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United Breaks Guitars

While on a United Airlines flight in 2008, musician Dave Carroll and his bandmates looked out the window to see United employees throwing his Taylor guitar while loading it onto the plane. This inappropriate handling of the delicate instrument caused \$1200 worth of damage. Carroll contacted airport officials after getting off the plane to try and resolve the issue, but was brushed aside by them. He then spent months contacting the company trying to get restitution for the damage they caused, only to be told that there was nothing that United could do for him or his guitar. Fed up by the lack of response from the company, Carroll gave up on trying to solve the issue quietly and internally. Instead, he resorted to launching a public kategoria against United Airlines.

This kategoria was unique, however, because Carroll utilized what he does best as a musician: he wrote his kategoria in the form of a song. Carroll and his band created a music video for his song attacking United for breaking his guitar, aptly titled "United Breaks Guitars," and uploaded it to YouTube. Though unusual, this song proved to be an effective kategoria against United Airlines. The video has been viewed over 15 million times and was shared countless times on social media. Within a week of the song first being posted, United Airline's stock plummeted, costing the company \$180 million (Sawhney). Carroll went on to release two more songs as part of his kategoria, which garnered around 1.9 million and 800,000 views

respectively. Clearly, his *kategoria* reached a large audience and had lasting effects for United Airlines.

How was such an unusual example of *kategoria* so effective? What can companies like United and other rhetors learn from this unique situation? In order to answer these questions, we will first look at how Carroll utilized Benoit's tactics to elaborate a *kategoria* and other rhetorical strategies in order to create an effective argument even though he used such a unique format. Secondly, we will look at how Carroll's demands on the company line up with Kador's components of apology, how the company could have apologized using Kador's methods and saved themselves a lot of damage to their image, and what we can learn from this incident.

I'm sure that as a musician Carroll was more concerned about the lyricism and musicality of his songs and didn't focus too much on the actual rhetoric. However, his songs do in fact employ some of Benoit's tactics to elaborate a *kategoria*, though they do so in a different way than most arguments. It's these rhetorical tactics that allow the songs to be persuasive and an effective argument. A few of Benoit's tactics that Carroll employs are elucidating the effects of the damage, arguing that the victims are helpless, stressing the extent of the damage, and pointing out inconsistencies in the accused's behavior. Carroll also boosts the accused's responsibility for the crime by claiming that they have committed the crime before.

One advantage of presenting a *kategoria* in the form of a song and an accompanying music video is that it allows the rhetor to clearly elucidate the damage. The video allows the audience to actually see the damage caused, instead of just hearing about it. Instead of only saying "the band and I exchanged a look, best described as terror," Carroll actually shows the band and him on a fake airplane, exchanging a look of terror in the first video. This is much more clear to the audience than just describing it. The same goes for showing the damage done to

the guitar. Carroll says that United employees threw his guitar, but being able to see people actually throwing a guitar on screen is much more meaningful. Carroll also shows the broken guitar, with the neck completely snapped off in this video. This way the audience can see and understand how bad the damage is.

Elucidating the effects in the video is effective because it allows the rhetor to show exactly how much damage has been done. When someone hears that United broke a guitar, they could think that maybe it was just a small scratch or a broken string, that it's not really a big problem, and that United has not actually done something wrong. Being able to show the audience the actual damage helps them to understand that there really is a problem and that Carroll's *kategoria* really is justified. Some of Carroll's first video is exaggerated for comedic effect, of course, but overall it helps to clearly portray the offence to the audience.

Carroll also utilizes Benoit's methods in a more traditional way through his lyrics. Though he also talks about other customers who have experienced the same problems, the main victim in Carroll's songs is himself. As such, he tries to convince the audience that he was a helpless and innocent victim. In order to persuade the audience that he was helpless when United broke his guitar, in the first video he says, "while on the ground...the band and I exchanged a look best described as terror at the action on the tarmac." Because Carroll and his bandmates were stuck on the plane, they were helpless to stop the employees on the tarmac from throwing his guitar, even though they saw it happen. Carroll also implies in this video that had he known what was going to happen, he would have "flown with someone else or gone by car." He was innocent because he had no idea that this could happen. If he had, he would have avoided it.

Carroll sets himself as especially innocent by showing that he did everything he could to right the damage as soon as possible. He says that even "before [he] left Chicago, [he] alerted

three employees” about the damage. He also began “a year-long saga” of contacting the company in an attempt to fix the problem. Instead of fixing it, however, by his second song he feels like United has left him “hanging like Apollo 13, adrift in space with no end in sight.” This metaphor shows how helpless Carroll feels in the situation, because he is trying everything he can to resolve the problem, but United never provides any help. It aptly sets Carroll up as the helpless victim in the story.

