**The case of Ryanair: Demonstrating the benefits and the limits of incivility**

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Abstract: This essay uses the case of increasingly successful Irish airline Ryanair to describe how incivility was used strategically to increase profits and publicity, but demonstrates a limit to the amount of incivility that consumers will tolerate from an organization. Although incivility was a successful strategy in Ryanair’s past, the airline’s uncivil acts and lack of positive relationships subjected them to strong public backlash until they were forced to implement an image restoration plan. This plan, entitled Always Getting Better (AGB), has been hailed as a success by the airline and industry analysts.

# *Keywords:* Ryanair; incivility; rhetoric; marketing; media; public relations; strategy

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# Introduction

Incivility filled the headlines in 2016, and it shows no signs of slowing down in 2017.

The 2016 installment of the Civility in America study found that 95% of Americans believe that incivility is a problem, with 70% saying that incivility has risen to “crisis” levels (Weber Shandwick, 2016). “Civility in politics has been declining for years, both a cause and symptom of a changing culture where anonymous verbal assaults are fired freely across the internet, and cable TV routinely broadcasts words once banned from the airwaves”(Geller, 2016, para. 2). An overwhelming increase in uncivil acts are expanding and occurring in places all around the world, including in the workplace, schools, homes, online, and in the media. The 2016 Presidential election has brought out the worst in American leaders and the electorate. After the shocking release of a tape recording, in which president elect Donald Trump bragged about his penchant for grabbing women “by the p\*\*\*y,” Trump began a campaign to publicly shame all the women accusing him of sexual assault (Ali, 2016). On Oct. 31, Trump was sued by the state Democratic parties of Arizona, Ohio, Nevada, and Pennsylvania for “encouraging unlawful voter intimidation” (Green, 2016). After Trump’s election to President, the acts of incivility only increased, with James Mullen, president of Allegheny College, declaring “We can all point to incidents in campaigns across history, but I think this one probably does represent a new place in terms of incivility”(2016, Geller, para. 6).

Whether or not this decline in civility will continue is beyond the ability of one essay to

explain. This essay, however, will address a specific example of uncivil public discourse in an attempt to glean larger lessons about the limits of uncivil discourse. Our focus here is the uncivil discourse of the Irish low-fare airline Ryanair. This case offers a sobering projection of an

increasing disconnect between public relations and civility, while providing reason to believe that using incivility as a strategy does not allow for a long-lasting success.

Until 2013, the notoriously uncivil Dublin-based airline seemed to have a good thing going. Ryanair lacked a good reputation with customers, but this did not seem to drastically influence customers’ buying decisions since its flights were the cheapest across Europe.

However, Ryanair’s customers eventually became frustrated and had enough of its rude CEO, crude marketing strategies, negative advertisements, lack of customer service, and poor treatment of its employees, and began choosing other airlines. Once the decline in sales resonated with Ryanair CEO Michael O’Leary, he decided it was time to adjust course and begin implementing new strategies to resurrect their reputation. He decided to make civility a part of this new strategy.

# Background

Ryanair, originally named Danren Enterprises, was founded in 1984 by Christopher Ryan, Liam Lonergran and Tony Ryan (Aldous, 2013). Shortly after its establishment, the airline was renamed Ryanair, and in 1985 it began operating with a staff of 25 and share capital of just £1. The airline’s first launch took place in July and offered daily flights from Waterford to London Gatwick on a Bandeirante aircraft, seating only 15 people per flight. In order to operate the aircraft, Ryanair’s first cabin crew had to fit a strict height requirement of five feet and two inches tall or below. One year later, Ryanair began operating two more aircrafts, both of which could seat 46 passengers. The new route flew from Dublin to London Luton with airfares that were far below its competitors, British Airways and Aer Lingus. With prices less than half

of its competitors, Ryanair started the first airfare war in Europe. Within the first full year in operation, Ryanair successfully carried 82,000 passengers on two routes (Ryanair, 2016).

With more than 1,800 flights per day, Ryanair will carry 119 million customers and more international passengers than any other airline in the European industry in 2016. The company has 84 bases across Europe and North Africa, and it operates in 33 countries from 200 airports. With an operation of over 1,800 routes, Ryanair has an unblemished 31-year safety record, along with a fleet of 350 Boeing 737-800 Aircrafts. Ryanair operates over 550,000 flights per year, and over the last 12 months, 90 percent of those flight arrived on time. The airline claims to cancel fewer flights than any other airline. (Ryanair Facts and Figures, 2015).

