



How Far Can a Good Story Take You:

*A Case Study on the
Uncle Nearest Brand Litigation*

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My Why

I am a public relations practitioner who has spent the past 23 years supporting grassroots leaders, nonprofit executives, foundations and aligned entities get the media spotlight they deserve.

I know what it's like to press for coverage for worthy causes only to be met with skepticism by some in the media. After years of being burned, some producers question if the product is as good as its ambassadors' claim, or the work is as transformative as its representatives claim.

I've also witnessed some in the media cater to celebrities and influencers because they have large platforms, meaningful connections, and drive ratings. In an era where everyone is obsessed with celebrities, it's easy for some media outlets to ignore those on the frontlines facilitating change.

However, when celebrities and influencers fail, their downfall hurts others. It casts suspicion on everyone who claims to have a good product, or a worthy cause.

This is why I often watch the headlines with the hopes of gleaning from leaders who have built impressive empires. When a high-profile leader experiences a scandal, I ask whether the situation offers lessons for the rest of us. I write this case study from that perspective: what can it teach others?

Additionally, as a small business owner who is also a woman of color, I know what it's like to be under-capitalized. When controversies like the one with the Uncle Nearest brand arise, it casts a shadow on other small businesses and/or charismatic leaders.

And yet, I understand that the challenges surrounding Uncle Nearest can envelope others. Without significant business experience, sound business practices, and the right team, any business can struggle. Few are exempt. This situation is a reminder of the importance of conservatism in business, sound financial management but also of mentorship. I keep wondering, where does one go to find mentors in the field in which they are launching or running a business?

This case study starts by offering background on the brand, and how it went from championing whiskey to the lawsuit with Farm Credit Mid-America. I explain what happened and why it matters. I discuss my observations as a small business owner, and a public relations (PR) expert. Finally, I close by offering recommendations on what I believe the rest of us can learn from this situation. If you are a business owner, nonprofit executive, or aspiring entrepreneur, I hope you read this case study in the spirit it is offered; a manual of leadership lessons meant to help us become smarter, more integrous leaders.

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Background

In 2024, [Forbes noted](#) that Uncle Nearest, founded by Fawn and Keith Weaver, [was valued at \\$1.1 billion](#). While Mr. Weaver maintained a lower media profile, Fawn was the face of the organization. This was a point of pride for many in the Black community; a Black woman at the helm of a [billion-dollar enterprise](#) that she and her husband built from the ground up. That the business grew so quickly, was also a point of distinction in the Black community. If one subscribes to Black Excellence, Fawn Weaver and the Uncle Nearest brand epitomized it.

So how did the Uncle Nearest brand come to be?

After reading a 2016 New York Times profile on Nathan 'Nearest' Green, a formerly enslaved master distiller who taught Jack Daniels how to make whiskey, Fawn Weaver was determined to shed light on Green's ingenuity.

She went on a campaign to learn as much about him as possible. She built a brand dedicated to bringing this man from obscurity out into the open. Even Black people who weren't whiskey consumers, celebrated that Weaver's efforts were as much about honoring a formerly enslaved master distiller, Nearest Green, as it was about making money. Some of us also celebrated her seeming business prowess – opening a bar, launching what we thought was a functioning distillery, making the rounds on the media and speaking circuit. Fawn seemed like the leader we all wanted to be.

Unfortunately, the made for Hollywood story, has had a few challenges.

Uncle Nearest, Inc., Nearest Green Distillery, Inc., Uncle Nearest Real Estate Holdings, LLC, and Fawn and Keith Weaver were [sued](#) in July 2025 by [Farm Credit Mid-America](#) for breach of certain loan agreements. On August 22, 2025, Judge Charles Atchley appointed [Phillip G. Young, Jr.](#) of Thompson Burton, PLLC as receiver of Uncle Nearest. Fawn Weaver will still be permitted to market the brand, subject to the receiver's consent.



My Initial Thoughts

When I learned about the Farm Credit [lawsuit](#), I was struck by several things. First, I wondered how a company valued at \$1.1 billion could face financial challenges. I was also curious how the media outlets that interviewed Weaver, confirmed her company's valuation before publicizing that information?

Certainly, all companies face financial ups and downs. Most business owners will acknowledge that they have, at one point or another, struggled with cashflow management. The recent lawsuit raises the question of whether the company is [experiencing a short-term, curable challenge](#) or whether it is [insolvent](#). This question is obviously for the court and creditors to decide.

However, what happens with Uncle Nearest is of interest to many stakeholders, including creditors, vendors, the media, industry media, whiskey lovers and the company's Black consumers and admirers.

Sadly, Farm Credit isn't the only [lawsuit](#) facing the brand. You can learn more about the other legal claims in the notes section of this document.



Why This Matters

I believe Fawn and Keith Weaver set out to do something admirable – unearth the truth about a formerly enslaved man who contributed greatly to the spirits industry. They worked hard to bring his memory to the forefront. But something went awry. That this chapter of Nathan 'Nearest' Green's legacy is ending in litigation is disappointing.

