



United Airlines Fiasco Is The Symptom Of a Much Bigger Problem In America: A Negotiator Explains

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SanDiegoBizLaw.com

Contact: Amanda Berkshire

Los Angeles: (619) 793-4827

Email: ab@Worldwide-Press.com

United Airlines Fiasco Is The Symptom Of a Much Bigger Problem In America: A Negotiator Explains

Los Angeles, CA. The United Fiasco could have happened to (most) any airline and it was a matter of time. The problem is not just with the airlines, but with the decline American customer service levels and the Stanford Experiment effect. Steven Riznyk, a negotiator who has dealt with international kidnappings, extortion, blackmail and various business issues, explains why this was inevitable.

Regrettably, 9/11 hurt our country in a number of ways, and its effects are still reverberating. What was once an industry based on pleasure has become more of a military installation. Airlines have embraced the powers afforded them through 9/11 and instead of treating passengers as customers, they often act as if they are doing the passenger a favor by transporting them. The key is that both empathy and discretion seem to be missing at the lower levels of staffing at the airlines and it has led to an exponential, not gradual decline in customer service levels. Granted, the airlines have tried to raise their valuations by hiring lower level staff to save money, their mistake is in not covering themselves by having a senior decision-maker at airports who is trained in decision-making rather than simply using a one-size fits all mentality to problems. When the lower level staff know that they can make adverse decisions with no consequences, being human, they will simply keep pushing the envelope. What happened on this United Airlines flight is no surprise.

The second factor to consider, states Mr Riznyk, is the danger with how people think. As a negotiator having dealt with people from over 50 countries, there are certain patterns amongst people that are quite universal, and even more pronounced in certain cultures. There are certain 'hotspots' that people have, and if you mention them to someone, people will instantly judge, with no regard as to truth. To see this at work, if you want to destroy someone's reputation, merely publicly accuse (an innocent person) of being a child molester or someone who is abusive of their spouse. The truth is irrelevant, and most people will instantly judge that person, make a determination, and maybe even spread the news and seek punishment. The truth is irrelevant. Same problem at the airports. Ask the wrong question, or be at the wrong place, and the airline workers immediately summon security as United did. The fact that United sold this gentleman a ticket for which he paid, or that he has obligations on the other side of this journey was irrelevant. No empathy and no discretion. Why? Because they 'could' (do what they did).

The third factor to consider is the Stanford Prison Experiment (August 14th to 20th, 1971). A very

famous study in which students were assigned roles as guards or prisoners in an experiment; it was cut short due to the guards' behavior on their fellow classmates that some characterize as torture. A fascinating study with middle class persons who were thought to be psychologically stable. It demonstrated that a predisposition is not required for people to take on the role that is situation-based and internalize it. The experiment also demonstrated the power of cognitive dissonance; keep in mind these were fellow classmates and this was just an experiment, but some of the guards treated their fellow (prisoner) classmates brutally. This is human nature at work.

Given that America has become very much a country that deals with things with muscle and kindness and patience have taken a back seat, and that it is a judgmental culture, it's not hard to imagine that an airline's customer service levels are so punitive. Some airlines provide their staff with the power, place little emphasis on customer service, and hire low-level staff who lack either the empathy or intelligence to make a decision that avoids a fiasco such as this one. Were it not for cameras on phones, this could have taken years to expose. The problem? The staff is not geared to be customer-service oriented; they can have anyone arrested for questioning them: they are power-oriented.

Hindsight, granted, is very good, so let's examine some of the underlying issues and how this could have been better handled:

1. The core of the problem is that four of United's people had to get to another destination to avoid their future flight being cancelled.
2. Most passengers are not aware that if they purchase a ticket on a plane it does not guarantee a seat.
3. Passengers have their own lives and obligations.
4. The airline is being greedy because it is being paid twice for seats if it is selling them and then selling them again.
5. Passengers will start flying the next international airline that will guarantee they don't use this tactic.
6. United's staff lacked the common sense and empathy to realize the damage they would cause by having a passenger dragged off an airplane, especially one who paid for the seat in full.
7. Many airlines seem to have the attitude that one passenger here or there who has been severely put out is not a problem, as there are few airline choices available.
8. Airline personnel have been granted broad discretionary powers and can have people arrested at a whim, using the same defense police officers routinely use: obstruction, or one of its variants.
9. No senior staff person was available to make the right choice.
10. The United personnel who made the decision to call security did not have the sense to realize how this would affect the other passengers (let alone the country or other countries). In China, the equivalent of Twitter brought in 100 million views regarding the topic.
11. America has a reputation of using force rather than discussion (ie stories about police, airport issues, etc) , which has hurt our international image, and a low-level person with no understanding of consequences at United only reinforced that perception.
12. The security guards were obviously untrained and did not use common sense. Just because one has the ability to use force and power does not mean that it should be used, especially in such a dehumanizing manner. They were removing a paying passenger, not a criminal.
13. The CEO, Oscar Munoz, apologized "for having to re-accommodate customers". Appalling. There was no concern over the passenger who was treated that way. Perhaps everybody should have had a free movie and it would be fine.

In conclusion, for enough frequent flier miles or future flying credit, someone would have sold their seat, the staff should have simply offered more. Now, the company's stock has lost almost \$1 billion. One person with a customer-service attitude could have prevented all of this.

Oscar Munoz could have easily apologized for the event and taken responsibility for the lack of training the staff have in proper customer relations or that he has a low-level staff that cannot think at those levels. Anything reasonable would have been accepted by the public. Additionally, the passenger should have been offered 5 years or a lifetime of free flights (for the way the security guards handled him); people rarely can take advantage of this offer as they have to earn a living. This would have been a good soft cushion for United in light of what was about to happen. They anticipated they could treat a person this way and get away with it.

Instead, United, afraid of admitting fault (i.e. the contract allows it so we can do it) took the high road to prevent a lawsuit. The settlement of the lawsuit would have been far cheaper than a billion dollars, one would think, not to mention that this will remain in people's minds for a good five years or so; one cannot unring a bell!

It was time that this happened to one of the airlines, as customer service levels are deplorable and if anything is questioned, one is routinely threatened with arrest or being denied boarding. It's the tail wagging the dog. A shame, states Steven Riznyk, as just recently he acquired the United credit card and chose to make it his major international carrier.

Steven Riznyk is the CEO of San Diego Biz Law and a high-level negotiator and business strategist who is hired to analyze and resolve complex issues worldwide. He can be reached at 619-793-4827.

Amanda Berkshire
Worldwide-Press
619-793-4827
email us here

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