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How to recover gracefully when your product launch is a disaster

It might be true that you never get a second chance to make a first impression, but you can still contain the damage. Here's how to get back on track

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[PM Images/Getty]

The first week of B.C.'s brand-new Tsawwassen Mills mall was marred by parking chaos that infuriated shoppers. We asked the experts how to recover when your launch blows up on the pad:

Start with “sorry”

“When we work with clients on issues like these, we always tell them to be proactive. A launch that goes this badly could result in a real loss of business if it's not handled correctly.

“In an incident like this, the mall’s store owners need to be reaching out to their customers themselves. It’s important to let customers know that your people—not just the larger entity of the mall—are sorry. And how you convey that is just as important as what you say: It has to be genuine.

“In this instance, there was a lot of negative social media activity after the opening. Engaging with frustrated customers on social media is a simple and easy way to address concerns—respond as directly and quickly as possible to each individual message: ‘We’re really sorry, we’d love to have you back.’ In these cases, promotions can also go a long way—one-time offers to customers who might have been affected, or ongoing offers if needed.”

Bob Neudecker, President, Ten5 Marketing, Vancouver

Call in the pros

“A company is dealing with a brand crisis at this point—it needs to have a crisis management strategy and mobilize a PR team, either internal or external, to mitigate the situation. These sorts of ‘epic fails’ can cause irreparable damage to a reputation. It’s very important to designate a trained media spokesperson to communicate key messages to the public, to try to turn some of the negative buzz positive, and to re-engage the audience.”

Debra Stuart, Branding consultant, Toronto

Act fast

“Time is of the essence when it comes to recovering disgruntled customers. It’s important to start with the idea that the customer’s complaint is probably valid—and, in all likelihood, they’re speaking on behalf of others who experienced, or will experience, the same thing. So don’t waste too much time investigating; act to make it right right away.

“It helps to ask the customer how they would like the problem remedied. They have already been fuming; they know what needs to be done for them to be happy. So ask them. Odds are that what they’d like done is less burdensome than the plan you were hatching to resolve things. And they will feel better about the solution because they got what they wanted.

“Finally, don’t panic. You can think of a botched launch as an opportunity. When a customer has a negative experience with a company or product and you do a good job of resolving it, they are more loyal than if nothing had gone wrong in the first place. I’m not suggesting you intentionally make mistakes. Just redouble your efforts to get your resolution process sorted so customers feel trusted right away.”

George Walther, Author, Upside-Down Marketing, Newcastle, Wash.



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Use the media

“If you’ve had a bad opening, rather than going silent, you need to double down and get your message out even more. You have a responsibility to tell people what’s not working and what you’re going to improve.

“These days, you can go directly to your consumers with social media to do damage control. You can post to your website’s blog, or to Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. But if you’re trying to control your message by ignoring requests from media, then you’re not allowing them to tell your story in an unbiased way. I think there’s a general opinion that if a journalist is calling, they’re out to get you. They’re not—they’re out to tell a story.

“Something I always roll my eyes at in the news is when a company ‘declined to comment.’ If you choose to do that, you’re missing an opportunity; the media is only going to tell one side of the story. And hiding behind your own social platforms is just as one-sided as what you fear will happen by talking to the media.”

Brian Cant, Senior communications manager, Tartan Group, Victoria



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