

"United Breaks Guitars"

Dave Carroll was just another traveling musician back in 2008, flying from Halifax, Canada, to Omaha, Nebraska. He had his treasured \$3,500 Taylor guitar with him, but United Airlines wouldn't allow it on board as carry-on and forced him to check it in with baggage. During a layover at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, he watched in horror as the airline's baggage handlers tossed his guitar like an old suitcase. By the time he got to Omaha, the worst had happened — his guitar was completely wrecked.

Determined to seek justice, Carroll spent nearly a year trying to get compensation from United. But the airline repeatedly denied his claim, citing that he hadn't reported the damage within their required 24-hour window. Frustrated and out of options, Dave did what musicians do best — he wrote a song about it. "United Breaks Guitars" hit YouTube in 2009, becoming an instant sensation. Recognizing Carroll's talent and supporting his message, Taylor Guitars owner Bob Taylor immediately gifted him two new guitars. With its catchy beat and tune and clever lyrics, the song quickly climbed to millions of views. By 2024, it had surpassed 23 million views, turning Carroll into a viral celebrity and a rallying point for every frustrated customer wronged by big companies.

The impact was swift: United's stock value dropped nearly 10%, wiping out an estimated \$180 million for shareholders in just a few days. United **scrambled to make amends**, offering Carroll a settlement and asking him to remove the video from YouTube. But after months of being brushed off, he wasn't interested. With the song's viral momentum, Carroll was now the one saying "no." His story didn't end there, either; he wrote two more songs about his United experience, each capturing the frustrations of his journey with just the right touch of humor.

As Carroll's story caught fire, his message grew louder, and it even took him all the way to Capitol Hill. Invited to speak at a Congressional hearing on passenger rights, he listened as an ex-CEO of one of the major U.S. airlines defended issues like long tarmac delays, calling them "statistically insignificant." To Carroll, it was painfully clear that this executive — and companies like his — didn't yet grasp the age of social media and the power one voice could have. Later, while giving a talk at Columbia Business School, Carroll said, "Big companies have been about doing it mostly right most of the time — that's been the model." But in his view, that just didn't cut it anymore. With the power of social media, every single customer's experience mattered and had the potential to ruin the company's image. As Carroll put it, "No customer is statistically insignificant."

After his viral success, Carroll launched the Right Side of Right project, inviting people with both bad and great customer service experiences to share their stories. According to Dave, "It's not just enough to bring a company down; the best learning tool's sometimes how to do it right." His efforts helped redefine customer service expectations. Companies began rethinking their approach to customer complaints. Now often cited in business schools as a case study on corporate missteps, Carroll's journey underscores the power of social media and the influence of a single customer's voice, proving that even the so-called "insignificant" customer can wield considerable influence through a simple song and an internet connection.

Dave Carroll's songs about his United experience did NOT have...

- 1) funny words.
- 2) a nice rhythm.
- 3) an angry message.
- 4) a memorable melody.