What's clear to me is that the brand benefitted from a powerful origin story. It was a story that resonated with those who desperately wanted to see persons who've long been overlooked, receive the attention and accolades they deserve.

It bears noting that a compelling story can take you far, but it is just one factor in a company's overall success. It can't provide long-term cover, especially when one faces allegations of defaulting on tens of millions in loans. The story opens the door, but that is just the beginning.



What I Observed

Fawn Weaver generated significant public interest for the Uncle Nearest brand. For some observers, the extensive coverage could have been disheartening.

I question whether Weaver's ubiquitousness in the media stung to other Black distillers – such as Black Momma Vodka, 18th Street Distillery, Greenwood Whiskey, Brough Brothers – who similarly believe they have a remarkable product. What would it feel like to be on the ground, building a brand, and watch a relative newcomer enter the market and quickly become a media darling?

I am not naïve. I know that when you launch a brand, your sole goal is to promote that brand. I also understand that media generates applause as well as resentment. This is human nature. While I'm sure other Black distillers wanted Uncle Nearest to do well, they also could have experienced frustration that they did not enjoy more coverage. This is conjecture, but it's a thread worth pulling.

This case disrupted what I thought I knew.

Given the proliferation of favorable media coverage, and Fawn Weaver's charismatic nature, I experienced cognitive dissonance when I learned about the Farm Credit lawsuit. The allegations ran contrary to the perception I'd developed about the Weavers and their companies. However, the Weavers' next steps raised more questions than they answered about the case and the Weavers' leadership.

When news of the Farm Credit lawsuit broke, Weaver noted on Instagram that the [“first to speak seems right until someone comes forward to cross examine.”](#) When I heard this comment, I was convinced the lawsuit was frivolous and perhaps, chalked full of lies and mistruths. I was inspired to read the case and research the company. I came away disappointed. I kept wondering, if the Uncle Nearest brand, in fact owed money to Farm Credit, which Keith Weaver acknowledged they did, why issue such a statement? It was not clear how such comments could [help the legal case.](#)

Some of Weaver’s other comments – such as saying [“when you know you were built for this exact moment”](#) - didn’t pass the smell test. I understand the desire to maintain calm and assure your base of your leadership. But who was born to be accused of defaulting on tens of millions in loans? Given the weight of these allegations, a better statement would have been, *“We had an audacious vision. We have made mistakes, and we are committed to working with the banks and the courts to turn this ship around. Out of respect for the process, we will not comment further.”* This would have acknowledged the seriousness of the matter, and the Weavers’ commitment to rectify outstanding issues.

These comments demonstrate why the PR and the legal teams must be in sync in terms of what a leader says, especially when they’re in a crisis or involved in litigation. They also underscore for me why everyone needs counsel; even the powerful. The truth is when we’re embroiled in controversy, our instincts should be tested with persons who aren’t directly impacted. I’m curious to know if Weaver ran every comment she wanted to make by a small circle of investors, public relations coaches, and lawyers.

This is critical because when we speak, we aren’t just speaking to people who listen in the moment. We are also speaking to the future. We are speaking to people who will hear about the matter, months from when it occurred, go back and research. They will then evaluate us and our leadership based on what we said and how we managed moments of crisis. Additionally, our digital footprint follows us for a long time.

For these reasons, some of Weaver’s initial comments didn’t match the weight of the situation. They also seemed questionable; if you owe the bank – and you owe other lenders – why not acknowledge that you’ve come up short but are committed to making all creditors and vendors whole? Then, stop talking for a season.



What I Would Have Advised

Launching a business is one of the most exciting chapters in a person’s life. For an entrepreneur, a business is like a baby; full of hope and promise. Businesses are uniquely important in the lives of not just the founder, but also the stakeholders (employees, investors, customers) of the business. It can therefore be very painful when the enterprise faces financial or reputational challenges.

To add another layer of agony, when we launch missional businesses, we believe deeply in the importance and efficacy of our work. This adds to the pain business

owners can feel when things go awry. All of this to say, I can only imagine how difficult this season must be for the Weavers, their employees, investors and community.

As I analyze the lessons, I'm reviewing the case from the perspective of my field of study; public relations. There are financial gurus who are better equipped to look at this matter and glean financial best practices. For me however, my focus is public relations. From a PR lens, here are three things I would have advised the Weavers:

 **I would have advocated for fewer media appearances.**

If I worked for the Uncle Nearest brand and had insight into the company's financial challenges, I would have advised fewer media appearances. I'm clear that media can drive sales; but it can also ignite questions. If you are struggling to pay your bills, over-leveraged or facing liquidity issues, being in front of a camera can be fraught. It can lead to questions of whether the leadership is misrepresenting the state of the business or whether leadership's focus is misplaced.

I understand that all of us want to be recognized for our work. But there must be balance. Moreover, there is an opportunity cost for everything that we do. Media appearances take time. The time you invest in media is time away from other aspects of the business.