Ryanair was famous for embracing incivility as part of its unique selling proposition. Consider the following questions and the counterintuitive answers Ryanair has given: Is it uncivil to make your passengers get out of the plane and load their own baggage? Is it uncivil to not offer refunds, even in emergency situations? Is it uncivil to not offer any free food, drinks, pillows, or even vomit bags on flights? Is it uncivil to minimize your employees’ wages and fight unionization? Ryanair would argue that even if such actions are perceived to be uncivil, the European travel and aviation world is better off because of this “incivility.” Ryanair changed the landscape of the European aviation industry through its uncivil business model, which we will now describe in more detail.

Ryanair has long cast itself as an outlaw, attempting to change air travel by operating outside norms of pricing, regulatory conformity, and passenger service. Michael O’Leary discussed, but never enacted, some extreme cost-cutting measures: Ryanair was the first airline to publicly consider pay toilets on its planes, to threaten to weigh passengers to force heavier

people to pay more for their tickets, to consider selling tickets for standing space (instead of seats) on flights to allow for more passengers and more revenue, and to threaten to fire pilots in order to replace them with autopilot (or to let stewardesses land the planes). Ryanair was the first airline to allow no refunds, to charge for any checked baggage, to offer no commission to travel agents, to make their flight attendants pay for their own uniforms, and fly their passengers to out of the way airports (somewhere near a big city) and asking them to take a bus or taxi to their actual destination (McGinn, 2004).

Some of their cost-cutting measures, like their small-town airport hubs, have been copied by other airlines (most notably by their main competitor, easyJet) in order to compete on price, but most airlines balk at the thought of openly shunning the tried-and-true practices of good customer relations. At the onset of their unusual strategies, the lack of customer service did not appear to hurt Ryanair, though. The Economist described “Michael O’Leary’s Ryanair paradox” this way:

It is hugely successful. It has brought flying within the reach of people of the most limited means. It has helped to change the economic prospects of neglected parts of Europe by bringing passengers and their money to underused provincial airports. But at the same time Ryanair has become a byword for appalling customer service, misleading advertising claims and jeering rudeness towards anyone or anything that gets in its way. (“Snarling,” 2007, n.p.)

# Research

**Ryanair Incivility Prior to 2013**

If incivility is defined as lacking in respect, restraint, and responsibility (Forni, 2002, p. 5), it is clear that Ryanair’s discourse has been uncivil. Ryanair showed a lack of restraint and

respect for its adversaries, when it accused them of “ripping off the Irish public” (Ryanair, 2003a), “slagging [sic] off a major fraud,” and having a “tenuous grip on reality” (Ryanair, 2003b). While this uncivil approach to public discourse might seem to curry favor with the media by providing plenty of quotable material, O’Leary served his own purposes by using publicity stunts to irritate people and get attention. The playful side of its incivility can be heard in its outlandish and headline-grabbing advertisements. One ad, consisting of two separate pages in the British newspaper *Evening Standard*, was created to promote a special £69 round-trip fare offer one Valentine’s Day weekend. The first page was headlined “BLOW ME! (These fares are hard to swallow!)” and the opposite page read “SATISFACTION GUARANTEED” with an image of one pair of feet lying on top of another pair of feet (Creaton, 2004, p. 197). Public outcry prompted the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) to rule that the ads were sexually suggestive and offensive, and to ask Ryanair not to repeat the advertisements.

Blatant and seemingly intentional disregard for the maintenance of positive relationships

with such key publics as customers, regulators, and the media certainly flies in the face of conventional wisdom. The ASA’s chief executive, Ed McCumiskey, recognized O’Leary’s motivation behind these outrageous ads: “‘I have heard Michael O’Leary laugh about this and boast about the huge amount of publicity it won for him’” (Creaton, 2004, p. 185). At a press conference in 2008, CEO Michael O’Leary promised “beds and b\*\*wjobs” to transatlantic passengers in business class (“Ryanair promises,” 2008). Also in 2008, Ryanair had another

run-in with the ASA when it published a sexually provocative ad with a young model dressed as a schoolgirl advertising the “hottest back to school fares” (“Ryanair schoolgirl ad,” 2008). That same year, the airline started publishing an annual calendar featuring flight attendants in bikinis

(all to benefit children’s charities), which has drawn plenty of criticism, including some from the “anti-fun” European Parliament Member Mary Honeyball (so named by Michael O’Leary).

