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Donald Sterling makes apology, but experts explain why it falls short

Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling did fulfill some of the requirements of apologizing, they say, but several things work against him, including the length of time it took for a reply.

By **Gloria Goodale** 51 minutes ago

In an interview that airs in full Monday night, Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling apologizes for his racist remarks and asks for forgiveness, saying he made a “terrible mistake.”

“I’m a good member who made a mistake, and I’m apologizing and I’m asking for forgiveness,” Mr. Sterling told CNN’s Anderson Cooper. “Am I entitled to one mistake?”

The National Basketball Association, which on April 29 banned him for life after his remarks in a recorded conversation were released publicly, has not responded to the *mea culpa*. But as the initial clips of the CNN interview make their way through the digisphere, the verdict from communication experts is weighing against the octogenarian billionaire.

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“In this case, even with Sterling trying to make amends for the allegations against him, it might be a case of too little, too late,” says Derek Arnold, who teaches communication at Villanova University near Philadelphia who has studied the art of the public apology.

On one hand, says Mr. Arnold, who made his comments via e-mail, Sterling fulfills many of the requirements of apologizing, such as acknowledging his mistake. He also stated it would never happen again.

But at least two things work against the longtime lawyer and NBA team owner, Arnold says: Sterling took a relatively lengthy amount of time to reply pub-

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lively to the charges against him, and he has a spotty history with women and minorities that has been documented in legal depositions over the past two decades.

Sterling told Mr. Cooper he was sorry he took so long to publicly reply, saying he was “emotionally distraught.”

In the CNN interview, Sterling further said, “I was baited,” referring to his companion V. Stiviano, who is also heard on the recording. “That’s not the way I talk,” Sterling added.

But by trying to justify why he said what he did, “he makes matters worse,” says Stan Steinreich, president of Steinreich Communications in Fort Lee, N.J.

An apology with caveats is no apology at all, Mr. Steinreich says.

Beyond that, Sterling probably burned bridges with the very individuals he may need to help his public redemption, says Charles Gallagher, chair of the sociology department at La Salle University in Philadelphia. In the interview, he criticized Magic Johnson, a beloved icon in the black community, stating he is not a “good example” to children.

“[H]is transgression ... involves an organization whose membership is overwhelmingly black, independent and savvy. There is no constituency that will expend the enormous social and political capital to come to his defense,” Professor Gallagher says via e-mail.

“Apologies are always contextual,” Gallagher points out. The family-values politician who has a one-time affair can and typically is forgiven in the court of public opinion, he says, “because we are a nation that loves the spectacle of redemption.”

But in Gallagher’s eyes, Sterling is leaving the game “without his ball.”

Indeed, the online chatter supports this opinion, says April Masini, an online relationship expert who has roughly 1 million followers.

Everyone from phone companies to airlines and banks are “quick and abundant with the ‘I’m sorry’ phrase, and slow to actually walk the walk,” says Ms. Masini, who coined the term “apology inflation” to describe the phenomenon. “Mr. Sterling’s apology is cheap, late and hollow,” she adds to her comments, which were made via e-mail.

However, one constituency may see something slightly different in the apology, says Carole Lieberman, a psychiatrist in Beverly Hills, Calif. The apology, she says, also paints Sterling as a victim of a young, conniving woman.

“Sterling’s raw, self-deprecating description of himself as an ‘old fool’ victimized by a bad girl will resonate with a lot of men – including those in the NBA,” she says, adding, “although they may not want to admit it.”

In the end, the apology will probably matter only indirectly, if that.



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What NBA owners decide to do next is likely to be a business decision based on whether the owners feel that Sterling's presence hurts their financial interests, says Robert Giacalone, chair of business ethics at the University of Denver.

"The owners may not care whether Sterling's apology is sincere," he says via e-mail. "Their real interest may be whether the public outcry is subdued by his apology."

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