

Bus 1170: Canadian Cannibalism Crisis

Presley G. Connor

Freed Hardeman University

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History of Greyhound

In the sleepy town of Hibbing, Minnesota, Carl Wickman pondered an idea that would eventually spark a new expansion in the transportation industry. The year was 1913, and the struggling entrepreneur realized that many of the iron minors in his community did not have reliable transportation to the neighboring mining town. He didn't know it at the time, but Wickman's group chauffeuring service (officially launched in 1914) established the idea of intercity travel via bus and completely revolutionized the way the world moves (Belsky, 2013). From this, Wickman founded Greyhound Lines, Inc. (Greyhound), and decades later, individuals across multiple nations are still benefiting from his genius concept. FirstGroup PLC, now the parent company of Greyhound, has a vision "to provide solutions in an increasingly congested world, keeping people moving and communities prospering" (FirstGroup PLC, n.d.).

Greyhound's Dwindling Brand

Intercity bus transportation services like Greyhound opened up many opportunities for travel in the twentieth century. Business boomed in the World War II era, but traveling by bus was later "perceived as the option of those who [could] not afford to travel by car, train or plane" (Walsh, 2003). This greatly affected the image of Greyhound and even influenced ridership. By the turn of the century, Greyhound's brand was only worsened by deteriorating facilities, unhappy workers, and dangerous terminals (Belsky, 2003). What was once known as "The Hound" got a new, unflattering nickname: "The Dirty Dog" (Belsky). After extensive renovations within the brand, Greyhound decided to reclaim its reputation in 2007 with a \$9 million media campaign to highlight its new and improved look (Elliott, 2007).

2007 Media Campaign

According to the New York Times, Greyhound's 2007 media campaign to repair the public image "[played] up the results of a three-year, \$60 million effort to improve service by upgrading and refurbishing Greyhound's buses and terminals — even sprucing up the uniforms of its drivers" (Elliott, 2007). Four independent public relations agencies were tasked with utilizing print and digital media to reach Greyhound's target audiences, including students, Hispanics, and avid bus travelers; each agency specialized in a unique element of the campaign, and they were "Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners in Sausalito, Calif., for the general market ads; the Vidal Partnership in New York, for the Hispanic ads; offices of Edelman, part of Daniel J. Edelman Inc., for public relations; and Slingshot in Dallas, for the online ads" (Elliott). "We're on our way" was the common theme of the campaign, but that did not stop Greyhound from incorporating witty slogans like "Faster routes get you there in time for the opening band. Whether that's good or not is up to you." However, certain slogans would not age well, as some signage included language stating, "There's a reason you've never heard of bus rage"; this advertisement, in particular, acted almost as a bad omen to the crisis in Greyhound's near future.

Bus 1170

Around a half-hour after midnight on July 29, 2008, "Vince Li [boarded] a Greyhound bus in Edmonton, Alberta, headed for Thunder Bay via Winnipeg" (McKeown, n.d.). He purchased the ticket under an alias, but the entire world would know his identity only days later. Now a Canadian citizen, Li was born in China and immigrated to North America with his wife Ana in 2001. It is important to note that Li had sought mental health treatment in Canada, but left any identified issues untreated. Sometime after settling in North America, Li and his wife

divorced, leaving the computer engineer to fend for himself by working random jobs. He remained in contact with his ex-wife after the divorce, but did not notify her of his trip in late July prior to leaving. He did, however, leave her a cryptic note, which read, “I’m gone, don’t look for me, I wish you were happy” (McKeown).

After stopping in Erickson, Manitoba, Li decided to disembark from the bus, even though it was not his scheduled destination. Li stayed the night on a bench near the Greyhound bus terminal. He was observed staring into space and sitting upright throughout the entirety of the evening; Li also got rid of several of his personal belongings, even selling his laptop to a witness for \$60 (The Canadian Press, 2008). Twenty-four hours after exiting the initial bus in Erickson, Li boarded bus 1170 bound for Winnipeg.

