Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Boeing

As of April 9, 2024

Condition: Critical

A safety promise with missing bolts

Boeing sells safety to airlines and, through them, to passengers. On January 5, 2024, a door plug blew out of an Alaska Airlines 737-9 MAX shortly after takeoff. No one was seriously injured, but it was the second crisis in five years on the same aircraft family. This check-up looks at how a promise made on the factory floor broke, how customers reacted and what it takes to win trust back.

Key takeaways

- Boeing's brand promise is that its aircraft are built right. That promise is kept or broken in the factory, not in advertising.
- Trust fell fast: Morning Consult measured Boeing's net trust among U.S. adults at 9 points in February 2024, down 16 points since December.
- Travellers used Kayak's aircraft filter 15 times more often to screen out 737 MAX flights. When customers avoid a product by name, the brand is working against the business.
- A new chief executive will help only with visible proof of better quality. Boeing's finance chief put the treatment plainly: "We are deliberately going to slow to get this right."

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Brand promise	Broken. “Built right” was not kept on the production line.
Trust	Falling. Net trust among U.S. adults down 16 points in two months.
Customer behaviour	Avoidance. Travellers filtered out 737 MAX flights by name.
Operations	Under review. Failed FAA audits and a production cap.
Leadership	In transition. CEO, board chair and commercial head changes announced.

Timeline

When	What happened
Oct 2018	Lion Air Flight 610 crashes.
Mar 2019	Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crashes. The 737 MAX is grounded for 20 months.
Jan 2021	Boeing agrees to pay over $2.5 billion under a deferred prosecution agreement.
Jan 5, 2024	A door plug blows out of an Alaska Airlines 737-9 MAX.
Jan 6, 2024	The FAA grounds about 171 737-9 MAX aircraft.
Feb 2024	Morning Consult finds Boeing’s net trust down 16 points since December.
Feb 28, 2024	The FAA gives Boeing 90 days to produce a quality action plan.
Mar 2024	An FAA audit finds Boeing failed 33 of 89 product audits.
Mar 25, 2024	Boeing announces its CEO will step down at the end of 2024.
Apr 9, 2024	First-quarter deliveries fall to 83 aircraft from 130 a year earlier.

What happened: the same question, twice

The 737 MAX already carried a heavy history. Lion Air Flight 610 crashed in October 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 in March 2019, killing 346 people. The jet was grounded for 20 months. The Justice Department later said Boeing, through two of its technical pilots, had deceived the FAA about a flight-control system.

No one died on Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, but it raised the same question: can Boeing build the aircraft right? The FAA grounded about 171 737-9 MAX aircraft the next day. The National Transportation Safety Board's preliminary report said four bolts that hold the door plug in place were missing. Chief executive Dave Calhoun said: "Whatever final conclusions are reached, Boeing is accountable for what happened."

The diagnosis: a promise made on the factory floor

- **Output outran quality.** An FAA audit found Boeing failed 33 of 89 product audits on the 737 MAX line, and its fuselage supplier failed seven of 13. The brand promise was being broken where the planes are built.
- **Repetition turned an incident into a pattern.** One failure can be read as bad luck. A second on the same aircraft family within five years reads as a pattern, and customers remember patterns.
- **Quality drifted away from the name on the plane.** Boeing confirmed talks to bring Spirit AeroSystems back in-house, a sign that control of quality had drifted too far from the company customers hold responsible.
- **Apologies without proof.** A second apology for the same kind of failure buys far less than the first.

The treatment: proof before promotion

The most useful sentence came from chief financial officer Brian West in March: "We are deliberately going to slow to get this right." On March 25 Boeing said Calhoun would step down at the end of 2024, the board chair would not stand for re-election and the head of Commercial Airplanes would retire.

New faces help only when they come with new evidence. We would add three things: publish the FAA action plan in plain language, report quality measures every quarter next to deliveries, and judge the next chief executive by those measures. A marketing audit usually starts with messaging. Boeing's should start with the gap between what the brand promises and what the factory ships.

The result: customers changed their behaviour

Trust fell before the business results could show it. Morning Consult found Boeing's net trust among U.S. adults stood at 9 points in February 2024, down 16 points since December. Kayak reported a 15-fold increase in use of its aircraft filter, which travellers were using to screen out 737 MAX flights.

The regulator acted too. FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker said: "This won't be back to business as usual for Boeing." The FAA refused any expansion of 737 MAX production until quality

problems were fixed, and first-quarter deliveries fell to 83 commercial aircraft, from 130 a year earlier.

Lessons for your marketing

1. Your brand is the promise your operations keep. Marketing cannot repair what the product keeps breaking.
2. When growth targets push quality aside, the bill arrives as lost trust, and it costs more than the growth was worth.
3. Measure trust directly. Demand signals such as branded search can flatter you while customers quietly look for alternatives.
4. When you apologize, show the fix with numbers people can check.
5. Judge new leaders by the evidence they produce, not by the announcement of their arrival.

The doctor will see you now.

Book a free marketing check-up at marketingdoctor.ca/contact. We'll examine your marketing, show you what's holding growth back and prescribe what to fix first.

Sources

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