

Lessons Learned from 2018 's Biggest Communications Crises

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They say a person's character is measured by how they respond to adversity. In that sense, public relations and communications crises are a measure of a person's or company's character.

From the White House to the coffee shop to the friendly skies, 2018 provided many examples of people and organizations responding to crises of their own making.

POTUS, Tesla and Papa John's made the top 10 list. Let's review how they fared.

Some leaders lack filters. Tesla founder Elon Musk discussed his company's possible valuation and was publicly rebuked by federal regulators. Papa John's founder John Schnatter used the N-word on a conference call and resigned as chairman. President Donald Trump and his press team seemingly pivot from

crisis to crisis, whether it's breaking news or a controversial tweet or alleged lie. When an organization's leader is the face of the brand, its ship rises and falls with every utterance. CEOs and presidents often are mavericks. But they should empower communications teams to train executives about messaging best practices and implement a quick and effective response when the wrong message is spoken. Grade: Low

Starbucks cools hot water. Earlier this year, an employee at a Philadelphia Starbucks called the police to report two black men in the store. The police arrested – and later released – the men, who had been waiting on a friend. An “ashamed” Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz personally apologized, accepted responsibility, and closed 8,000 Starbucks locations to put 175,000 employees through racial bias training. The cost? Millions of dollars. But as Schultz said, “We’re better than this.” Grade: Outstanding.

United’s not-so-friendly skies. In November, United Airlines was hit with a \$10 million lawsuit by a former NBA basketball player, Eric Murdock, who is black, accusing a white flight attendant of “race-baiting” when she didn’t allow him to switch to an exit row seat on a July flight. The flight attendant then allowed a white passenger to take the seat. Security was called to escort the player, and another woman who supported his claim, from the plane. Neither were charged. In a statement to media, United said it has “zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind.”

In March, two dogs died in separate incidents resulting from United employees’ loading errors or wrong passenger instructions. United’s leadership apologized to the owners, and in the case of French bulldog puppy, Kokito, that died in an overhead bin, assumed “full responsibility” and repaid passenger fees. But in seemingly siding with its crew and offering refunds as an almost kneejerk remedy, United did little to quell social media uproar.

This is the same airline that in 2017 had a seated passenger dragged off a plane to accommodate traveling employees, and ordered two teenagers off a flight for wearing leggings.

Human errors happen at a company with 88,000 employees (it's noteworthy that United attendants and gate agents days before the dogs' deaths received compassion and customer service training). Some noted that leadership did what was required, but accused executives of lacking empathy in their response. Caring in public messaging and even embracing the "customer is always right" ethos, except for the most egregious instances, can go far in winning over the public's – and pet-loving public's – opinions, and business. Grade: Satisfactory

How can your organization make the grade in [crisis communications](#) in 2019? Whether dealing with a CEO, one of thousands of employees worldwide, or the President of the United States, try to put a plan in place for how and who will respond, and how the team will react, to crises that emerge.



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