Aboard the bus, Li sat in the third or fourth row. In the back of the bus sat Tim McLean, a 22-year-old Canadian man. He traveled alone, listening to music, exiting the bus for quick cigarette breaks where appropriate, and sleeping. McLean was reportedly returning home after a long summer working in the carnival circuit (McKeown, n.d.).

The bus stopped along its route in Manitoba for a scheduled break on July 30, 2008. After the stop, McLean returned to his seat next to the window, but Li relocated to the back of the bus and sat next to McLean. As McLean returned to his nap, Li grew increasingly agitated and suspicious. At approximately 8:30 p.m., Li stabbed McLean without any apparent cause; eyewitnesses reported hearing a horrific scream from McLean that notified passengers of the attack (*Beheading*, 2009). Everyone except Li and McLean was able to escape the bus physically unharmed.

The passengers, now stranded on the side of the road, watched through the bus windows as Li continued to attack McLean. The driver, a trucker who stopped to aid the group, and a passenger armed themselves with tools and reboarded the bus in an attempt to rescue McLean. However, upon boarding, the men found that McLean was already deceased and that it was in their best interest to keep Li contained in the vehicle. The bus driver locked and immobilized the bus so that Li could not escape, which was a valuable decision as Li attempted to drive the bus away at one point during the attack. The attacker continued to mutilate McLean's body, dismembering his limbs and cannibalizing the victim's eyes and a third of his heart. After decapitating McLean, Li held the head up for the passengers to see. Through the entirety of his attack, Li is observed as emotionless.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officers who responded to the scene did not attempt to board the bus or subdue Li in any way. Instead, Li was allowed to continue his attack until approximately 1:20 a.m. on July 31, at which point he tried to escape the bus through a window; RCMP officers apprehended Li (McKeown, n.d.). In Li's pockets, officers find McLean's nose and tongue.

At Greyhound's discretion, survivors were transported to a local hotel as the RCMP prepared to take each of their witness statements via a crisis team. Since their luggage and personal belongings could not be retrieved from the bus (which was now a crime scene), Greyhound representatives took the passengers to a local store to purchase replacement clothing (*All Aboard*, 2014). The next day, the passengers completed their journey and reunited with their loved ones in Winnipeg.

Crisis Communication from Greyhound

As illustrated by their actions in providing replacement clothing and an overnight hotel stay, Greyhound attempted to provide some immediate relief to the victims. Still, long-term assistance would be necessary in order to accommodate those who witnessed the attacks in healing. According to CBC's interview with Greyhound Canada's Senior Vice President Stuart Kendrick, "the company [offered] financial help and counseling for passengers on a case-by-case basis" (*Beheading*, 2009). Despite this, many witnesses struggled and continue to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues due to the attack.

On August 5, 2008 - 6 days after the attack - Abby Wambough, a spokesperson for Greyhound, said in an interview with Windsor Star that the company would be pulling all running advertisements with the mention of bus rage (Rynor, 2008). "We just felt, in light of the recent incident, it could be a very offensive message, and we didn't think it was appropriate for it to be run any longer," said Wambough.

In both conversations with Kendrick and Wambough, the need for increased safety aboard Greyhound buses was emphasized. Kendrick stated, "We did introduce some of the passenger screenings at our major terminals, as well as on-road policies on what items can be carried onboard. We maintain that we are one of the safest modes of travel" (*Beheading*, 2009). Concerned members of the public did not appear to be satisfied with this response. Many questioned why increased security measures were only implemented at specific locations, as opposed to all of Greyhound's terminals (*Beheading*). Wambough recognized that this had been an ongoing need, as Greyhound had been evaluating safety protocols for 18 months prior to the attack on bus 1170 (Rynor, 2008). Wambough also mentioned the potential introduction of

random security screenings but maintained the belief that the event on July 30 “truly was an isolated incident” (Rynor).

