

Part 4: Sex, Power, And The Workplace – When To Tell The Customer They’re Wrong

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We all know the old adage: the customer always comes first. But, what about a predatory, harassing customer? Not so much. Sexual misconduct has been ablaze in the news, and doesn’t seem to show any sign of halting. Alaska Airlines was recently pulled into the fray when Randi Zuckerberg, sister of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, accused the airline of failing to do anything about a fellow passenger’s sexual misconduct against her. The Alaska Airlines incident underscores the reputational dangers for companies that turn a blind eye to such behavior.

According to Randi Zuckerberg, after being subjected to lewd behavior by a fellow passenger, she told the airline’s crew members, who brushed her off, telling her “Don’t take it personally,” and kept giving him drinks. Apparently, the crew was aware of this passenger’s pattern of similar conduct. Afterward, Zuckerberg tweeted her story and the airlines launched an investigation. Lack of training is at least part of the issue here. A [Reuters](#) article reports that a recent survey by the Association of Flight Attendants shows many flight attendants lack proper training on how to deal with complaints of on-board sexual harassment. Of the 2,000 respondents it surveyed, an astounding more than half had no knowledge of any specific policies. No less disturbing, a [report](#) from the International Air Transport Association, says that between 2007 and 2015 there were more than 49,000 reported incidents involving in-flight unruly passengers of all types, including harassment and violence against crew and other passengers. Managers and employees may get all sorts of training on sexual harassment against *employees*; but what are a business’ responsibilities to train employees in handling unruly and harassing customers? Such training not only helps employees comply with the law, but also makes good business sense.

Here are some approaches to consider for warding off customer-customer harassment:

- Remind customers of your expectations of civil conduct
- Train employees to recognize and discourage inappropriate conduct
- Give employees permission to exercise discretion and intervene to prevent unruly or harassing behavior; for example, relocating unruly customers or limiting alcohol service to such customers, if necessary
- Take victim complaints seriously. Listen, and where appropriate, investigate
- Evaluate your organization’s policies and provide training to personnel on sexual harassment prevention and correction

There is no perfect set of solutions; however, encouraging basic courtesy and

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respect among customers and employees cannot be underestimated. While employers may not directly be able to control a harassing customer, they *do* have control over their employees' responses and can take steps to minimize the reputational risks associated with sexual harassment.