

CRISIS AND DEFENSIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE AIRLINE INDUSTRY:
AN ANALYSIS OF HOW STRATEGIES HAVE CHANGED
WITH THE WIDESPREAD USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

by

Anne Reneslakis

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Texas Christian University

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Russell Mack, J.D.

Department of Strategic Communication

Broxon Sears, M.F.A.

Department of Strategic Communication

Eric Simanek, Ph.D.

Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry

ABSTRACT

For my Departmental Honors Research project, I researched and analyzed the influence of social media on defensive and crisis communication within the airline industry. I looked into the history of how airlines have responded to crises in the past, and how their strategies have changed with the use of social media.

While crisis communication focuses more on large-scale catastrophes or disasters, defensive communication serves to defend or uphold a company's reputation. For my research, I first studied crisis and defensive responses in general. After getting a better understanding of communication strategies in the industry, I determined the role social media plays in different airlines' responses. This analysis is important because reputation management needs to be upheld amidst a crisis. I researched factors that influence the communications that a corporation publishes, as well as the preparation that goes into them. Because airlines face crises with accidents, crashes, and recently the impact of COVID-19, social media has been essential to engage with both the public and key stakeholders.

My goal in my research was to focus on how strategies have changed with the use of social media in the past ten years. Because reputation management is vitally important to any company, and crises are frequent with airlines, I chose this highly visible industry for my research. My thesis focuses on three main categories: the history of crisis communication in the airline industry, the current strategies used, and how effective these strategies, specifically the use of social media, have proven.

INTRODUCTION

My thesis explores the influence of social media on defensive and crisis communication in the airline industry. I began by collecting secondary research from a variety of sources to learn about the history of airlines' communication strategies. I looked at case studies, company policies, scholarly articles, and other sources to better understand this history.

Next, I gathered primary research. I conducted several in-depth interviews with professionals in both the airline and communication industries. I talked with marketing and communication directors, pilots, and crisis communication experts. When I concluded these interviews, I analyzed emergent themes and organized the information I learned.

I discovered a lot about how defensive and crisis communication is handled both generally across industries, as well as specifically within the airline industry. I looked at the role that social media plays in different airlines' responses, as well as elements such as the crisis team and the preparation that leads up a public response. Because airlines face a variety of crises ranging from aircraft accidents to defensive situations, social media is an important tool for airlines to engage with the public, as well as key stakeholders. The communication strategies that airlines implement have changed over recent years with the development of new technologies and social media channels.

Since companies are able to communicate quickly and directly with the public through social media outlets, communication tactics have changed from traditional methods. With new channels of communication available, airlines are presented with various advantages and disadvantages from the direct access provided by social media. In the increasingly connected world, the public wants quick and accurate information throughout a crisis, and social media has both met and hindered this need in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role of Defensive and Crisis Communication

In the past, airlines only had to respond to events that received news coverage, whether locally or nationally. These were usually rare accidents or specific customer service situations that were picked up by the media. With the use of technology and social media, every passenger now has the ability to immediately report anything, and make the news go viral. The very nature of airline response has become trivialized, as companies are forced to deal with lots of small things that previously were overlooked. Airlines have to be ready to apologize, if necessary, and address customer concerns quickly and often. They also have to balance the formality of the statements they put out with the severity of a given situation. Sometimes, a circumstance required multiple statements instead of just one, and airlines must respond with the necessary content in the appropriate delivery system.

There are several important ideas in the communication field to understand, with regard to the airline industry. The first is crisis communication, which can be defined as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Institute for Public Relations, 2020). It also involves the dialogue between the organization and its publics prior to, during, and after a negative occurrence. This is similar to defensive communication, which is “designed to protect and defend an individual, company, or organization facing a public challenge to its reputation” (Gibb, 2020). Both of these elements contribute to the image and reputation of a company or organization. Reputation management consists of the “activities or written communication that attempt to shape public perception of a person or organization by influencing available information about the entity” (Campbell, 2020). This is an important part of any company, as public perception can have a major impact on business and profitability.

While there are several methods to prepare for and address conflict, I will use elements of the Conflict Management Life Cycle, offered by a combination of public relations scholars over the years, to study various aspects of airline crises and communication efforts. This is a public relations model that divides strategic conflict management into four phases, each with specific functions and techniques. This model emphasizes that conflict management is ongoing and cyclical in nature (Lang, 2009). The first element is the proactive phase, which includes environmental scanning, issues tracking, issues management, and crisis planning. Next is the strategic phase, which consists of risk communication, conflict positioning, and crisis management. Third, the reactive phase includes crisis communication, litigation public relations, and conflict resolution. Finally, the recovery phase consists of reputation management and image restoration.

There are several different types of crises, as well as factors that distinguish a true crisis from a defensive situation. There are also strategies that organizations use in order to develop and implement communications that are appropriate for any given situation that may arise.

In my research, I focused on three main categories of crises: immediate, emerging, and sustained (Public Relations Accreditation, 2020). An immediate crisis consists of unprecedented and unforeseen circumstances, often of the natural disaster, terrorist attack, man-made disaster, or major emergency type. An emerging crisis can often be anticipated and minimized at early stages, and includes technological crises, confrontations, organizational misdeeds, and rumors. Finally, a sustained crisis involves situations that may have lingering consequences or results for years, and often have a significant reputational impact on the company or organization.

