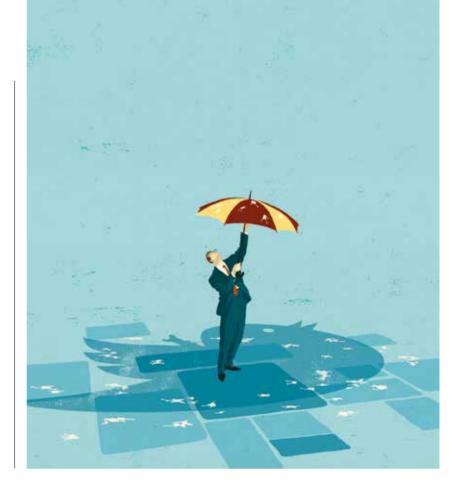**S**INCE THE START OF HIS PRESIDENTIAL campaign in June 2015, President Trump used apologetic language 20 times on Twitter. Thirteen of his tweets (65 percent) included terms that qualified the apology, like "if," "however," or "on the other hand." The President isn't alone in his approach. According to data analyzed by our team, over a 30-day period in early 2018, "sorry" or similarly apologetic words appeared 20.4 million times on Twitter – and in one out of every five instances, "sorry" was followed, either immediately or shortly afterward, by a single word that completely undermined it: "but."

Harriet Lerner, a best-selling author and clinical psychologist at Columbia University, believes there may be no worse word for apologizing. "'But' automatically cancels out an apology," she wrote, "and nearly always introduces a criticism or excuse." Its widespread use in tweeted apologies – more than 4 million times in that 30-day span – may explain why a Brunswick Insight survey found that while 80 percent of Americans expect the CEO to apologize for a company's mistake, only 13 percent

#SorryNotSorry

believe that apology is entirely genuine. Even though Twitter's reach is small compared to its social media peers (Twitter has 330 million active users; Facebook has 2.1 billion), the platform is designed for real-time conversation and is heavily weighted with influencers, policymakers and journalists, making it the channel of choice for most corporate communications in the aftermath of a mistake. But with all of the trolls and traffic on Twitter, and with companies mishandling apologies and still reporting strong earnings the following quarter, how much does a well-worded apology on Twitter really matter?

Many of the benefits of a well-coordinated apology seem obvious but difficult to quantify: a stronger reputation, more credibility with stakeholders, or preventing a bad situation from being much worse. A 2015 study conducted by the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology found timely, well-worded apologies on Twitter "reduced the level of negative sentiment" surrounding a mistake – better than the alternative, but not exactly inspiring.

If large organizations seem to be able to weather an apologetic misstep, it's often a different story for individuals. Couched, toothless apologies have

It may seem easy for an executive or company to tweet "I'm sorry." What to say with the remaining 271 characters is the hard part. Brunswick's **ZACK CONDRY** and **SPARKY ZIVIN** report

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SPARKY ZIVIN, a Partner, oversees Brunswick Insight's Washington, DC group, which provides critical issues research for market-moving decisions. **ZACK CONDRY** is a Director on the digital team, and also based in Washington, DC. Additional reporting by **RILEY BACK,** an Executive.

contributed to actors being dropped from movies, CEOs departing the C-suite and politicians resigning their offices. Organizations endure, but often with a different leader at the helm.

So what does a good apology on Twitter look like?

Platitudes and legal jargon suggest a tweet was written by a team rather than a leader, which makes audiences understandably skeptical. The passive voice – "mistakes were made" – or qualifying the apology implies a leader is more interested in avoiding blame than fixing the problem. Plain writing, with a lot of "I" and "me" pronouns, is a good place to start.

Words matter, but behavior and authenticity matter more. Like a good golf swing, there must be follow-through. In 2015, Taylor Swift announced a boycott of Apple Music over a one-month trial that neglected to compensate the artists for that time period. Eddy Cue, Apple's SVP of Internet Software and Services, responded quickly in two tweets: The first said Apple would fix the problem, the second was to Taylor Swift directly, saying "we hear you." Taylor Swift ended her boycott and, at the time of this article, is still with Apple Music.

Ms. Lerner writes that any apology should look to convey: "Yeah, I get it; I screwed up. Your feelings make sense, and I'm taking this seriously." That's a good template for executives to start with the next time they need to tweet "I'm sorry." Those two words matter, but what comes after makes all the difference.

ILLUSTRATION: MARK SMITH