

## United Airlines – Passenger Removal Incident (2017)

Class: PRAD 540

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United Airlines (UA) is a major U.S. airline headquartered in Willis Tower in Chicago, Illinois, near its main hub, O'Hare International Airport. Founded in 1926, it is one of the largest airlines in the world, operating thousands of flights daily that connect major cities across the United States and internationally. The company is known for its global routes and strong business travel services. Before the crisis, United held a solid reputation and a stable customer base in the U.S. market.

On April 9, 2017, United Airlines experienced a serious crisis event that drew worldwide attention. On flight UA3411 from Chicago to Louisville, an Asian American passenger, Dr. David Dao, was forcibly removed from the plane because the airline needed to make room for crew members. He refused to give up his seat and was then violently dragged off the plane by airport security. The scene was recorded by other passengers and uploaded to the internet, triggering global outrage and heated discussions. The video showed Dr. Dao screaming, bleeding, and being dragged from his seat, which shocked people around the world and quickly escalated into a serious reputational crisis for United Airlines.

The incident caused serious damage to United Airlines' reputation. After the video went viral, social media was full of criticism and boycott messages from angry users. According to *The Independent* (2017), the company's stock price dropped about 4% in the next few days, losing nearly one billion dollars in market value. Many people thought United did not show enough care or professionalism when dealing with the overbooking problem. Because of this, the company lost customer trust and also faced pressure from the government to improve how

passengers are treated.

I think this case is a preventable crisis in Coombs' definitions. This kind of crisis usually happens because of management mistakes or improper actions by the company. United Airlines could have avoided the problem with better internal policies and responses, but it showed little care and flexibility when dealing with the overbooking issue, which led to serious negative results.

I think the direct trigger of this crisis was the overbooking incident on April 9, 2017. United Airlines asked four passengers to give up their seats to make room for crew members. Among them was Dr. David Dao, a Chinese-American passenger. When he refused to leave, airport security officers boarded the plane and forcibly dragged him off his seat. Other passengers recorded the scene and posted it on social media. The video showing Dr. Dao bleeding and screaming spread worldwide within hours, causing outrage and anger across the globe. On April 10, United Airlines' CEO Oscar Munoz made a statement saying he felt "upset" about the incident, but he did not apologize. Instead, he blamed the passenger for being "uncooperative" and even praised the crew for handling the situation "professionally." He used the phrase "re-accommodate the passengers" to make the problem sound less serious, which made people even angrier. On April 11, Munoz issued a second statement, apologizing and admitting that United handled the case poorly. He also said that Dr. Dao did nothing wrong. On April 27, United reached a private settlement with Dr. Dao, but the details were not disclosed.

I think this was a double crisis. The first crisis came from the violent removal itself, which directly caused public anger. The second crisis came from the company's poor

communication. The CEO's first statement was cold and defensive, showing no empathy and shifting the blame to the victim. This made people feel that United was avoiding responsibility and distorting the truth. Witnesses said that Dr. Dao was polite and calm, although he refused to leave because he had patients to see the next day. His action was not aggressive, but firm. The CEO's reaction only made the situation worse.

The incident had serious consequences. United Airlines' reputation was deeply damaged, and its stock price dropped by about 4% in the days following the event, wiping nearly \$1 billion off its market value (The Independent, 2017). Social media was filled with criticism and boycott calls. Many passengers said they no longer trusted United and some even started refusing to fly with the airline. The case also triggered discussions about passenger rights and racial discrimination. Some passengers reported hearing Dr. Dao shouting, "I'm Chinese," which made the issue gain huge attention in Chinese media. Many people believed this was not only about overbooking but also about discrimination. As a Chinese student studying in the United States, I was really shocked when I saw the news. The video was disturbing and made me afraid to fly with United Airlines. Although overbooking is common in the airline industry, this incident made me worry that if something similar happened to me, I might also be treated unfairly. It made me realize that crisis management is not just about protecting a brand—it's also about protecting passengers' sense of safety and respect.

Based on the 6R principles of crisis management are Recognition, Reaction, Responsibility, Regret, Resolution, and Reform. I think United's initial response was very poor. The company failed to recognize how serious the situation was and underestimated the influence of social media. Its first statement sounded cold and defensive, using

“re-accommodate” to minimize the violent act and even praising the crew, which made people even angrier. United did not take responsibility and instead blamed the passenger. Under strong public pressure, the CEO later made a more sincere apology, but it was too late. After that, the company changed its overbooking and boarding policies and reached a private settlement with Dr. Dao. Later, United reformed its internal process, limiting forced removals and raising compensation to rebuild its reputation and regain public trust.

I think the main stakeholders in this crisis were the passengers, employees, and investors. The most directly affected were the passengers on the flight, especially Dr. David Dao. He suffered both physical injuries and emotional trauma, becoming the center of global attention and facing strong pressure from both the media and the public. Other passengers, though not physically harmed, were deeply shocked and frightened after witnessing the violent removal. This experience weakened their trust in United Airlines and made potential customers question the company’s sense of safety and humanity.

