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THERE MUST BE A PONY IN HERE SOMEWHERE\* THE LIGHTER SIDE OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

# Breaking Guitars & Starting a Business From a Viral Video

Published: Thursday, 1 Mar 2012 | By: Cindy Perman | CNBC.com Staff Writer

Everyone wants to create the next viral video, but once you reach that Holy Grail, the question becomes, how do you make money off of it?



This is your guitar. This is a baggage handler breaking your guitar. Any questions?!

Ask Dave Carroll.

You probably know him: He's the guy who flew United Airlines, found out when he landed that his \$3,500 Taylor acoustic guitar (he's a professional musician) had been broken and got no help from the air carrier's parent, **United Continental Holdings**, to pay for the repairs.

So Carroll uploaded a video to **Google's** YouTube called "United Breaks Guitars" that has been viewed more than 11 million times.

It's got a catchy chorus that really sticks with you:

United United —  
You broke my Taylor guitar.  
United United —  
Some big help you are.  
You broke and you should fix it.

Your liable just admit it.

I should've flown with someone else or gone by car...

And it stuck with United, too: He got nowhere after haggling with them to cover the \$1,200 repair for nearly a year, but two days after the video went up on YouTube he got a call from United offering to pay him double that amount.

Not to mention, it stuck with Taylor: The company sent him two guitars to use in his next YouTube videos.

But by that time, it was a full on media frenzy and Carroll's inbox was blowing up.

"People were coming into my house like it was election night for a winning politician. Everyone was hugging and everyone was bringing finger sandwiches and casseroles," Carroll said.

He got 10,000 emails in those first few weeks, with people sharing their own customer-service nightmares.

"It wasn't just the millions that showed up to watch the video. It was the reaction and the energy behind it," Carroll said. "I realized that if I could get 10,000 emails that quickly, I could get a million."

So, he decided to launch a website to aggregate all of those complaints, called **RightSideofRight.com**.

Carroll was tapping into the growing resentment over bad customer service, but just aggregating the complaints wasn't a viable business model.

"It was well-intentioned, but it wasn't very effective. We just ended up asking people to share their stories," said Carroll. "I didn't have the time or expertise to do much about it."

About a year ago, he was approached by a venture capitalist and a web developer who had seen the video and saw potential for the business.

So, they teamed up and transformed RightSideofRight.com into a new venture, **Gripevine.com**, a site that caters to customers as well as businesses. For customers, it offers a national forum for them to log a complaint — or a video of their own — and Gripevine connects them directly with the decision makers at the company they have the issue with — to save them having to go through the same story 20 times without reaching the right person.

The other side of the business, the money-making side, offers businesses a dashboard for managing all the facets of their customer service, including monitoring all the conversations and complaints about its business on Gripevine, **Facebook**, **Twitter**, and other social media, and managing the resolutions.

Now, Carroll is not only is a co-founder of Gripevine, he also travels all over the world speaking to companies about his experience, customer service, and Gripevine. He's also got a book due out in May, called "**United Breaks Guitars: The Power of One Voice in the Age of Social Media.**" He still plays and records music — his latest album, along with the "United Breaks Guitars" songs (there are now three) are available for download on Apple's iTunes.

Customer service has really taken a hit since the recession — everyone, it seems, is focused on money, which has brought more surly reps, more automated systems, and more groans from consumers. The phrase "the customer is always right" is going the way of the dinosaurs.

"It's not because people stopped caring," Carroll said. "Companies are just trying to trim their workforces so much...they're overworking employees or trying to shave on service. The quality goes down and for whatever reason, I think people have given up on customer service too easily," he said. "And really, it's the one thing they should be holding on to."

With the rise of social media and the growing connectedness, the power of one complaint, like Carroll's YouTube video, can become a gigantic public relations headache for companies.

Remember that video of the FedEx guy throwing the computer monitor over the fence just a few days before Christmas? Yep, that one was viewed more than 8 million times.

"It's very difficult to argue when guitars or packages go flying over fences — there's a tremendous amount of evidence!" said Randy Jones, the creative director of marketing firm [MindZoo](#).

And Gripevine isn't the only business to capitalize on the big business of gripes: There's **ComplainApp**, a complaint-logging app for consumers; **GetSatisfaction.com**, which focuses on the business side of managing complaints; and **Consumerist.com**, which aggregates stories about customer complaints. There are also companies on the rise, such as **TOA Technologies**, which makes software that helps businesses better track their service people to narrow down the maddening window of time that customers have to wait for everything from the cable guy to the **United Parcel Service** guy to deliver your new Apple computer.

Jones said sometimes these incidents like the United guitar or FedEx guy tossing the computer, could be one-off rogue employees, but often it's an indication that something is broken further up the chain.

In the same way that companies such as grocery chain **Trader Joe's** or **Nordstrom** have reputations for great customer service because they've made it a priority from the top down, so, too, can bad communications and customer service trickle down from the top.

"I swear, I could probably try to return a tire to Nordstrom — and they'd return it!" Mindzoo's Jones said. "Or, at the very least, they'd say — let me see if I can find somebody."

He added: "That kind of focus on the customer "absolutely comes 100 percent from management."

Jones is so passionate about getting it right from the top down, so there are more Nordstroms in the world, he's launched a program called [Rediscover Courtesy](#) to start a dialogue about improving how managers communicate with employees, how companies communicate with their vendors, and communications at every step of the chain. A dialogue that will include "a combination of rants, rhetoric, stories, and solutions," he said.

"At a time when displays of good manners seem to be on the decline, my biggest fears are — does anyone even notice any more? Is 'terse' the new standard operating procedure in today's over-stimulated business world?" Jones asked.

Well, if 11 million hits on YouTube and the rising cottage industry that's sprouting up around the complaint business is any indicator, not for long. © 2012 [CNBC.com](#)

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