

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On the morning of his wedding in March 1951, Mr R M Hosking of King's Heath in Birmingham realized he'd got an embarrassing problem. Through no fault of his own he was without a morning suit in which to get married. He'd ordered one and paid for it in plenty of time. It just never arrived. As he set off to get married in a pair of his soon-to-be father-in-law's trousers, Hosking would have been entirely unaware that the events leading to his misfortune had been set in motion the previous year. It would be of little comfort when he realized, but he wasn't the only groom without a suit to get married in that year.

A year before Hosking was due to tie the knot, Clement Attlee's Labour Government had made a change to the tax laws that inadvertently provided a hefty tax incentive for engaged couples to get married before the beginning of April, when the UK's fiscal year ends.¹ The advantages – specifically that any married couple could claim the full married man's allowance for the year ahead provided they were married by the end of the previous tax year – were sufficient that March swiftly overtook

August to become the most popular month for weddings in the UK.² It remained the most popular wedding month for almost two decades after Attlee's new rule, despite the obvious disadvantage of the famously bad British weather.

In 1951, the first year in which couples could take advantage of the new rule, the number of March weddings almost doubled on the previous year. Without knowing it, approximately 80,000 happy couples, like Hosking and his wife-to-be, would put an enormous strain on the entire wedding supply chain. And that is why Hosking had to borrow a pair of trousers from his fiancée's dad. The initial and unprecedented spike in March weddings took a lot of people by surprise. Unfortunately for Hosking that included the company from whom he'd ordered his morning suit.

A few weeks after his suit-less wedding, he received a letter from the company who'd let him down. The letter said:

Dear Sir,

Words fail me to express the humility in which I stand for the disgraceful way you were let down. This is the first time such a thing has happened in the history of the Firm, and I can only say that the orders received were phenomenal. You are very moderate in your expressions [*sic*].

Your fee for breach of contract is inadequate – I enclose an extra £5 and ask you and your wife to have a bottle or two of wine on my House, to make up in a small way for our lapse. I offer my sincere apologies to you and your wife.

Yours faithfully,
H N Moss
Managing Director

The writer of the letter was Harry Moss, the then managing director of Moss Bros & Co of Covent Garden, now Moss Bros PLC, a global chain with annual revenue in the hundreds of millions.³ Moss had enclosed two cheques along with his apology: one a refund from the company and a personal cheque

from his own account that, in today's money, would be worth a few hundred pounds.

In November 2018, Hosking's son Patrick shared the letter on Twitter, almost 67 years after it had been sent. Citing a 'magnificent grovel', he asked why companies don't apologize like this any more. That's a question lots of us have been asking recently.

Moss's apology was never intended to be public. It was a letter from supplier to customer expressing genuine remorse and seeking to put things right. That it was written in such a fantastically grovelling style is merely a bonus. In terms of intent and structure, this apology was almost spot on.

By today's standards especially, the letter could be considered a masterpiece; it is sincere, carrying with it an offer of repair and it's refreshingly free of any corporate equivocation or excuse-making modern consumers have come to accept as standard. It focuses almost entirely on Hosking and not the organization giving it. Compare this letter to any of your favourite shrink-wrapped corporate apologies from the last few years and it becomes very clear very quickly that lots of organizations have forgotten their manners.

*'Why can't
organizations
apologize any more!'*

What went wrong?

2018 was a good year for bad public behaviour. Facebook and Starbucks set the early pace for corporate contrition. Tesla and Uber ended the year on a rousing crescendo. 2019 wasn't much better. Lots of organizations issued apologies. Very few of them said sorry.

As authors we've been closely monitoring these high-profile public apologies for more than two years. It's been remarkable to see how much effort goes into bad apologies and how skilful public figures and organizations have become in crafting

semantically acrobatic statements – calling them apologies would be a category error – to deflect, reframe and evade the misdeeds they find themselves addressing. It’s been even more impressive to witness, through the conduct of recently contrite organizations, just how much they didn’t mean their apologies.

The lengths organizations will travel linguistically to *not* say sorry while appearing to apologize has been similarly impressive. The highest profile and most eagerly awaited apologies of the past few years have been insincere, passive, self-regarding and, perhaps most unforgivably, they’ve been far too long.

We’ve known how to apologize since biblical times. The Bible and the Quran are full of tips on saying sorry and forgiveness. And pretty much the entire point of Yom Kippur, Judaism’s highest holiday, is to say sorry.

The current situation has nothing to do with organizations and public figures being unaware of how to say sorry. The world is chock-full of advice on how to do it properly. Two separate 2016 studies of 755 people conducted by Professor Roy J Lewicki, a scholar in the subject of trust development, negotiation and conflict management, identified the six key elements of an apology: regret, explanation, acknowledgement of responsibility, repentance, offer of repair and request for forgiveness.⁴ There are more than 1,500 highly-cited studies about saying sorry listed in Google’s academic database. There’s even one about how to apologize to ‘psychologically entitled shoppers’.⁵ The lessons are there if we want them.