Investors were also affected. After the incident, United’s stock price dropped around 4%, wiping nearly \$1 billion off its market value (The Independent, 2017). Many investors worried that the company’s damaged reputation could harm its long-term profitability. Some shareholders urged United to improve its crisis management systems and strengthen its public relations strategy to prevent similar crises in the future.

United Airlines employees were another important stakeholder group. The flight crew and ground staff were placed in a difficult situation, and their professionalism was questioned. Because the company lacked proper training and clear guidelines for handling overbooking cases, employees didn’t know how to respond effectively and became targets of public

criticism. After the incident, one airport police officer involved was fired, while others were demoted to airport security positions. The Chicago Department of Aviation Police was also widely criticized for poor management. United's management faced heavy internal and external pressure, dealing with negative media coverage while trying to calm employees and restore morale.

I think the secondary stakeholders included Dr. Dao's family, other passengers' families, the general public, the media, regulators, and other airlines. Dr. Dao's family had to care for him during his recovery while facing overwhelming media attention. The families of other passengers also grew worried about airline safety. The media and social media users acted as "amplifiers" during the crisis. Continuous coverage kept the story in the headlines, while influencers and online users accelerated its spread. For example, the hashtag #BoycottUnitedAirlines went viral, reaching millions of views within hours. Regulatory bodies such as the U.S. Department of Transportation demanded reports from United and reopened discussions about passenger rights policies. Meanwhile, competitors like American Airlines and Delta took the opportunity to highlight their "respect for passengers" policies, which made United's image appear even worse.

In my view, these secondary stakeholders played an important role in shaping how the crisis evolved. Although they were not directly involved, their actions and voices through media, public opinion, and policy discussions turned a single flight incident into a global brand trust crisis.

I think the most effective strategy United Airlines used during this crisis was its later-stage effort to issue public apologies through mainstream and social media, followed by

concrete policy reforms to rebuild trust. However, overall, the company's initial response was too slow and lacked empathy, which turned a single incident into a global outrage. According to the "6R" principles of crisis management, United failed in the early stages of Recognition and Reaction but improved during the later stages of Regret, Resolution, and Reform. In the Recognition stage, the company failed to realize the seriousness of the situation even after the video went viral. In the Reaction stage, its first statement used the phrase "re-accommodate," which angered the public. During the Regret stage, United finally issued a more sincere apology under public pressure. In the Resolution and Reform stages, the company changed its boarding and overbooking policies, limited forced removals, and increased passenger compensation. These later actions helped the company partially recover its image and demonstrated a more effective communication approach.

After the passenger removal crisis, United Airlines engaged both mainstream and social media to address public outrage and begin restoring its reputation. Through these channels, the company demonstrated the key elements of the 6R framework. Especially Regret, Responsibility, Resolution, and Reform as it attempted to rebuild trust among its key stakeholders.

United first turned to mainstream media to express accountability and remorse. CEO Oscar Munoz appeared in multiple interviews with reputable outlets such as CBC News and ABC News, which were selected for their credibility and broad reach. In an interview with CBC News, Munoz stated, "No one should ever be mistreated this way... This can never, will never happen again," expressing genuine regret and acknowledging the company's moral responsibility (see Figure 1). Similarly, in an ABC News exclusive, Munoz said he felt

“shame” after watching the viral video of Dr. Dao being forcibly removed, describing it as a “system failure” (see Figure 2). These interviews allowed United to communicate directly with key stakeholders, including passengers, customers, employees, regulators, and the general public. The goal was to rebuild trust, reassure safety, and demonstrate that the company’s leadership was both aware and accountable.

On social media, United Airlines used its verified Twitter account to deliver an official apology and share its action plan for reform. The post by CEO Munoz stated, “We take full responsibility and will work to make it right,” and promised a policy review with results to be shared by April 30 (see Figure 3). This tweet represented a transparent and empathetic approach that aligned with the Resolution and Reform stages of the 6R model. The primary audience on social media included digital consumers, journalists, and opinion leaders. The same groups that had amplified the crisis online. By directly addressing public anger on Twitter, United sought to regain control of the narrative, rebuild online credibility, and show its willingness to act responsibly.

There is little evidence that United Airlines used paid media, influencers, or third-party endorsements during the immediate crisis period. This strategic decision likely stemmed from the company’s desire to appear authentic and avoid the perception of “buying” goodwill. Instead, United focused on earned and owned media, such as news coverage and corporate statements to communicate with institutional stakeholders like investors, employees, and regulators. In the weeks following the crisis, the company shared policy updates and internal reforms through its newsroom and press releases, emphasizing long-term improvement over short-term image management.

Overall, United Airlines' crisis communication demonstrates a gradual transition from defensiveness to responsibility. By combining mainstream and social media outreach with honest leadership communication, the company attempted to regain stakeholder trust, stabilize its reputation, and show commitment to meaningful reform.

