

The Art of the Organizational Apology

By Bill Smith

“EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES.” Growing up, we heard it over and over from our parents or teachers or friends. No doubt they were just trying to make us feel better about doing something stupid, but they were right. We all screw up now and then.

Companies, government agencies, and other organizations mess up too. Airlines send pets to the wrong destinations (or worse), car companies (no need to name names) fudge their environmental data, corporate management at high-profile companies mishandle personnel issues, executives do or say stupid things. The examples are too numerous to list, and in the social media age we seem to be getting new examples every day.

As bad as these mistakes are, companies' responses are often worse. All too often, organizations mishandle their responses and end up exacerbating an already volatile situation. Most of us hate to apologize. It's not fun to acknowledge a mistake and accept responsibility for it. For organizations, that instinct is often much stronger than it is even for individuals because organizational mistakes are often much larger, more noticeable, and potentially more damaging than individual errors. Plus, corporate lawyers often get involved and may be hesitant to approve apologies that could influence litigation down the road. It's understandable why the first instinct is often to try to wait things out and hope the issue goes away.

The other side of the coin is that not all mistakes warrant a public apology. In fact, most don't—a public apology is typically only called for when the actions in question meet specific criteria. First, was the company responsible for the issue or does an individual's

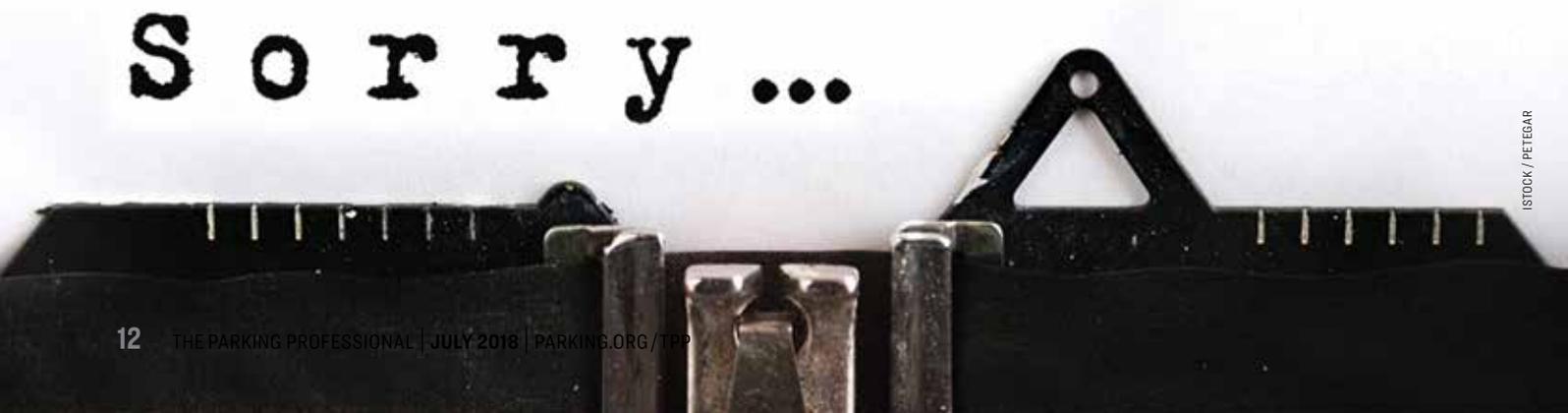
mistake reflect on the company? Also, does the issue pose a threat to the core mission of the organization? Is this a public issue requiring a public response? Is the company willing to commit to change in the face of this issue? If the answer to all four questions is yes, a public response is likely called for.

Saying You're Sorry

So, that leads to the million-dollar question: How should an organization apologize? The process is important on a couple of levels. First, a heartfelt, effective apology will help set the matter straight with those who were injured in the first place. Remember, this isn't just about PR. More importantly, it's about doing the right thing. Still, the resulting publicity could have a significant effect—either positively or negatively—so it's essential to get it right.

How should organizations apologize? Sincerity is key. We've all seen half-baked apologies issued by company spokespeople or organizational leaders. The “we don't think we really did anything wrong, but we apologize to anyone who was offended” approach just makes matters worse. It's clear to everyone that it's just a pro-forma statement designed to get the public off the organization's back. But all these types of responses accomplish is getting people even more upset.

The apology should also make clear that the organization knows what it did wrong and who was



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hurt and that it will strive to do better in the future. This seems like common sense, right? But all too often, common sense flies out the window. Take, for instance, the “apology” issued by the CEO of BP after the Gulf oil spill: “We’re sorry for the massive disruption it’s caused to people’s lives. There’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do. I’d like my life back.” Nothing like whining about how hard it’s been on you when you are issuing an apology, right?

The Ground Rules

When an organizational apology is called for, the ground rules are really very simple. The apology should be unequivocal, open, and honest. It should also demonstrate a commitment to seeing that the situation never happens again. It doesn’t have to be self-flagellating, but it needs to acknowledge the error and its impact in simple, frank terms. Something like, “We are very sorry that we did xxx. This is not consistent with our organization’s values, and we have done yyy to ensure that it never happens again. We want to

offer our sincere apologies to (name those who were affected).” Depending on the scope of the transgression, the apology should be issued via a press release, press conference, social media, an advertisement in key media, or a combination of these approaches.

Hopefully your organization will never be faced with the need to publicly apologize for a corporate policy or the acts of one of your representatives. But if you are faced with such a situation, it’s imperative to respond quickly and unambiguously to take responsibility and assure the public that the transgression will not occur again. An effective response can be the difference between being able to move on and being mired in crisis. [P](#)



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