

# BA's catalogue of **terminal mistakes**

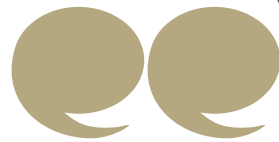
**B**ritish Airways' Terminal 5 disaster will prove even more damaging to the BA brand than initial indications suggest. A PR storm has been created by mismanagement, strategic circumstances and simple bad luck, and the events of the past few days will blight BA's brand for years.

British Airways is a Branded House; the best possible brand architecture for employer branding, service businesses and brand strategy. However, one of its key disadvantages is its vulnerability to crisis. When Coca-Cola endured the unmitigated disaster of Dasani, it took one on the nose and scrapped a brand that had been expected to make millions. But no damage was done to Coke, or any of the brands in its portfolio, because of the house of brands structure it operates. In BA's case, the problems at T5 hit 100% of the brand, all over the world.

Then there is the very specific damage done to BA's brand equity. At the heart of its positioning are 'reassurance' and 'reliability', making it peculiarly vulnerable to a debacle like that of T5. In branding terms, there is a world of difference between inconsistency and contradiction. BA is facing the mother of all contradictions, amplified by global media coverage. Fortunately, it was able to scrap a scheduled BBH-created brand-building campaign citing T5 before it broke. This, however, leaves the brand facing a torrent of negative coverage and passenger experiences, without any possible injection of brand equity in the foreseeable future.

BA's marketing has also become its own worst enemy. Only a few days ago, it was drawing as much attention to T5 as possible,

and promoting it as the future of the airline. The image of BA chief Willie Walsh, arms outstretched, gushing, 'I think it's great and it's going to get better. This is a hundred times better than anything else at Heathrow,' has been etched in the annals of PR blunders.



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Aside from undermining Walsh and his tenure as chief executive, this has compounded the damage to the brand. It is one thing to get it wrong. It is another to boast about how right you have got it, then get it wrong.

Once the crisis began, BA's well-prepared crisis-management plan kicked in. But despite the sincere apologies and professional PR job, this was a crisis that could not be managed.



Last weekend was low on news. An African election and a small plane crash could not keep BA out of the headlines, where it stayed for four long days.

The other problem is that the crisis is not over. With 15,000 bags still missing, 10% of flights cancelled and no certainty that problems won't resurface, there is no way to officially claim the crisis at an end.

A final eviscerating factor is the effect on BA staff. Unlike T5 boss Gareth Kirkwood, who, accompanied by a minder, stepped boldly before the TV cameras to read a statement, then swiftly retreated to his office before he could be asked any questions, BA's terminal staff had to stay out on duty and in the firing line. The absence of senior managers – or of a suitable response from them – made service staff targets for irate passengers, even as union officials issued a statement pleading with the public not to abuse BA employees.

BA promoted T5 as an opportunity for its staff, but overnight, credibility in its employer brand and management approach have been severely undermined.

All in all, it has been quite a weekend for BA: a fatally undermined chief executive; an employer brand in disarray; a terminal that will remain open for decades blighted at birth; and a British brand broken, in front of a global audience.

## 30 seconds on... T5 in quotes

- 'People will be **genuinely wowed** when they experience Terminal 5.' BA chief executive Willie Walsh, pre-launch.
- 'T5 marks the start of a new beginning for Heathrow, BAA and our millions of passengers. It is a **living, breathing advertisement** for Britain's ambition.' Sir Nigel Rudd, chairman, BAA.
- 'There were **1000** people in line and

- four** people at the desks, taking **20-30 minutes** to process each one.' T5 passenger.
- A BA spokeswoman on the **party** taking place while the terminal failed: 'It was not a party – it was a **staff communication event**. There

was a string quartet, doughnuts and food, but we would not describe that as a party. It was designed to update staff and **did not impact** on the problems at the terminal.'

- 'I came into BA to make T5 work. I am **not going to step down** because it didn't work on day one,' Willie Walsh, post-launch.