

When your CEO is giving you PR nightmares

What do you do when your CEO is giving you lots of PR problems? We've been seeing a slew of PR missteps by CEOs, from Tony Hayward of BP to Ben Baldanza of Spirit Airlines.

Ben Baldanza seems to be quite the character. He recently said that luggage is not essential when traveling, and this is why Spirit is now charging for bringing carry-ons on board. BudgetTravel just wrote a post about it here (and please read the comments, which is where we can start to see the PR dimensions).

When the charge was announced earlier this year (it will start being implemented in August), Baldanza set out an letter to his email subscribers describing how carry-on fees actually make flying cheaper. Anybody who has a half-brain and has flown anywhere before knows that this is simply spin. When you have to pay to check baggage and you have to pay to check carry-ons, it doesn't matter how cheap airline tickets seem because you will end up paying more.

Steve Jobs recently showed a considerable degree of hubris when telling journalists that the way people were holding the iPhone 4 was responsible for the loss of signal. Huh? Inc. Magazine has a great article about this misstep here.

I am not even going to discuss Tony Hayward.

Unfortunately, many people in leadership positions do not have leadership qualities. These folks tend to be arrogant, often believe that they know best and that underlings should remain quiet. It is not easy to deal with this situation professionally, but it is nearly impossible to rectify from a public relations perspective.

These cases illustrate a real conundrum for marketers. The CEO is the public face of any company, and if he or she is saying things that hurt the company, what do you do? Chances are the CEO is the one with the ultimate power to hire or fire PR counsel. Or the person who refuses to listen to counsel.

As PR counsel in this type of case, you are in a delicate position. The best thing to do is to point out how the CEO may be affecting the bottom line. You may need statistics, like sales or stock prices. Make a case as to what should be done, and why it will be better. If your CEO refuses to listen to you, he/she may listen to outside counsel.

There is a chance your CEO will not listen to anyone and he/she may bring the ship down. Is there a recourse? Probably stockholders or your board of directors are interested in remaining profitable and keeping the public happy. If no one seems to think bad PR is a problem, well then you really have a problem!

What do you think?