PETA

Shortly after the death of Tim McLean, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) attempted to run an advertisement in the Portage Daily Graphic comparing McLean's death to the slaughtering of animals. PETA Spokesperson Lindsay Rajt justified, “In the wake of the stabbing, beheading, and cannibalization of a man on a bus in front of horrified passengers, PETA is planning to run an ad in the Portage Daily Graphic that draws comparisons between cold-blooded murder and the torture of animals in slaughterhouses - making the point that slaughter should always be shocking” (Price, 2008). The Portage Daily Graphic declined to run the advertisement in its publication, but PETA released it independently on August 6, 2008 (PETA). The all-text graphic read, “Manitoba... An innocent young victim’s throat is cut... His struggles and cries are ignored... The man with the knife shows no emotion... The victim is slaughtered and his head is cut off... His flesh is eaten... It’s still going on!” (PETA, 2008). The 2008 advertisement also included secondary text that encouraged vegetarian diets and personal lifestyle evaluations:

“Right now, this exact scenario is reality for many. They are sensitive, they value their lives, they see what is happening, they cannot run away, and they often suffer greatly yet are being killed for nothing more than a fleeting taste of their flesh. Nonviolence can begin at breakfast, with what we eat. For our free “Vegetarian Starter Kit,” visit GoVeg.com. If this ad leaves a bad taste in your mouth, please give a thought to what sensitive animals think and feel when they come to the end of their frightening journey

and see, hear, and smell, the slaughterhouse. Try switching to a healthy vegetarian diet and save lives every day, including your own.” (PETA)

Not Criminally Responsible

The public and the Canadian law enforcement sought to hold Vince Li accountable for his actions against Tim McLean. However, upon a court-ordered psychiatric examination of Li’s mental state, it was revealed that he had a history of mental illness and suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. In regards to his motivation for the act, Li explained, “I believed he was an alien. The voices told me to kill him, that he would kill me or others. I do not believe this now” (BBC, 2012).

Manitoba's Criminal Code Review Board found Vince Li not criminally responsible (NCR) in 2009 for murdering Tim McLean due to his schizophrenic diagnosis. (This ruling is similar to that of a “not guilty by reason of insanity” plea in the United States.) Instead of serving a prison sentence, Li was sent to a secure psychiatric hospital for treatment. Justice John Scurfield said, “[Li] did not appreciate the act he committed was morally wrong. He believed he was acting in self-defense and that he had been commanded by God to do so” (CTV News, 2009). Now legally known as Will Baker, Li progressively received more and more freedoms as his behavior improved throughout his treatments (Associated Press, 2017). Baker was initially kept in a secure wing of the hospital but gained privileges such as going on unsupervised day trips, living in a group home, and eventually living on his own. In 2017, Baker was granted an absolute discharge and is no longer subject to any type of monitoring from the Canadian government or justice system (Associated Press). The review board found that “the weight of

evidence does not substantiate that Mr. Baker poses a significant threat to the safety of the public” (Associated Press).

Carol de Delley, the mother of victim Tim McLean, has been in outspoken opposition of this ruling since court proceedings began. McLean's mother started a petition to pass Tim's Law and established the de Delley foundation to change NCR laws; however, after five years, her petition only gained 1,200 signatures, and her efforts came to a close in 2014 (*Mother*). de Delley expressed that she supports treatment versus prison sentences for mentally ill criminals but stands by the fact that Baker (Li) should be required to forfeit his freedoms (*Mother*, 2014).

With eyes on Greyhound to acknowledge Baker’s fate either in favor of or against it, there is no clearly documented response from Greyhound in regards to the matter.

Public Perception & Reaction

With such outspoken public opposition to the outcome of this criminal case, many continue to question the validity of NCR laws and how they are implemented. Additionally, Baker’s release and the actions (or lack thereof) of the RCMP officers on the evening of the attack remain controversial topics. As a government agency, the RCMP and the Canadian government as a whole have done little to respond to the backlash resulting from this crisis. Only one press release from the RCMP regarding the event can be found, consisting of three sentences identifying Li and discussing his apprehension (Government of Canada, 2008).