I believe United Airlines demonstrated effective crisis management by implementing a series of corrective actions to prevent similar incidents in the future. On April 27, 2017, the company announced its "Ten Policy Changes," a set of reforms designed to improve passenger experience and rebuild public trust. These included ending the practice of forcibly removing boarded passengers, raising the maximum volunteer compensation to \$10,000, providing employees with conflict management and communication training, and ensuring that crew members were booked at least 60 minutes before departure. Additionally, United enhanced its cooperation with airport security, improved its complaint and compensation system, optimized flight scheduling, and introduced the "Customer First" initiative to emphasize a passenger-centered service approach.

From a business recovery perspective, Forbes (2018) reported that United Airlines showed clear signs of improvement within a year after the crisis. First, it was the only one among the top eight U.S. airlines whose stock rose in 2018, with a 7.5% increase, signaling renewed investor confidence. Second, United's stock price rose by 17 cents to \$73.19, reflecting a positive market response to its management reforms. Finally, UAL's passenger traffic increased by 5–6%, and combined with a 1.7% year-over-year network growth across the airline industry, the company's total route traffic rose by 2.9%. These figures indicate that

after facing intense public criticism, United successfully rebuilt investor and customer trust, achieving recovery in both business performance and brand reputation through consistent reform and communication.

Overall, United Airlines experienced a severe brand and trust crisis following the 2017 passenger removal incident. The crisis exposed weaknesses in the company's customer relationship management and crisis response mechanisms, while also revealing broader issues in the airline industry related to service awareness and emergency handling. In the early stages, United's slow and emotionless reaction caused the situation to escalate, sparking public outrage and discussions about discrimination and fairness. Personally, when I first saw the news, I felt a sense of fear and rejection toward the airline. However, as public and media pressure mounted, United eventually acknowledged the seriousness of the issue and took corrective actions. Through increasing passenger compensation, strengthening staff training, improving communication systems, and optimizing boarding procedures, the company demonstrated its ability to learn from mistakes and rebuild its reputation. From a broader perspective, this incident offers valuable lessons for global businesses: transparency, accountability, and timely communication are essential to restoring public trust. As a Chinese international student studying communication in the United States, this case deepened my understanding of how critical brand reputation is, and how sincerity and concrete action are vital to rebuilding it after a crisis. United's experience proves that even after a severe loss of credibility, an organization can regain both its reputation and market position by responding responsibly to public concerns and committing to lasting reform.

This paper used ChatGPT and Grammarly to assist with grammar revision and spelling

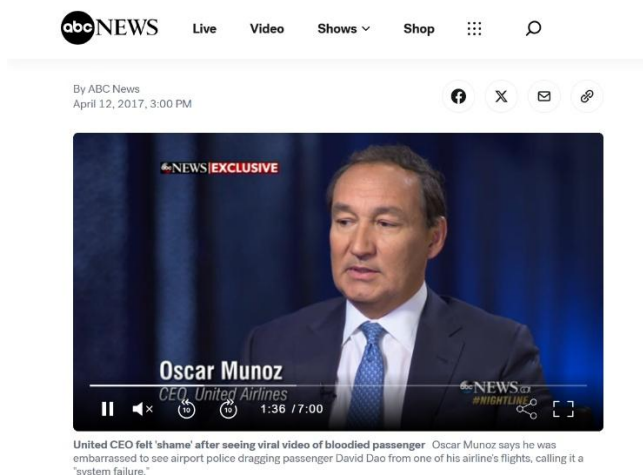
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3. Figure 1. Screenshot of CBC News article “No one should ever be mistreated this way,’ apologetic United CEO says in TV interview.”  
Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/united-airline-ceo-1.4067069>

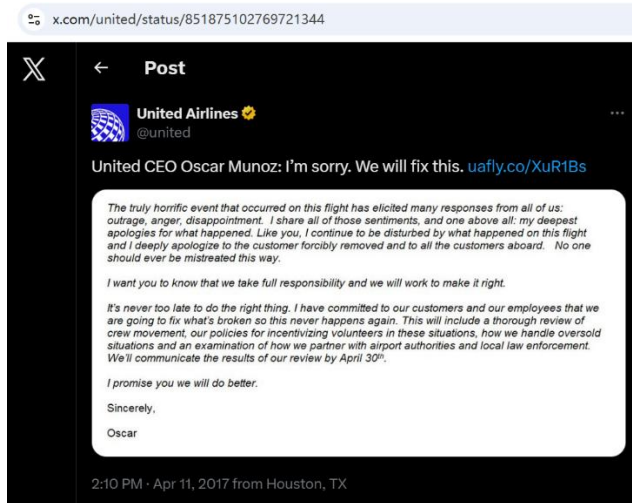


4. Figure 2. Screenshot of ABC News exclusive interview “United CEO felt ‘shame’ after seeing viral video of bloodied passenger.”  
Source: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/united-ceo-oscar-munoz-felt-sham-passenger-dragged/story?id=46746594>



5. Figure 3. Screenshot of United Airlines' official apology tweet by CEO Oscar Munoz, April 11, 2017.

Source: <https://x.com/united/status/851875102769721344>



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