The misogynistic humor was a common theme in Ryanair discourse and it all seemed to stem from the CEO himself, Michael O’Leary. O’Leary’s personal comments on behalf of Ryanair, as already illustrated, could always be counted on for controversial quotes that seem devoid of the politeness conventions typically associated with civility. He was famous for his “thick-skinned aggression, outrageous public statements and an implacable belief that short-haul airline passengers will endure nearly every imaginable indignity” for a cheap flight (Lyall, 2009, n.p.). Along with the business class b\*\*w job quip mentioned above, some of his shocking statements from his past include calling British Airports Authority “overcharging rapists” and calling Prime Minister Gordon Brown a “twit” and a “Scottish miser” (Lyall, 2009). O’Leary did not hide his feelings about the British Airports Authority, which manages and taxes all flights in and out of the U.K.: “They fucking piss away as much money on capital expenditure as humanly possible” (qtd. in Lane, 2006, p. 62).

O’Leary definitely got the media’s attention when Ryanair released its annual Girls of

Ryanair calendar to raise money for charity. The CEO performed a strip tease at a press conference to promote the swimsuit calendar. When one reporter asked why no scantily-clad men were pictured in the calendar, O’Leary shot back, “Because if there were men in the calendar it wouldn't sell, you mutton head” (Russell, 2008, p. 7). At another press conference, a female reporter made the mistake of deciding to leave early and crawling up to the front of the room to retrieve a microphone before O’Leary had finished speaking. When he saw her, he stopped mid-sentence.

“If you want to stay on your knees, by all means, I'd encourage you,” he said in front of the gathered, mostly male, journalists. “Sorry, I've forgotten the question . . . There was a very pretty girl on her knees there in front of me.” (Ayliffe, 2008, p. 3)

Another one of Ryanair’s many instances of harsh customer treatment, a seemingly terrible blow to its reputation, was turned into a joke and created even more publicity in 2011. In February, a group of Belgian student passengers outraged at Ryanair’s oversized luggage fee staged a “mutiny” on a flight boarding in the Canary Islands, bound for Belgium (Hosford, 2011). Reports suggest that after the police cleared the aircraft, Ryanair refused to allow 70 students to board the plane, which later departed for Belgium, leaving them stranded in the Canary Islands. The next day, Ryanair posted a “How to pack light” video tutorial on its webpage, along with links to media reports that the same students damaged hotel properties in the Canary Islands, and also advised Belgian universities to teach their students the importance of safety regulations and hotel rules (Ryanair, 2011b). Ryanair made a name for itself as an abusive bully, roughing up anyone who gets in its way, including government ministers, union leaders, people running big airports, and even passengers (“Snarling,” 2007).

Ryanair employees have also been subject to the airline’s incivility. Unlike its

counterparts at Aer Lingus and BA, in 2008 Ryanair’s employment strategy was “to focus on low costs via wage minimisation [sic], command and control of employees, and union avoidance” (Bamber, Gittell, Kochan, & von Nordenflycht, 2008, p. 3). The airline’s anti-union stance has prompted the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) to launch a web-based campaign called “Ryan-Be-Fair.” During two industrial disputes with Spanish and Italian Ryanair employees, the ITF publicly scolded Ryanair for its incivility, saying,

Discontent was never far from the surface at Ryanair, where workers felt mistrusted, marginalised [sic] and mistreated. Once again Michael O’Leary’s bombast and bullying has brought it bubbling to the surface, and he is going to have to either accept the consequences or learn to behave like any other normal, civilised [sic], twenty-first century employer. (ITF, 2006)

Ryanair’s once hidden charges such as online check-in, administrative and luggage fees, were “compounding an increasingly damaged reputation. That was made all the worse when it was revealed in 2012 that the carrier used an exchange rate of £1 to €1 – set when it was almost accurate – for flight add-ons, which reportedly disadvantaged UK fliers at a time when the pound was particularly strong. The tarnished image came to a head in 2013, when the airline suffered a slump in growth and was forced to revise its profit forecasts twice in the space of two months, for the first time in a decade. It saw a loss of £28.7m in the final quarter of the year, marking the poorest end-of-year performance in five years” (French, 2015).

# Incivility and Profits Continually Rise

Despite the reports of incivility and dissatisfaction, in 2002 Ryanair was leading the way in customer service for punctuality, fewer cancellations and least lost bags among all other European airlines. Google named Ryanair the most popular airline on the internet in 2003, and its website was the most searched travel website in all of Europe (Ryanair, 2016). Customers were still purchasing airline tickets regardless of the incivility of the airline.