Carroll’s audience is likely persuaded by these sections of the songs because most of them have flown in a plane before. They understand that once you check your luggage, you are helpless to protect it from anything the airline employees decide to do to it. They accept this argument because they can easily see it happening to themselves, even though they are also innocent. No one can even blame Carroll because he states that he did all that he could to fix the problem, instead of sitting idly by letting it happen to him. He has established himself as wholly innocent so that the audience has no real choice but to agree with him and take his side. Because of this, choosing to establish himself as an innocent victim was a good rhetorical choice on Carroll’s part.

Another good rhetorical move that Carrol makes in his trilogy of songs is stressing the extent of the damage. He makes it very clear that United broke his guitar (that is the title of the first song after all), but the audience may not know how much a professional guitar is really worth. Because of this, they may just brush the incident off as no big deal. In order to make the extent of the damage clear to these members of the audience, he specifically states that he had to “fix it for 1200 bucks.” Assigning a large numerical value to the damage helps the audience understand just how much damage United did to the guitar. Carroll also points out that the damage was not only monetary but emotional because United not only broke his guitar, they

“broke [his] heart.” While Carroll never explicitly states it, the audience can infer that because he is a musician, Carroll’s guitar is extremely important to him. Because of this, the audience will likely understand that the damage was more than just physical to Carroll.

While this argument is effective in convincing the audience that United did real damage to him, one way that Carroll could have strengthened it is by pointing out any other damages or inconveniences that he incurred by having a damaged guitar. Because he is a musician and was traveling with his band, we can assume that not having a working instrument would have been detrimental to him. If he had been unable to practice or perform with his band because his instrument was damaged, mentioning that would have stressed the extent of the damage that United caused even more and strengthened his *kategoria*.

Another way that Carroll simultaneously stresses the damage that United has caused and boosts United’s responsibility for the crime is by claiming that they have committed the crime before to other customers. The first video is called “United Breaks Guitars,” plural. He just as easily could have called the video “United Broke My Guitar,” but instead he makes the choice to title his song in a way that implies that United breaks other guitars as well. In the third song, Carroll claims that not only has United damaged luggage before, they do it quite often. He informs the audience that “there’s a long line of people with a story like [his]” who have also had their luggage mistreated by United. He points out that though United Airlines claims that “99 point something [percent] don’t get broke, there’s a lot of bags that make it but a heck of a bunch that won’t.” While it’s good that 99 percent of the luggage is undamaged, Carroll is saying that it’s unacceptable that one percent is. Because United has millions of customers each year (“Total Passengers”), even only one percent of those customers’ luggage is actually quite a lot to damage.

This is an effective argument because if it were just a one-time thing and only Carroll's luggage had been damaged, the audience might be tempted to say that it's not really United's fault because it was a freak accident that they couldn't have prevented. By pointing out that it happens rather frequently, and that United is even aware that about one percent of the luggage gets damaged, the audience becomes more convinced that the problem is United's fault. After all, if they know that luggage gets damaged, shouldn't it be their responsibility to work on preventing that, or at least to compensate the customers? Because it happens frequently, the audience understands that it's not Carroll's fault, but instead United's.

The last major method that Carroll uses to elaborate his kategoria is pointing out inconsistencies in United's behavior and handling of the issue. In his second song, Carroll acknowledges that United "said [they] were sorry." He assumes that apologizing means that United has accepted their responsibility for the damage, and he is therefore "a bit confused...[when] United sees no need to make anything right." Carroll views United's apology and subsequent unwillingness to pay for the damage as inconsistent behavior. He thinks that if United is truly sorry then they should "accept the consequences of [them] letting certain baggage handlers smash [his] property." Instead they apologize in words only, which Carroll views as inconsistent.