Two passengers who witnessed the murder and the family of McLean began seeking legal action against Li, RCMP, the Canadian government, and Greyhound in 2011. The RCMP & the government were removed from all of the lawsuits in 2013 due to a lack of case strength. The witnesses “accused the company of not providing adequate security and of leaving them with

anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress,” which Greyhound denied (*Passengers*, 2015). By 2015, the two witnesses dropped all of their charges against Greyhound due to Manitoba's system of no-fault vehicle insurance. Greyhound declined CBC's request for an interview on the matter (*Passengers*). As of 2018, the family's lawsuit against Greyhound was still in limbo (*10 years*).

In July 2018, the minister for Saskatchewan's Crown Investments Corp. cited the death of McLean as the "tipping point" for a decrease in bus ridership across Canada (McKenna, 2018). According to Global News, “Saskatchewan shut down the government-owned Saskatchewan Transportation Co., or STC, in last year's [2017] austerity budget due to what the province said was a consistent drop in people taking the bus” (McKenna). The STC was able to briefly stay afloat after the Greyhound bus crisis by offering incentives and deals to senior citizens and improving onboard amenities. Still, the success was temporary as ridership statistics plummeted overall. Greyhound also ended a majority of its services in Western Canada in 2018 due to decreasing ridership (McKenna). It is important to note that other factors did play a role in the reduced interest in bus travel, such as airline popularity and convenience; still, McLean's death was a catalyst in this transition within the industry.

Areas for Improvement

While Greyhound claimed to provide financial support and counseling opportunities to passengers affected by the death of Tim McLean, it does not appear that these resources were sufficient or widely offered. I believe Greyhound was not proactive enough in seeking help for survivors. Many developed PTSD or other related mental illnesses after witnessing the murder and not receiving adequate treatment. This has impacted the personal lives of all of those who

still suffer, as one responding officer committed suicide and a female passenger was unable to properly care for her newborn given her mental state after the crisis (*10 years*, 2018). This is not to mention the ongoing pain that the McLean/de Delley family must endure, with little offers of reparations from Greyhound as they continue their legal battles. Perhaps most troubling, Tim McLean's son never met his father and must now grow up to process the pain that his father experienced in his death. If I were in Greyhound's position, it would be of utmost importance to ensure the health and well-being of the survivors. Not enough was done to compensate the victims for the events that occurred on Greyhound's watch.

Beyond victim compensation, Greyhound took few tangible actions to improve security while traveling with their company. The company had previously recognized the need for better safety measures, allowed this crisis to occur, and still did not mandate any major protocols that could potentially save lives and protect passengers from harm or injury in the future. Random screenings and metal detectors in major terminals are a start, but I believe Greyhound can and should do more to meet the demands of their publics for better security while traveling. The company had just spent millions of dollars improving its facilities and a media blitz to publicize the new look - why were increased security technologies not included in the remodel if they already knew it was an issue?

Other than Greyhound's subpar attempts to rebuild after the crisis, I believe PETA's response to the death of Tim McLean was distasteful and could have been more humane. I understand the comparison PETA was trying to make. Still, I do not think there is ever a circumstance where an organization should deliberately attempt to profit off the death of a human being. As a humanitarian group, I would assume that PETA might have considered this,

but it appears that dehumanizing McLean and comparing him to a pig to the slaughter was worth the attention to the organization. Personally, I would never approve of an advertisement such as PETA's, and I appreciate the Portage Daily Graphic's choice not to run the ad.

The RCMP and Canadian government remained relatively quiet throughout the life of this crisis. This may be partly due to the public status that these organizations hold, but I find it interesting nonetheless. I do not know that the RCMP and Canadian government could or should have done anything differently, but I could see some literature in support or justification of NCR laws coming in handy to combat the backlash faced after the release of Will Baker at the very least.