# Strategy

In 2013, Ryanair became fearful that its profits might miss or fall to the lower end of its target range, and they reported both a drop in ticket prices and booking levels. In order to reform

its “abrupt culture” and to hit the forecasted profit mark, at the annual general meeting in 2013, Ryanair CEO Michael O’Leary responded to shareholders’ concerns regarding customer service issues and sales. O’Leary said, “We should try to eliminate things that unnecessarily annoy customers” (BBC, 2013). The same week as this meeting, Ryanair was voted the worst of Britain’s 100 biggest brands by *Which?* magazine. This was not entirely surprising, as consumer complaints about the airline had been increasing steadily. Customers reported fines charged for luggage that exceeded size regulations by a tiny fraction, and fees for not printing their own boarding pass. In response, Mr. O’Leary said he would address these types of issues over the next year since they did not cost the airline much money. He also disclosed to shareholders that Ryanair would revamp its website and create a new team to respond to customer complaint emails. O’Leary stated, "I am very happy to take the blame or responsibility if we have a macho or abrupt culture. Some of that may well be my own personal character deformities," (BBC, 2013).

In order to win back customers, Mr. O’Leary called for a redesign of the company’s

dysfunctional website and let up on the burdensome hand-luggage restrictions. Ryanair cut customers’ fees and told its employees to be less confrontational. The airline was now actively taking customer and employee relationships into consideration. It also caught on to the passengers’ annoyance at its trademark bugle call, which sounded in the aircraft each time a flight arrived on time, and they cut this as well. Other changes in strategy were pouring out from the once uncivil airline:

“Standing room only and charging for toilets was a great PR wheeze when we were young, dumb and growing rapidly,” Mr. O’Leary said in an interview. But after rivals started painting the moves as cheap and nasty, “the laddish noise was displacing the great

fares, brilliant punctuality and new aircraft,” he said. Passengers responded. In 2013, passenger growth was stuck at 1% to 3% some months, with as much as 20% of seats unsold. This year, monthly growth is climbing by 10% or more. Full-year results are due in May, and Ryanair expects passengers to hit 106 million, about 6% more than forecast. (Wall, 2016, para. 12)

# Execution

Ryanair implemented a new, three-year program known as “Always Getting Better” (AGB). The idea was to focus more on customer service and stop unnecessarily making customers angry. Some of the positive changes included allowing passengers a free second carry-on bag, assigned seating and reduced fees for instances such as printing a boarding pass for a passenger. Ryanair also focused on appealing to families when it launched its “Family Extra” plan of discounts and incentives for family customers in hopes of their continued support. Most of the changes made cost the airline very little in spending, and although there was concern that fees would eat away at the revenue base, the airline had faith that increasing passenger numbers would pay off in the long run. Their image restoration began with implementing new marketing strategies, and in order to make a splash, Ryanair nearly tripled its marketing budget at an estimated €35m for advertising, website improvements and travel products in 2014, and launching its first television advert in a quarter of a century (Ryanair Annual Report, 2015).

After its shift in advertising, Ryanair developed a new digital strategy in hopes of

appealing to more customers. What began as a jumbled, unorganized website was transformed into a more interactive and helpful site. Not only did the website improve, but the Irish airline developed an app for customers, making it much easier to carry a boarding pass digitally.

Another marketing strategy employed by the airline was the extension of its reach. The company

began offering airline ticket sales through third party agents, and Ryanair began welcoming American customers to purchase airline tickets in Europe prior to their arrival (French, 2015).

Ryanair began creating more jobs within the company after its profit scare in 2013. According to the Chief Executive’s report in 2016, last year the company created 2,065 new jobs, increasing employee headcount to 11,458 highly skilled aviation professionals. Along with creating jobs, Ryanair promoted more than 1,000 team members to more senior positions. Over the next eight years, the airline plans to grow traffic to more than 180 million customers per year, creating an additional 7,000 jobs directly in Ryanair and sustaining 140,000 jobs indirectly at airports all over Europe by 2024. In terms of employee relations in 2015, Ryanair successfully concluded multi-year pay and productivity deals at all 84 airport bases across Europe. It now offers pilots an improved roster, giving them four days off after every five days of duty, while the cabin crew was given a long weekend of three days off after every five days of duty. The airline also secured improved allowances and pay increases for the next five years (Ryanair Annual Report, 2016).

# Evaluation

The first year of the AGB program was so successful that Ryanair extended it to a three-year program of continuous listening and improving customer experience. During the second year of the program, Ryanair launched a US website, a new customer charter, and cut airport bags and sports equipment fees. The airline also delivered an improved mobile app, as well as a desktop and tablet site. As for the enhancement of customer services in-flight, they provided new aircraft interiors and healthy choice menus. Ryanair says their AGB program

remains an unrelenting commitment to lower costs and keep fares low while their competitors raise prices (Ryanair Annual Report, 2015).

