

Commentary: Cookie crumbs on a lawyer

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

An international airline with computer troubles was compelled one recent day to cancel hundreds of flights for thousands of passengers, but it apologized.

Sort of.

"We apologize to our customers for any inconvenience," the airline said. It didn't say, "We apologize to our customers for the inconvenience." The airline spokesman said, "for any inconvenience," suggesting the weasel-worded possibility that none of the thousands of passengers was inconvenienced by a tiny little matter like being delayed for hours before embarking on their journeys.

You hear such wobbly, half-sincere apologies constantly in business and in politics. Especially in politics. It's usually something like, "If I have offended anyone by calling the senator a typical California nut job, I apologize."

That is not an unqualified apology. It is an attempt to soften the charge and to shift some of the blame to the hypersensitivity of Californians who are so unreasonable as to resent being categorized as nut jobs.

The magic word is "if" - "if I have offended anyone."

Of course, you have offended someone, you twit. You have suggested that all Californians are nut jobs. And some of them aren't.

To spot the insincerity of a public apology, look for the weasel words. For instance, "I apologize to anyone who may have been insulted by my calling the president an admitted lawyer."

The key words in that alleged apology are "who may have been" - as if nobody would really mind being called an admitted lawyer.

And speaking of the president (who is, in fact, a lawyer and might as well admit it), he was recently required to issue an apology. He was praising Kamala Harris, the attorney general of California (who is also an admitted lawyer), for her intelligence and toughness. And then, he went a compliment too far in an era of triumphant gender equality. He said she is also the most attractive attorney general in the nation.

His inner college boy escaped for a moment.

The incident carries mixed messages. For instance, deep down, few among us mind being told that we are good looking. (I know I never tire of it.) But we have not yet come so far as a society to dare dwell on the undeniable appearance of the best looking attorney general in America.

That does tend to suggest that there is more to what some admitted male lawyers like about admitted female lawyers than their briefs.

So the president, being reminded of what a clod he had become, picked up the phone and called to apologize to the best looking attorney general in America. We haven't been told the exact words. However, we can bet that the president apologized profusely to the California A.G. and to women in general.

He would have done that because he was embarrassed and probably because the first lady (who is also an admitted lawyer) had given him a few sharp jabs with her attractive elbows.

Timid half-baked apologies of business and politics are not just weak-kneed but they tend to defeat the purpose and the effectiveness of an honest and forthright apology. If you put your foot in your mouth, as we all tend to do from time to time, which is more likely to get your foot out of your mouth?

"If I might possibly have offended anyone by calling the AARP a gang of washed up spongers on the public purse, then I am inclined to apologize."

Or:

"I apologize for saying such a stupid thing about the elderly. I was wrong, wrong, wrong!"

A sincere, direct and heartfelt apology will do a politician or a corporate CEO more good with the public than a weak, half-hearted apology that digs the offender in deeper.

This is another example of how often in politics and in business the right thing and the smart thing are the same thing.

After all, these public apologies are a variation on what most people learned in their childhood. You get in more trouble with your parents for lying about stealing a cookie than you do for stealing the cookie, especially when you have crumbs on your shirt while denying what you did.

Politicians get in more trouble with the voters for lying about having accepted unethical favors from lobbyists than they do for the bribe itself. Bribes also tend to leave crumbs on your shirt, even if you are an admitted lawyer.

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