

The Art Of GROVELING

The week of February 12, 2007, was not a good week for JetBlue Airlines. A severe winter ice storm in the Northeast United States caused flight cancellations, lost baggage and other major inconveniences throughout its system. Some passengers at JFK Airport in New York City were stranded on their aircrafts for more than 10 hours as the airport became gridlocked. The evening news around the world blasted JetBlue for its incompetence and insensitivity. It was a public relations nightmare for a company that had always been perceived as the "fun way to fly."

When faced with a similar public relations disaster, what would you do? Blame the storm and say it was beyond your control? Blame the airport for not allowing the planes to return to their gates? Ignore the situation and hope your customers will quickly forget? Grovel? The correct answer is grovel.

For those not familiar with the term, grovel means to humble oneself or act in an abject manner, as in great fear or utter servility. Or in this case it means accepting full responsibility for the major mistake and pleading for forgiveness.

Several days later, after evaluating their options, JetBlue embarked on a groveling campaign of epic proportions. Its President David Neeleman took out a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* and crafted a letter to customers containing all the essential components of groveling. He started with the apology: "We are sorry and embarrassed." He then restated his apology for emphasis: "But most of all, we are deeply sorry."

Next, he unequivocally accepted full responsibility for the situation: "We subjected

our customers to unacceptable delays, flight cancellations, lost baggage and other major inconveniences."

Neeleman then apologized again and accepted even more responsibility: "Words cannot express how truly sorry we are for the anxiety, frustration and inconvenience that we caused."

The last component of groveling is to provide a solution or compensation. JetBlue promised corrective steps to regain customer confidence. "We have begun putting a comprehensive plan in place for handling operational difficulties in the future."

Neeleman ended his letter with another grovel followed by a critical groveling component—a statement of what you expect in return from the customer as the result of your groveling and compensation.

Lastly, and most importantly, JetBlue unveiled the "JetBlue Customer Bill of Rights," an official commitment of how future operational interruptions will be handled, including a monetary payment schedule that would compensate customers for delays and inconveniences.

After giving his customers a solution and compensation, Neeleman ended his letter with another grovel followed by a critical groveling component—a statement of what you expect in return as the result of your groveling and compensation. Neeleman wrote, "You deserve better—a lot better." He added, "Nothing is more important than regaining your trust and all of us here hope you will give us the opportunity to welcome you onboard again soon and provide you the positive JetBlue experience you have come to expect from us."

A week after Neeleman's letter was published a survey indicated that 70% of the respondents would be willing to fly on JetBlue again. Today, almost everyone has forgiven the airline, and it has happy customers once again.

Groveling is an essential tool for dealing with adversity in everyone's personal or business life. A well-executed grovel will completely disarm an aggravated spouse or an irate customer. "I am so sorry. You are completely right. I am totally at fault. It was my mistake. I have no excuse. What can I do to make things

right?" The result of using these phrases is an immediate decrease in hostility, leading to a positive resolution of the problem.

I use groveling with great results. Based on experience, the following is my list of do's and don'ts for effective groveling:

Accept full blame. Trying to attribute some of the blame to others dilutes your sincerity and significantly lowers the effectiveness of the grovel.

Start groveling immediately. It does not matter whether you are right or wrong. If the other person perceives you did something wrong, groveling is in order.

The apology needs to be

sincere and from the heart. Sprinkle your apology with descriptive adverbs: "I am so sorry. You are *completely* right. I am sure my actions *totally* ruined your day."

Repeat your apology several times using different words and phrases. Over-groveling is better than under-groveling.

The solution/compensation needs to exceed expectations. After a particularly bad stay, the manager of a 5-star hotel in Madrid met me at checkout and tore up my bill for a four-night stay. I was impressed and have become a regular customer.

Empower everyone to grovel and provide immediate solutions. Fast action often prevents major public relations catastrophes.

Immediate compensation is best. Comping a room or a meal now is significantly more effective than providing a free night or a free meal at some point in the future.

Don't forget the quid pro quo. You need to secure something in return. In most cases a commitment from the customer of continued loyalty is usually sufficient. A follow-up call or e-mail with another (brief) apology will often seal the commitment with the customer.

When I was learning the ropes in hotel operations, a savvy GM once told me there are two rules: The customer is always right, and if you think you are right then go back to Rule No. 1. Groveling works the same way: When in doubt, grovel. And if you think you are right then go back to Rule No. 1. ♦



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