now is for American Airlines to give feedback to all about what happened before, during and after the video based on a thorough, quick and appropriate investigation that should not take months to complete. The tone, strategy and focus of the investigation must include American Airlines’ crisis communications and reputation management teams in the lead to get it right.”

Write to Ben DiPietro at ben.dipietro@wsj.com, and follow him on Twitter @BenDiPietro1.

Share this:

AMERICAN AIRLINES CRISIS OF THE WEEK

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.