Leaders also need to walk a fine line with media appearances to avoid over-saturation. Over-saturation in media is when people get tired of seeing you; even if they love and appreciate you and your products. For these reasons, I recommend media campaigns that have a clear beginning and end.

Finally, I want to remind us that what we say in public remarks or in media appearances can raise the level of scrutiny we receive. We therefore have to be very careful of our public record. For instance, at the beginning of August 2025, Fawn Weaver made several comments on social media about the Farm Credit litigation. She referred to the matter being a doozy; she's right it is a doozy, but not in a way that is beneficial for her or her company. Those comments were made via social media, but the opposing counsel and the courts had to have seen them as well.

 **I would have advised accepting responsibility for the challenges rather than pinning the lot of the blame on a former CFO, Mike Senzaki.**

The Weavers' decision to place the blame on a former CFO (Michael Senzaki), for overstating their inventory, is unsettling. The move felt like a lack of accountability. Even if Senzaki did all that the Weavers accused him of doing, company leadership shoulders some of the responsibility.

Additionally, when C-Suite level executives separate from a company, they are often bound by their employment contract, Non-Disclosure Agreement or a separation agreement. These often prevent personnel from openly discussing the terms of their employment or termination. If that is the case, it is disingenuous to blame someone whom you know cannot defend themselves.



I would have urged caution around public statements via Instagram.

Before I offer an explanation on this point, I'll start by reminding us that anytime we speak publicly, we are engaging multiple audiences. This includes employees, investors, customers, social media followers and other stakeholders. When you are embroiled in litigation, the court and the opposing party are also part of a leader's audience. Some messages may work well for some audiences, but they could be alienating to other audiences.

When the Farm Credit lawsuit was announced, Weaver gave the impression that the effort was designed to smear her good name. If a company allegedly defaults on loans, and there is an ensuing lawsuit, their reputation may temporarily take a hit. I also keep asking myself, if an executive knows they are in default, why claim there have been "hit pieces" about you as a leader? Messages along these lines can be offensive.

I should note that some of these comments were made while the Weavers and the plaintiffs (Farm Credit) were under a gag order. Skirting with a gag order, and making careless comments in general, can anger the court. This never bodes well.



Where Should We Go from Here?

If the [allegations against the Weavers](#) are true, it's right to question whether the public was sold a story, one shot at a time. If that is the case, members of the media bear some culpability. Some outlets repeatedly referred to Uncle Nearest as a billion-dollar brand without explaining how they confirmed the valuation before publicizing it.

Nonetheless, the question becomes what can we do, from where we are, with what we have. Here is what I recommend:



We should expect more from the media.

When we see an article, we should expect the media outlet to share how they confirmed the information they provided. Fawn Weaver did one media or podcast interview after another. It baffles the mind that there was headline after headline about how Fawn Weaver built a billion-dollar brand. Yet I don't recall many articles breaking down how the company reached that valuation and how some in the [media confirmed the valuation](#). Media consumers shouldn't believe everything we read or watch without confirming what we're told. But we should still hold the media accountable for fact checking, and also telling the whole story. The goal of the media should be to protect the masses, not the powerful.



We should assume most people don't have as much as they purport to have.

When it comes to finances, we should assume that the vast majority of people in the United States live above their means, have less than they purport to have, and are trying to impress others. Even people with celebrity, big platforms, and deep connections can live above their means. Therefore, we shouldn't automatically

give people with big names the benefit of the doubt. Nor should we try to model our lives off of theirs. Everyone is on a journey; celebrities and influencers are no exception.

 **We should understand that good intentions aren't a defense.**

Most people don't wake up and decide to throw their lives away. But it is far too easy to compromise, cut corners, and gradually lower standards. If you ask some of the people who have made life-altering errors about their mindset at the time, many will tell you that they had the best of intentions. However, good intentions are not always inoculation from mistakes. Even the best of us is subject to fail. We need guardrails to protect ourselves and others. If we operate from the premise that anyone can make a mistake, then we will ask, 'what guardrails can be implemented to protect ourselves?'

 **We should trust, but verify.**

Trust is earned. Before we believe a narrative or headline, we should look for substantiating data. If we haven't researched, or vetted the information we've received, we must not fully commit. We should also remember that a lot of what we see on social media and in popular culture are curated images meant to entice us to consume. We should look for proof points before embracing every headline or narrative.



Conclusion: Media Coverage Can't Sustain What Infrastructure Hasn't Built.

Again, I believe the Weavers set out to do something admirable. They faced a host of challenges, including a slumping whiskey industry, allegations around financial transparency, and lawsuits. I hope they are able to resolve this chapter and continue their work of celebrating Nathan 'Nearest' Green.

For the rest of us, I hope we take this situation, incorporate the lessons into our own businesses, and commit to operate with discipline, sound financial management and transparency.

If you're experiencing a PR crisis, know you do not have to manage the situation alone. Reach out to us via our website to [book a consultation](#).

Litigation

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