

United's World of Woes

Editor's Note: CommPRO reached out to Virgil Scudder, the "Dean of Media Trainers," for this follow up to his analysis, United Airlines O'Hare Fiasco: A Lesson for All Leaders.



Virgil Scudder, President, Virgil Scudder & Associates

How can United Airlines ever dig itself out of its ever-deepening hole?

It won't be easy, cheap, or quick. And, it's not likely to be done without some dramatic changes in personnel, policy, and practices.

As most of the world now knows, the problems began last Sunday when a bumped passenger was dragged, bloody and screaming, off a United flight from Chicago to Louisville to make room for a crew member who needed to be on a flight out of Louisville Monday morning. The passenger's lawyer says he suffered serious injuries and was even more traumatized than when he fled his native Viet Nam on a boat in 1975.

The airline badly mishandled the initial response to the situation with a statement from the CEO noting that the airline has a right to kick off passengers, calling the man disruptive, and praising the crew for its handling of the incident. It apologized only for having to "re-accommodate" passengers.

A subsequent CEO apology went farther but not far enough. The crisis continued to bubble.



Fate then stepped in to deal more blows to an airline that was already struggling with a terrible reputation for service. At mid-week, a passenger who bought a full fare first class ticket from Hawaii to Los Angeles said he was forced to give up his seat and placed in a middle seat in coach between a feuding couple that quarreled all the way to Los Angeles. The passenger said the crew threatened to handcuff him if he refused to move. He didn't receive a formal apology or compensation, at least initially.

This is an incident that would have received minimal news coverage if not for the Chicago incident.

Then, along came a spider, or a scorpion or something like it, that fell out of an overhead bin on a flight to Calgary and stung a passenger. Talk about bad luck.

United now faces a multitude of problems including these:

- A multi-million-dollar drop in market valuation
- Passengers switching to other airlines
- A Congressional inquiry
- A heightening of the bad service reputation

- Employee morale becoming even worse

A number of major steps will need to be taken to rebuild United's reputation. They include the following:

- Full and sincere apologies and generous compensation to all who have been affected
- Heads must roll, including that of the CEO who should be replaced by a proven industry veteran like former Continental CEO Gordon Bethune to clean up the mess
- Outside crisis counsel needs to be brought in and fully utilized
- Policies and procedures need to be examined and changed, emphasizing customer service instead of airline convenience
- An extensive PR campaign needs to be initiated, one focusing not on bland promises that "we'll make it right" but outlining what will be done and then giving regular progress reports on just what it has done and why

As I said, this will not be a quick, cheap, or easy process. But it's one the board of directors should demand and monitor. Failure to take such steps will carry a very high price.

***About the Author:** Often referred to as "The Dean of Media Trainers," Virgil is considered one of the world's foremost communication experts. In a 30-year career that has covered 26 countries on five continents, he has provided coaching and counsel to heads of some of the world's largest corporations and government leaders. Virgil is a prolific writer and speaker. His book, *World Class Communication: how great CEOs win with the public, shareholders, employees, and the media*, written with his son Ken, was named one of the 25 best business books of 2012. His column, *In the C-Suite*, appears*

in every quarterly issue of the Public Relations Strategist and is read by leaders of major public relations agencies and global heads of public relations of large companies. He has written or been featured in articles that have appeared in The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, Reuters, Investors Business Daily, and numerous professional publications. Two of his speeches have been reprinted in the prestigious Vital Speeches of the Day. Prior to founding Virgil Scudder & Associates in 1990, Virgil headed the media training units of two of the world's largest public relations firms, Hill & Knowlton and Carl Byoir & Associates. Earlier, he was an award-winning news broadcaster at major radio and television networks and stations in New York City. He was a first-night Broadway drama critic for six years during that period, broadcasting reviews on NBC's all-news radio network and all-news WINS radio.