Greyhound, PETA, Portage Daily Graphic, and the RCMP could not be reached directly for comment, despite attempted correspondence.

Image Repair Theory

Greyhound utilized strategies outlined by the image repair theory to assess and address the damage that Vince Li's actions caused to its reputation. Also known as image restoration strategies, this theory is "designed to repair damage done to reputation whether individual or organizational" (Benoit, 1995). Of the 14 total approaches provided by this theory, evasion of responsibility by defeasibility, evasion of responsibility due to an accident, and corrective action are the most prominent in Greyhound's approach.

Defeasibility was used to explain the fact that Greyhound was unaware of Li's mental health issues and therefore could not take any action to prevent his behavior. In this approach, Greyhound is able to avoid responsibility by explaining that they do not have the right to inquire

about an individual's health and therefore cannot be held responsible for allowing Li on the bus, and thus, the attacks.

Secondly, Greyhound was able to claim that this event was an accident, as they could not expect this event to occur and could not control the behaviors of the passenger. Like in Lindsay Wambough's statement, Greyhound supported the idea that this was an isolated incident, proving that they were attempting to evade responsibility by claiming it was a rare and unintended occurrence. The blame once again is removed from Greyhound because the "accident" was not caused by factors that the passengers could expect Greyhound to control.

Corrective action has a fairly literal application, as Greyhound made a vow to correct their mistake(s), as this strategy would suggest (Vogelaar, 2005). Regardless of whether or not they truly improved their security standards, Greyhound expressed interest in correcting their safety policies, which had been lacking and could have been a cause for Li's successful attack.

Arriving at Our Destination

I highly doubt that Carl Wickman anticipated the future of Greyhound Lines as he considered the idea of intercity bus travel in Hibbing, Minnesota. It's been over 100 years since 1914, and Wickman's development has played an important role in history for a majority of that time. Even more so, I don't believe anyone could have predicted the impact that Greyhound would have on the personal lives of many, including that of Tim McLean and those involved in the crisis which resulted in his murder.

What started as an innocent media campaign to highlight the bus company's new and improved facilities turned out to be an omen of its greatest nightmare. Sure, no one had ever heard of "bus rage" at the time that Greyhound's print ads were released, but less than a year

later, the narrative would change, forcing Greyhound to pull the advertisements and evaluate their crisis communication approaches.

Vincent Li's actions aboard bus 1170 did not just result in the death of Tim McLean. Witnesses have been permanently scarred, families lost their loved ones and continue to mourn, and the public has been enthralled in the responses from both governmental agencies and Greyhound, leading to decreases in bus ridership across Canada. Tim McLean's death raises a valid ethical concern as well, as organizations such as PETA seek to use these tragedies to their advantage as they attempt to further their message.

When a crisis strikes, I believe it is important to first and foremost consider and aid those who it affects the most, and then work outwards. I believe Greyhound may have missed this, as there appeared to be a lack of victim assistance and increased safety protocols after the death of McLean. Attempts were made, yes, but adequate resources were not provided by Greyhound to truly treat the crisis. Furthermore, the utilization of the image repair theory reflects that Greyhound evaded responsibility and the role they played in the July 30 attack. Instead, the organization primarily evaded responsibility and only vaguely promised some type of corrective action. Based on the strong public demands for action, Greyhound did not meet their societal obligations in treating the crisis.

The death of Tim McLean is a tragic story that must not be forgotten for the sake of justice, understanding, and prevention. Mental illness impacted this case greatly, but that does not excuse Greyhound's part in compromising the safety of their passengers by a lack of action and protocol. There is a lot to learn from bus 1170: the Canadian cannibalism crisis, as Greyhound Lines, Inc. did not respond to the crisis to the fullest extent possible, and that is why

public relations practitioners can and should continue to look at this example for what not to do if encountering a major crisis within an organization.

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