

United Is Operating On Auto-Pilot

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4/10/2017



Now that social media has made every customer a media channel, leaders must recognize every employee is a brand touchpoint.

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- Published on April 11, 2017

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United Airlines got into another public relations crisis this week -- the second in two weeks. This week's incident ended up with a widely-shared video of a man being dragged off a plane bloodied and howling. This fiasco shows that United is not operating with the conscientiousness required in today's world where incidents of brands behaving badly spread like wildfire on social media. The company's leadership and its employees need to stop operating on auto-pilot and get out in front of potential public debacles.

The prior PR incident involved United employees refusing to allow teenage girls to board a plane wearing leggings because doing so violated the airlines rules about "pass travelers." The incident could have been written off because it seemed that the employees were simply doing their jobs by enforcing an established policy and shouldn't be criticized for doing so. And the outcry on social media about the incident, including accusations of the company being sexist, seemed like overkill. (United could have mollified the outrage by indicating it would revisit its dress code policy.)

This new incident seems to indicate a pattern of behavior inherent among United employees: they once again blindly enforced a policy instead of weighing the consequences. Since the employees were trying to get passengers off the plane in order to allow crew members to fly, they simply could have offered more compensation until someone took the bait. Instead they insisted on forcing a passenger to give up his seat. When he refused, the employees took what was probably the next action prescribed in their operating procedure -- they called airport security to compel the passenger to leave. And then they wiped their hands clean of the problem when airport security proceeded to forcibly remove the passenger.

By indiscriminately following rules, United employees delivered a terrible customer experience. What's just as, if not more, important is that they didn't seem to consider or care about how their behavior would impact brand perceptions. Anyone involved could have foreseen that the incident would have ended up in the news and on social media. The employees should have realized that the debacle would cost United far more in bad press and loss of reputation than the few hundred dollars more it would have taken to get another customer to deplane.

United employees are not the only ones who seem to be operating on auto-pilot. The company's leaders should stop waiting until incidents happen before reacting and offering an apology. Instead they should proactively start ensuring employees are encouraged, equipped, and empowered to do the right thing. In addition to writing the rules of customer engagement, company leaders should train its employees to use discretion when enforcing those rules. Moreover, leaders should ensure employees understand the big consequences of seemingly small decisions.

The valuable lesson that all companies can learn from United is this: Policies and procedures are not enough. Leaders must recognize that in this day and age it's not possible to anticipate every possible customer scenario and to dictate the appropriate employee response. Companies must have clear values that help employees determine how to handle unforeseen or difficult situations. Vague values like respect and integrity don't provide the specificity that employees need to help them make the right in-the-moment decisions. Leaders must also cultivate a culture where all employees take responsibility for how its brand is perceived. They should ensure all employees know what the brand stands for and how to appropriately interpret and reinforce it. Leaders must identify and implement clear and distinct values and link them to brand-building actions and behaviors that every employee embraces.

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