

Wake Up and Fly Right: A Message for the Airlines



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A basic tenet of effective crisis management is this: act decisively and act fast, taking remedial steps before a limited problem becomes a full-blown crisis. U.S.-based airlines are blowing this one big time.

If airline management follows the news in any form—print, broadcast, or digital—they have to know that sexual harassment is one of the hottest topics of the day. What that means is that any report on such abuse is likely to get heightened news coverage and extensive social media comment. In other words, a story that might have been a short item five years ago is now in the top story lineup. Widely reported incidents involving Donald Trump, Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, and others have changed the game.

In the current environment, it doesn't take many such occurrences to create big and damaging news coverage. A good example is a story recently broken by CNN.

The story reported that four women told CNN that they were sexually assaulted during recent airline flights. Just four? Why is the unverified testimony of only four people major news? Because it's a hot topic and it clearly appears to be the tip of the iceberg about a serious problem airlines are ignoring or mishandling. It shines a spotlight on what

clearly appears to be a critical failure of customer service and protection.

In each case, the women said the flight attendants appeared ill equipped to respond effectively, or made wrong decisions, when they complained of being groped.

Perhaps the most egregious story came from Ayanna Hart, who reported fending off an intoxicated serial groper several times on a Delta flight. On her first complaint, she said, the flight attendant was dismissive. On a later complaint, the flight attendant simply told the man, "no touching."

When another woman summoned a flight attendant to express concerns about the man, according to Hart Dvaladze, the flight attendant said, "Oh, don't worry about him. He flies with us all the time. He's Delta Platinum." Hart is suing the airline for not intervening and continuing to serve the man alcohol.

According to the CNN story, in some of the four cases the airline



turned the offender over to authorities after landing and in others did not.

The airlines' responses to the four women's complaints could

best be described as insincere boilerplate, ho hum, macho talk, or “don’t bother me.” Here are some examples:

- United Airlines has “zero tolerance for this kind of behavior.”
- “We’re disheartened by the event (the passenger) described.”
- “(We) know it’s not fair when one person’s behavior affects another person.”

The statement from the industry voice, Airlines for America, was no better:

- “(Member airlines) take these matters seriously and do not tolerate harassment in any form.”

If only it were true. If we are to believe the women quoted and the comments of many other passengers, that’s not always the case.

How bad is the problem? It’s hard to tell since many such instances undoubtedly go unreported. Also, in today’s over-packed airline coaches, it can be hard to distinguish between inappropriate touching and incidental contact. But, FBI investigations into midair sexual assaults have increased by 66% since 2014. With more women now being emboldened to come forth, that number will surely increase.

What accounts for this serious customer service failure in what is supposed to be a service industry?

Sara Nelson, a United flight attendant who is president of a large union, The Association of Flight Attendants–CWA, told CNN that “In my 22 years as a flight attendant, I have never taken part in a conversation—in training or otherwise—about how to handle sexual harassment or sexual assault.” She added, “Not only are we not equipped with good, clear policies about (how to protect both passengers and crew members), you’re asking people who are experiencing sexual harassment

every day to now be the enforcers and it just doesn't make a lot of sense."

What should airlines do to address this situation before it becomes a full-blown crisis?

- First, lay out clear guidelines for handling these situations.
- Next, train or at least instruct flight attendants in these procedures.
- Be transparent—tell the public and media what the policies are and that they will be enforced.
- Remind pilots of their obligation to support and protect the cabin crew.
- Be consistent in enforcing the policies.

If I were consulting for an airline today, as I have numerous times in the past, my advice would be this: Let's take these steps and lead the industry toward a more enlightened approach to the problem.

Let's hope some airline does. If the action gets enough favorable news coverage, the other airlines will follow. They couldn't afford not to.

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

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