

# One delay **BA could have done with**

If British Airways chief Willie Walsh ever decides to write his business biography I have just the title for him: *Ever Increasing Circles: How to Make a Bad Crisis Even Worse.*

Walsh is really starting to distinguish himself as a chief executive who is not only uncomfortable with brand building but from where I'm standing also seems to be destroying any brand equity BA is still clinging onto. Obviously not content with his spectacular mishandling of the opening of Terminal 5, last week he managed to spend a small fortune on marketing communications to make the situation even more dire.

First the good news. The Bartle Bogle Hegarty 'Terminal 5 is working' campaign, which launched last week, is fabulously on-brief. The idea of using real-time, real-life passenger data to dispel negative perceptions about T5 and BA is a terrific idea, beautifully executed.

But crucial marketing mistakes have been made. First, this campaign is at least six months too early. The memory of T5 and the dirty brown halo that now hovers above the BA brand are still too raw and pungent for even the best ad campaign to overcome. The great fashion designer Tom Ford once said: 'The right thing at the wrong time, is still the wrong thing.' He was talking about fashion, but it would have been sage advice for BA too. They pressed the button too early on this campaign and the market is clearly not ready to forgive so soon after the T5 debacle.

Next, BA used the wrong tool. The BBH work is brilliant but it is advertising and entirely the wrong communication tool for the current challenges BA faces. Porter

Novelli, BA's PR agency, should have been given the lead role for the rest of 2008. If it had been running things it might have advised BA that many key publics were still very negative about the brand. It might have been able to get BA to spend more time with journalists and other key stakeholders to rebuild its tattered reputation before any boastful and expensive ad campaign



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kicked in. Porter Novelli would probably also have advised BA that launching a big new ad campaign centred on service on the same day that an independent survey revealed it as the worst major airline in Europe was probably not a good idea either.

In the poker game of marketing communications, negative editorial always trumps positive advertising, no matter how good your campaign is. It's all very



well running a newspaper spot showing a young girl waiting happily for her sister to arrive and claiming that: 'Yesterday at T5 89% of flights arrived on time.' But if most of the newspapers are also running stories pointing out that the Association of European Airlines (AEA) ranks BA last for losing luggage and also well below average for departing and arriving on time, it's clear which message is going to resonate with the public.

You can regard the timing of the AEA survey and the launch of the BA campaign as bad fortune. Or else see it for what it really is: evidence that the marketers at BA are out of their depth. British Airways is a member of the AEA; surely someone was aware that these figures were imminent? Given that *The Times* reported last week that BA contacted the AEA and 'ordered' it to withhold the results – something which is illegal under EU law – it does seem that BA knew what was coming.

The galling reality for BA is that the £6m it is spending on the 'T5 is working' campaign may not only represent a waste of money, but also end up hurting the brand at its own expense. Last week BA was rushing things, it wasn't ready, and its execution was woefully poor. Sound familiar? Yup, it's T5 all over again. At least BA can claim brand consistency.

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## 30 seconds on... the battle to rescue BA's reputation

- Last week BA launched an **integrated campaign** in which passenger's photographs and statistics from the previous 24 hours were featured in print and radio spots **the following day**. The campaign will run for 38 days.
- According to Katherine Whitton, BA's general manager for marketing: 'The aim of the campaign is to

- communicate to the travelling public in an open and factual way that Terminal 5 is now working well.'
- The survey published by the **Association for European Airlines** is based on six months of passenger data. Among other findings, it concludes that British Airways was the

- worst of the 29 airlines surveyed in terms of **lost luggage** and among the worst for on-time performance.
- According to Simon Evans of the **Air Transport Users Council**: 'We are seeing some improvements but not that significant in terms of where BA is featuring in European airline league tables.'