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**A Public Relations Disaster  
  
How saving $1,200 cost United Airlines 10,772,839 negative views on YouTube**

[](http://sentium.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Guitar.jpg)It is a customer service nightmare. At the same time, it is a good lesson about how social media can impact your business.

Here’s what happened:

A singer/songwriter named Dave Carroll was flying from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Omaha, Nebraska, with a layover at Chicago’s O’Hare airport. As he was getting ready to get off the plane, he heard another passenger say, “My God! They’re throwing guitars out there!”

As Dave and the other band members looked out onto the tarmac where the luggage was being unloaded, they recognized the guitars. Their reaction was a blend of terror and disbelief.

Later he indeed discovered that his $3,500 Taylor guitar’s neck had been broken.

What followed was a customer service nightmare. Dave tried for nine months to get a claim processed with United. The response was a firm and consistent “no.” They claimed he had waited longer than 24 hours to process a claim, so he was out of luck.

He tried phone calls. He tried e-mails. He even went so far as to suggest that instead of money, United give him $1,200 in flight vouchers to cover the cost of repairing the guitar. United held firm. They said “No.”

So, what else could a singer-songwriter do?

That’s right. He wrote a song and produced a music video. The song was titled “United Breaks Guitars.” He put it up on YouTube and it went viral.

Now just in case you’re not up on this particular piece of internet slang, “viral” means one person sends it to ten of their friends, who send it to ten of their friends, who send it to ten of their friends, and so on. It follows the same pattern of how a bad cold gets passed around. (Hence the name.)

It also means that pretty quickly very large numbers of people were singing along to “United Breaks Guitars.”

As of this writeup, this video has had 10,772,839 views.

After 150,000 views, United contacted Dave Carroll and offered payment to make the video go away. He had changed his mind, however. It wasn’t about the money anymore. In fact, he suggested they donate the money to a charity.

United also discovered that “United Breaks Guitars” wasn’t just a single song. It was part of a trilogy.

So far, “United Breaks Guitars Song 2” has generated 1,322,582 views on YouTube. “United Breaks Guitars Song 3” has generated 405,790 views. All together, that’s over 12.5 million negative impressions.

That’s a lot of people listening to catchy tunes about United’s customer service.

Of course, the impact of Dave’s song went far beyond YouTube.

As “United Breaks Guitars Song 1” was becoming an internet phenomenon, the news media picked up the story. Soon newspapers and news broadcast media across North America were doing stories about the song. Dave became a sought after guest on many radio and TV shows where, of course, he retold the story of “United Breaks Guitars.” He did over 200 interviews in the first few months.

Then the copy cats and parodies started. There are now countless add-on videos that others have posted on YouTube. They range from a parody called, “United Breaks Guitars – Inside Response from United Airlines” to “Hitler Finds Out United Breaks Guitars.”

Add a few million more views to the discussion about United.

How has the public felt about this portrayal of United Airlines? When you look at the “United Breaks Guitars Song 1,” 51,327 people voted that they liked it against 1,012 dislikes. That’s roughly a 50-to-1 ratio against United.

A recent Google search of the term “United Breaks Guitars” returned 2,690,000 results.

Remember the offer from Dave to accept $1,200 worth of travel vouchers as compensation for the repair costs? Compare that to millions of people singing along to songs about how they wish they’d “…flown with someone else….or gone by car…because United breaks guitars…”

One story out of Newark, New Jersey describes an entire shuttle filled with passengers who spontaneously began singing “United Breaks Guitars” while traveling between terminals.

This tsunami of bad public relations has certainly had an effect on people’s decision in choosing an airline. The BBC reported that United’s stock price dropped by 10% within three to four weeks of the release of the video – a decrease in valuation of $180 million.

United is clearly the loser.

**Not everyone did it wrong**

Taylor Guitars, the people who made the now famous guitar — and who are referenced in the video — had their own response.

They gave Dave a new Taylor Guitar. But that’s not all.

They created their own YouTube video. In it, they stated how unhappy they become when any guitar gets damaged and reminded people about their repair services. They also offered free information about how to travel safely with guitars.

This quickly produced two-minute video has generated 562,777 views.

They came out an unanticipated winner in this adventure by taking positive action.

**What does this mean for your business?**

We live in a world where YouTube videos can get a following overnight. A website such as www.your-business-sucks.com can be set up and operational in about an hour.

Having a philosophy of doing the right thing is more important than ever. Information now travels at the speed of the internet. Sadly, bad news seems to travel faster than good news.

But don’t just approach the idea of “doing the right thing” because of its public relations value. This philosophy is rightly the foundation of any sound, successful business.

Deliver exceptional service and high quality products. Turn your customers into raving fans. Use that base of support to get positive reviews on social media sites. The way to counter an unhappy customer’s one-star rating is by having ten five-star ratings already in place.

So first, earn the positive reviews from your customers. Next, encourage them to share those positive reviews with others.

And try to avoid antagonizing anyone who can create a catchy music video.

**Building an excellent reputation**

Building an excellent reputation is a process. It’s not a single event.

An excellent reputation is the result of many positive actions over a period of time. There are, however, some strategies that can accelerate the process.

The best time to implement them is now, before anyone starts singing songs about you.

If you’d like to explore your options, call Sentium at (800) 595-1288 and we’ll set up a phone meeting. This is a free, no obligation meeting where we can discuss your situation and how to improve it.

In the meantime, check out “United Breaks Guitars Song 1” on YouTube.

To Your Business Success,

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Are you looking to raise the effectiveness of your marketing? The first step is to have a conversation. (800) 595-1288 to schedule a no-obligation telephone meeting. Or, simply send an e-mail.

Want to learn more? [Access the Marketing Rocket Fuel Archive Library.](http://sentium.com/rocket-fuel/)

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Richard Wilson is the Founder/Chief Marketing Strategist for Sentium Strategic Communications which helps companies craft the right message for extraordinary results. Over the past 33 years, his clients  
have ranged from startups to major technology companies.

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