Interestingly, what Carroll is really looking for from United is a wholehearted apology following Kador's five R's. He complains in the first song that United tells him "'Pass the buck', 'Don't ask me', and 'I'm sorry, sir, your claim can go nowhere.'" Instead of making excuses and refusing to talk to him, Carroll wants them to recognize what happened to his guitar. He tells United "you're liable, just admit it", or, in other words, asks them to take responsibility for their actions. While United has said that they were sorry, as discussed Carroll doesn't feel that they

have shown true remorse towards him because their words are inconsistent with their actions. In his second song he says “What did you mean when you said you were sorry? I’m a bit confused. I think you owe for wrecking my guitar but you don’t think you do.” He believes that if United were truly remorseful, they would offer restitution in the form of paying for the damage they caused to his guitar. Finally, Carroll demonstrates in his third song that he wants the company to promise non-repetition when he says “United needs to change in a big way.” All Carroll really wants from United is for them to recognize that they are responsible for damaging his guitar, show sincere remorse by offering restitution in the form of paying for the repairs, and then promise to work on policies so that the crime is not repeated.

Had United done all of these things when the incident first happened, they could have avoided major damage to their company and their image. They likely thought that by refusing to take responsibility and pay restitution, they would save their company money. However, the cost of the damage to the guitar was \$1,200. The negative PR from the videos that Carroll created ended up costing them \$180 million in stock value (Sawhney). The videos were also viewed collectively more than 17 million times, creating quite a lot of negative feelings towards the company, the cost of which is much more difficult if not impossible to measure. Instead of saving them a little bit of money, the decision to not wholeheartedly apologize ended up costing the company quite a lot.

The biggest reason why Carroll’s videos had such a big impact on United’s public image is because they gained a lot of presence. It doesn’t really matter if an argument is rhetorically sound if no one sees it. However, because Carroll’s songs gained a lot of presence, they were able to spread his message because they also contained strong elements of kategoria. It’s impossible to say exactly what causes a video to go viral or gain a lot of presence; however we

can speculate a few reasons why Carroll's videos were so popular. The first is because they are novel. People are used to seeing kategoria against companies. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are full of attacks against companies and people. However, most of those are just text. An attack contained in a song is interesting because it's so rare. Another reason that Carroll's videos likely gained popularity is because they were well produced. Carroll is a member of a professional band, and as such his songs are professionally produced. The music videos are much better than the amateur videos that are the norm on YouTube. And perhaps most importantly, people can relate to Carroll's struggles. Most people have flown on an airplane and understand that airline companies can be hard to work with. A lot of people have had luggage lost or damaged and thus can relate to Carroll. People likely shared the videos with their friends because they could relate and knew that their friends likely could as well. These factors, along with a lot of luck, contributed to Carroll's videos being viewed millions of times, which helped spread Carroll's message.

There are a few things that to learn from this incident. Firstly, it demonstrates the need for companies to apologize. United made the mistake of underestimating the power of the customer. However, as Carroll points out in his last song—after his previous videos had been viewed millions of times—“United needs to understand their customers ain't helpless.” Because of the presence that Carroll's videos gained on social media, his kategoria was able to have a great effect on United Airlines, one that neither Carroll nor United could have predicted. This incident shows that consumers can have a lot of influence through the power of social media. Because of this, it is more important than ever for companies to apologize wholeheartedly, following Kador's methods.

The second lesson that can be learned from this is that a kategoria can be successful despite its format, as long as it uses Benoit's methods to elaborate a kategoria. Carroll's kategoria isn't the traditional speech or essay, but it still manages to employ Benoit's tactics effectively. This shows that the format of the kategoria isn't always as important as the content. Of course there are situations where one format is more appropriate than another. Carroll's songs were an appropriate format for his kategoria because he is a musician and was singing about his broken guitar. This may not be the case for more formal situations, but this example shows that it's important to think outside of the box and use the format that is most appropriate for the situation, instead of the one that may be the most obvious.

Eventually Carroll's kategoria was effective: United offered him \$1200 to replace the guitar and another \$1200 in flight vouchers for his troubles (Hanna). However, because of his effective use of Benoit's tactics to elaborate a kategoria and the immense presence his kategoria received, Carroll's kategoria was much more successful than he or United could have ever imagined. He was able to greatly influence the public's opinion of United, gain a small amount of celebrity for himself and his band, and was given "two new Taylor [guitars, by Taylor themselves] and a heck of an interesting year." In end, United offering Carroll too little compensation much too late allowed him the chance to take a kind of revenge on United by refusing to take the compensation. He wouldn't allow them to correct their wrongs and gain a little bit of redemption. Had he accepted the money and voucher, he would be granting United the chance to walk away from the situation and earn back some customer respect, but instead he denied them that. The choice also left his image unsoiled, because no one could claim that he did the whole thing for the money only, instead of really wanting change from the company.

Refusing to accept their restitution was the fitting last piece of Carroll's effective albeit unusual kategoria against United Airlines.

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