



# The hardest word

When it's time to apologize make sure you mean it, advises Brunswick's **ERIC SAVITZ**

ARCHIE: All right, all right,  
I apologize.

OTTO: You're really sorry?

ARCHIE: I'm really, really sorry,  
I apologize unreservedly.

OTTO: You take it back?

ARCHIE: I do, I offer a  
complete and utter retraction.

The imputation was totally  
without basis in fact, and  
was in no way fair comment,  
and was motivated purely by  
malice, and I deeply regret any  
distress that my comments  
may have caused you, or your  
family, and I hereby undertake  
not to repeat any such slander  
at any time in the future.

OTTO: OK.

*Kevin Kline (Otto) wrenching  
an apology from John Cleese  
(Archie) by holding him outside  
a window upside down,  
in the 1988 film,  
A Fish Called Wanda*

**T**HERE COMES A TIME IN THE  
lifecycle of every company,  
government agency, corporate  
executive, celebrity, athlete,  
official and 12-year-old, when the  
only rational option is to issue a sincere,  
heartfelt apology.

It happens to the best of us – we screw  
up. The fact is, here on Planet Earth  
things often go wrong. Your software  
goes kablooey and shuts down your  
website. Your CEO is photographed  
canoodling with someone other than his  
or her spouse. Your oil wells leak. Your  
drugs sicken patients rather than cure  
them. You've lost client data, cost them  
money, or otherwise failed to live up to  
commitments to your customers, clients,  
employees, partners or fans. You've been  
thoughtless, or selfish, or irresponsible,  
or sloppy, or simply stupid. In one way or  
another, you have screwed up royally.

Time to apologize.

But apologies are not a form of  
communications to take lightly. In  
any corporate crisis, the ability to  
emotionally connect with the public  
through communications will be a key

factor in keeping control of events and  
retaining trust. In short, when you need  
to apologize, you need to be sincere or it  
will show.

Of course, your lawyers will weigh in,  
and the balance between an apology and  
admitting liability will always be difficult  
to resolve. But bear in mind that the  
lawyer you need is one who will help you  
communicate openly and effectively with  
your stakeholders.

Now, let us be clear what an apology  
accomplishes – and what it does not. It is  
not a magical cure-all. It doesn't negate  
inappropriate or inopportune behavior. It  
will not prevent lawsuits from being filed  
against you. It won't necessarily save your  
job, or keep you out of the clink, or scrub  
your reputation clean. But a clear, specific,  
genuine apology can go a long way toward  
softening the public's harsh indictment of  
your misdeeds. It can be the crucial first  
step in turning a crisis around. ♦

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## COMING CLEAN Just in case you ever find yourself dealing with a corporate snafu, here are some pointers:

### 1. Avoid being defensive.

Want to dig yourself an even bigger hole than you've already dug for yourself? Start making excuses. The dog ate my homework. It was the hurricane's fault. We just got here, the decisions were made under the previous administration ... Don't go there. Before you can start apologizing, you have to take responsibility.

**2. Lay out the facts.** Resist the temptation to engage in spin control. Give people the unvarnished truth. Don't engage in cover-ups. Simply tell people what actually happened and you will be halfway home.

**3. The buck stops at the top.** Apologies are going to be far more meaningful if they come from the CEO, rather than the general counsel, or someone in the corporate communications department.

### 4. Concede that people got hurt.

This is obviously true in the case of actual death or injury, but it also applies to breaches of trust or other disappointing behavior. Own up to the consequences of your actions.

**5. Take responsibility.** Now, you might get some pushback from lawyers here, but you can't expect to have an apology taken seriously unless you stand up and acknowledge that your actions were wrong. Find a legal team that understands the communications imperative and value of what you are trying to do.

**6. Express regret, seek forgiveness.** This is an apology. You are sorry, you have regrets, you made mistakes – say it any way you like, but at the end of the day, you need to express sorrow and seek forgiveness. And mean it.

### 7. Vow to take corrective action.

Do what you need to do to prevent your misdeeds from being repeated. Fire those who need firing. Fix systems that need fixing. Revamp procedures that need revamping. If the issues involved personal peccadillos, vow to seek professional counseling – and then actually get some.

**8. Make it right.** Apologizing is an empty exercise in many situations unless you can make an effort to right your wrong. "Oops!" is not a sufficient response. Provide restitution to your customers. Where you have caused financial or property losses, find a way to pay people back. Putting your money where your mouth is should be part of the equation.

**9. And vow that the violations won't be repeated.** This requires more than simply a promise. You want to give your audience reason to believe that the bad behavior will not happen again – that you have taken steps to prevent a repeat

of whatever triggered the issue in the first place.

**10. Be aware of corporate apology fatigue.** This makes it all the more imperative that your apology is not contrived. "Bad apologies drive out good," says Dov Seidman of LRN, a consultancy that advises on corporate culture. "The *mea culpas* have kept on coming to the point where they are reaching the level of parody. It is because I mourn the loss of the genuine apology that I propose an apology cease-fire." His speech on this theme at Davos was recently picked up by *The New York Times*, which has launched "Apology Watch" on the DealBook website to track this trend and check on who keeps their word. You have been warned.

**THE GOOD NEWS** is that the world is a forgiving place. But to be forgiven, you need to come clean and you need to show true regret. Perhaps that's tough to swallow, but that's just the way it is.