

Marketing Lessons after a United Airlines Employee Tries to Assault a Stranded Passenger

By **Larry Bodine**, a Business Development Advisor with a nationwide practice. He has helped 250+ law firms generate new revenue by devising strategies, conducting business development retreats and individually coaching attorneys. He can be reached at www.LarryBodine.com and 630.942.0977.

It was hard to believe it when a United Airlines employee stood two inches from my face and threatened to punch me at 3:30 PM today at LaGuardia Airport.

His face was bright red and he said, "you wanna go now?" Not backing down, I expressed my concern verbally right to his face. At that moment his enormous supervisor grappled the employee and told him, "I'm ordering you to back off," and dragged the attacker away.



I wonder whether United will win an award for good customer service or be considered the [worst airline in the world](#).

I saw a CBS News crew interviewing other stranded passengers and recounted my story. They videotaped me in the airport food court where I retreated for my own safety. Digital journalist [Miles Doran](#) interviewed me, and I explained how **United canceled my flight, abandoned me in the middle of winter in New York, refused to provide me a place to stay. When I expressed a complaint, a physically aggressive employee tried to attack me.**

When I brought the camera crew back to the United counter upstairs, all the counter personnel immediately disappeared. No one would speak for the TV news and Mr. Doran said he would contact United corporate headquarters.

What is the marketing lesson here? I see several.

- **The customer is always right.** When you fail to deliver for a customer, you must offer a makegood. It doesn't matter what the government or company rules are. You must offer satisfaction.
- **Do not try to physically attack customers.** Many of them will be older people, and will not be accustomed to being in a fistfight with your employees. Beating up your customers is likely to decrease your retention rate.

- **Don't tell a customer "it's not our policy" to help them.** If your customer has trusted you to their detriment, you have an obligation to help them out of the problem you created. Otherwise, your policy is wrong. If your policy can't be changed, then it should be ignored. Don't hide behind your policy or the customer will develop a policy of not buying from you.
- **Don't tell the customer that there is no law requiring you to help them.** This only engenders bad will and ferocious word-of-mouth. Your customer will support legislation requiring you to stop mistreating them. Your customers may even foster the legislation and regulation.

For more on this continuing story, please visit <http://blog.larrybodine.com>.