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The current mess is a supply and demand problem. There isn’t enough genuine atonement to go round. Consumers are demanding accountability, organizations are reluctant to provide it and people are getting short-changed as a result. In the absence of the genuine apologies consumers demand, crude fakes are flooding the market.

If you've been paying attention and looking beyond the headlines, you'll have noticed a worrying countertrend emerging alongside the highly noticeable bad apologies. In the background, partially hidden behind the blockbuster bad *mea culpas* issued by the likes of United Airlines and Facebook, there's an audible hum of mass apologia emanating from Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and press offices around the world.

Everyone is issuing apologies. Public figures, world leaders, YouTubers, iconic institutions and huge organizations have been busily dishing out high-minded, low-quality apologies at an impressive rate. In fact, throughout January 2018 alone, the UK media reported on 35 high-profile public apologies. More than one apology per day making the news in that month alone. It was a month in which Virgin, H&M, YouTube, Asda, the *Daily Mail*, Vladimir Putin and even Pope Francis all issued public apologies.

Look past the headlines and you'll see that for every airline apologizing for violently 're-accommodating' a terrified passenger, there's a stationery shop apologizing with comparable vigour for advertising in the wrong newspaper. For every Facebook executive appearing at a government hearing, there's a social media executive desperately attempting to placate a handful of outraged Twitter users. Everyone is apologizing and no one is saying sorry.

So to answer Patrick Hosking's question – 'why can't organizations apologize any more?' – in short, it's the fault of people like us. People who make their living communicating on behalf of organizations, institutions and public figures. The PR people, crisis management consultants, social media account managers and the rest. And we are sorry.

Or rather: 'We regret that our services did not live up to our usual high standards.' And if you think that's not a proper apology, you're in the minority. A 2019 study by YouGov found that only 49 per cent would have a problem with that kind of wording if it were offered to them. The business of saying sorry is in

such a crisis that almost of UK adults think vague waffle about meeting high standards counts as an apology now.

Apologizing has become a public relations exercise and consumers are buying it. Publicists and communications strategists have got into the nasty habit of writing apologies on behalf of their clients with the sole intention of *not* saying sorry. We happily dish out apologies to anyone who demands one, but we are not sorry.

Apologizing has become a public relations exercise.

We might acknowledge an ‘upsetting event’, as the United Airlines’ CEO did after a passenger was dragged from a flight. And yes, we might also concede that ‘we are disheartened by the way this situation unfolded’ as United’s rival Southwest Airlines did following a similar situation on one of their planes. But please don’t mistake these boilerplate responses for genuine contrition. In the chapters that follow, it’ll become clear that public figures, businesses, politicians, even lifestyle bloggers apologize a lot and that it means little. After all, the word ‘apology’ derives from *apologia*, Greek for ‘defence’ not regret.

The inability of organizations and public figures to simply say sorry when they’ve done something demonstrably bad is not a new phenomenon. It’s just getting bigger and more visible. What is new, however, is the parallel and equally pernicious phenomenon – an almost perfect counterweight to the non-apologizers – the eagerness, often desperation, of some organizations and public figures to say sorry when they needn’t and shouldn’t. This is the Apology Impulse.

Why write this book?

In this book, we’ll be exploring the psychology behind the apology impulse and how our instinctive fear of mass disapproval and hyper-sensitivity to even the smallest criticism, typically

driven by social media and, latterly, viral news publishers, causes us to apologize for the most trivial of things and withhold the big apologies when they're actually required. We'll analyse the factors behind our keeness to say sorry and the consequences of dishing out apologies to anyone who demands one.

We'll be also examining some historical apologies, profiling some of today's most prolific apologizers and taking a deep dive into what happens on those rare occasions when apologies are demanded but not given.

We'll be asking why women are considered better apologizers than men, why Spain refused to apologize to Mexico, which British supermarket managed to apologize 50 times in a single day, how one British company banked £1 million in less than a week simply by not saying sorry, why one of the most anticipated apologies in history came with a legal disclaimer, why one beer brand paid good money to deliberately make itself look bad, and how one company's stock value went up by billions of dollars when their CEO said sorry for being what can only be described as a jerk.

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Why write it now?

The apology as we used to know it is in grave danger of becoming irrelevant. If we want to rescue it from obscurity and return 'sorry' to its rightful place as a rare and important word, we need a plan. It's imperative for professional communicators, many of whom are privileged to have access to large platforms, to stop abusing the word 'sorry' and return some credibility back to the act of apologizing. We can only do this by taking more care over what we say when we are sorry and by doing our best to give up the bad habits we'll explore in this book.

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