Despite the conventional wisdom that business communication and public relations should be sensitive to publics’ concerns, Ryanair under O’Leary has certainly achieved business success while engaging in abrasive, sometimes offensive communication with multiple publics. According to Ryanair Chairman David Bonderman’s report to shareholders, in 2015 Ryanair grew its traffic by 18 percent to 106.4 million customers, as load factors rose from 88 to 93 percent, and it delivered the second year of its AGB customer experience program. The company opened seven new bases and more than 100 new routes, becoming the first airline to carry over 100 million international customers in a calendar year. In October 2016, the airline launched its new website and mobile app, while agreeing to five-year pay and conditions deals with all 84 pilot and cabin crew bases. The company increased profit after tax by 43 percent to

€1,242 million (Ryanair Annual Report, 2016).

# Analysis & Discussion

In this essay, we have attempted to establish two things: first, an explanation for the counterintuitive success of a company that seems to break all the rules of public relations; second, the public’s limited capacity for incivility and how a company with an uncivil reputation can regain the public’s trust. There are some more recent examples of the public responding positively to uncivil behavior or discourse by public actors (see: the 2016 presidential election). Clearly there are people who are attracted to or entertained by incivility in the public sphere. The Ryanair case demonstrates that while incivility may not keep a company from being successful, the public may, at some point, demand some measure of respect and civility from that

organization. How much the company has to give in order to regain the public’s support will depend upon the case. Here we have seen that by merely bringing their customer service efforts in line with their competitors (not charging passengers to print their boarding passes, allowing 2 free carry-on bags, having a well-organized website, etc.), Ryanair was able to boost sales and increase profits.

There are multiple possible explanations for this counterintuitive success from a public relations perspective. One is that Ryanair has succeeded in using incivility to craft its image as a renegade corporation, unconcerned about anything but low prices. Consistent with Cheney’s (1992) observation that organizations are increasingly concerned with images, Ryanair’s incivility paradoxically reinforces its position as a consumer champion, fighting for low prices at all costs. Another explanation is that most of the uncivil statements attributed to Ryanair are attributed directly to O’Leary, allowing him to serve as a buffer between the organization and its publics, who write off the incivility as the ravings of a CEO who likes the spotlight. The elegance of this approach is that he gets to say outrageous things that are discounted as “official” organizational speech, but that still receive publicity connected to the organization. So Ryanair is potentially able to reap any positive aspects of O’Leary’s low-price crusade but disavow the most extreme comments. Within the British Isles, O’Leary may fit the exception of the “rhetorical celebrity” who outshines the organizational voice (Sproule, 1988, p. 474), but this explanation is inconsistent with studies in organizational rhetoric, which argue that any communication or rhetorical action on behalf of an organization, regardless of the actual rhetoric, “counts” as organizational rhetoric (Cheney, 1992; Cheney & McMillan, 1990; Crable, 1990).

It seems that Ryanair's success has come in part because it cast itself as the protector of low prices at any cost (even the cost of breaking long-held rules and norms related to good business and civil discourse). In doing so, it was attacking entrenched, slow-moving competition in the form of Europe’s many national carriers. So in similar situations (government, politics, or heavily-regulated enterprises such as utilities, postal services, etc.), an uncivil approach might have some potential. In a newer industry, however, such as technology, such an approach might be less distinctive and more counterproductive than constructive. And in industries where the major product or service is not perceived as simply a commodity (as air travel seems to have become), there might be room for good customer service, and not simply price, to create competitive advantages.

But for the airline industry, it is quite possible that Ryanair is leading the way to an uncertain future for public relations and expectations of civility. Now that Ryanair corrected course and devoted more attention to customer service, incivility is not a prominent feature of the company brand. This change has proven beneficial for the airline and its customers. How much of their current AGB reputation improvement program is really just basic customer service? Is AGB really unique in its tactics in ways that make Ryanair more customer-centric than its competitors or is the margin of difference between the old/uncivil and the new/improved Ryanair just impressive?

# Discussion Questions

1. If you were a public relations employee for Ryanair during the course of its uncivil acts and outbursts by CEO Michael O’Leary, how would you have handled the negative backlash?
2. Would you have felt compelled at any time during Ryanair’s past to leave the company if you were an employee?
3. If you had a management role in this company, would you have pushed for more customer-friendly approaches and strategies, or left them the same since the company did not appear to be losing customers?
4. Do you think the AGB program makes Ryanair’s customer service any better than Southwest Airline’s customer service?
5. What strategies would you suggest Ryanair use to further improve the reputation of the company?
6. If Ryanair offered the cheapest flights from the U.S. to Europe, and you were traveling to Europe, would you choose to fly with this company even though you know their history of incivility and poor customer relations?
7. Can you think of any other companies that use incivility as a marketing tool? How so?

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