Though there are many different strategies that can be used to create communications in response to a crisis situation, I chose to use the Gibb categories as my lens. These are six

defensive behaviors that are used during interpersonal communication, which include evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, and certainty (Gibb, 2020). The six corresponding supportive behaviors are used to lessen the defensive feelings that the previously mentioned behaviors often evoke. These supportive behaviors include description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism (Gibb, 2020). Organizations can use a mix of these strategies in order to communicate a specific message with the tone necessary to the situation.

Review of the History of Communication and the Effect of Social Media

Prior to the common use of smartphones and the onset of social media, airlines (as well as other industries) had much more flexibility and time to construct public statements. This could range from setting up a planned press conference to publishing a well-thought-out news release. The traditional concept known as the “Golden Hour” refers to the time that an airline crisis management team had to activate, meet, confirm details, and issue a statement (Sehgal, 2019). This concept is largely absent nowadays, as stakeholders and the general public are the entities producing the news and expecting a swift response from airlines.

The seven major airlines in the United States are Delta, Southwest, American, United, Alaska, JetBlue, and Spirit (Holmes, 2016). Each of these airlines has had experience with handling crises, ranging from minor situations to major disasters. There are several incidents that demonstrate this news-reporting style and new sense of urgency for communication. In December 2008, a Continental Airlines aircraft crashed on the runway in Denver (IATA, 2020). A survivor of the crash posted a picture of the crash on Twitter, shortly after the accident occurred. This was the first instance that suggested that the emergence of social media added a challenge to airlines’ response to crises in the industry.

In November 2010, a Qantas Airbus plane bound for Sydney experienced an engine fire four minutes after take-off, resulting in damage to the wing, fuselage, and critical systems (IATA, 2020). Although the aircraft landed safely back at the airport 90 minutes later, passengers had already shared images and comments regarding the incident. These descriptions called it an “explosion in the sky” and highlighted the “multiple impact sites,” creating a sense of panic and emergency. While it was a serious situation, there were no fatalities, and the CEO released a statement confirming the “air turnaround.” Because the airline responded quickly and provided information on what happened, it avoided what could have escalated into a full-fledged crisis.

On a Southwest Airlines flight from New York La Guardia to Dallas Love Field on April 17, 2018, passenger Marty Martinez became the first person to broadcast an aviation crisis (IATA, 2020). Twenty minutes into the flight, the Boeing 737 experienced an uncontained failure of the left engine, which damaged the fuselage and smashed a window. This caused rapid depressurization of the cabin, resulting in one passenger being sucked out the window and killed. An additional eight passengers sustained minor injuries. Martinez went live on Facebook to say goodbye to family and friends, as she assumed the aircraft was going to crash. The live stream included video and commentary from inside the aircraft, which marked the first instance that represented the “Always On” crisis communication mode of the airline industry. This refers to the idea that airlines have to be constantly prepared to respond to situations as they unfold; a delay in response would look suspicious or irresponsible. Furthermore, what would previously be considered to be trivial customer service complaints now have the potential to intensify and become a serious issue for the company, with reputational consequences. In this case, Southwest

released statements from both pilots and the CEO, and the response was deemed “timely, empathetic, and transparent” (IATA, 2020).

While accidents involving the aircraft are important and an obvious source of news, there has recently been an emphasis on the customer experience and the social aspect of one’s flight. One example of this occurred on April 9, 2017 on a United Flight out of Chicago O’Hare Airport (Page, 2017). A 69-year-old man was forcibly removed from his seat, in order to make room for United Airlines employees who needed to be aboard that particular flight. As security guards pulled him off the plane, after causing him physical injuries, other passengers filmed and took pictures of the situation, rapidly posting them on social media. When the CEO of United Airlines attempted to brush off the situation without really addressing it, people expressed their anger against the company on Twitter. Eventually, the issue garnered national attention, which forced the airline to release more complete communications regarding the issue.

These situations illustrate the idea of citizen journalism, which is the idea that people have high-resolution cameras everywhere they go and can publish content easily and quickly (Sehgal, 2019). With technological innovation, there are certain developments that benefit consumers but present new challenges to airlines. One example of this is Flight Tracker websites; these allow families and friends to get real-time updates about a flight status. However, these websites can quickly cause panic in the case of an accident. Similarly, an image shared on social media of an unfolding crisis can cause massive repercussions, from the eyes of an airline.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) is a trade association of airlines around the world. It includes members from 290 airlines in over 120 countries, and its mission is to “represent, lead, and serve the airline industry” (IATA, 2020). The association has published

guidelines for crisis communications in the digital age, which are intended to support and enhance the communication efforts of various airlines.

One element of these guidelines includes a suggested organization for a crisis communication team. It is important to note that this is significantly expanded from what was previously deemed necessary. While the communications or public relations departments were historically not viewed as an essential part of the company, they have become a cornerstone to the company's reputation. Figure 1 was included in the IATA guide and demonstrates this idea of expanding the number of people involved with communications efforts.

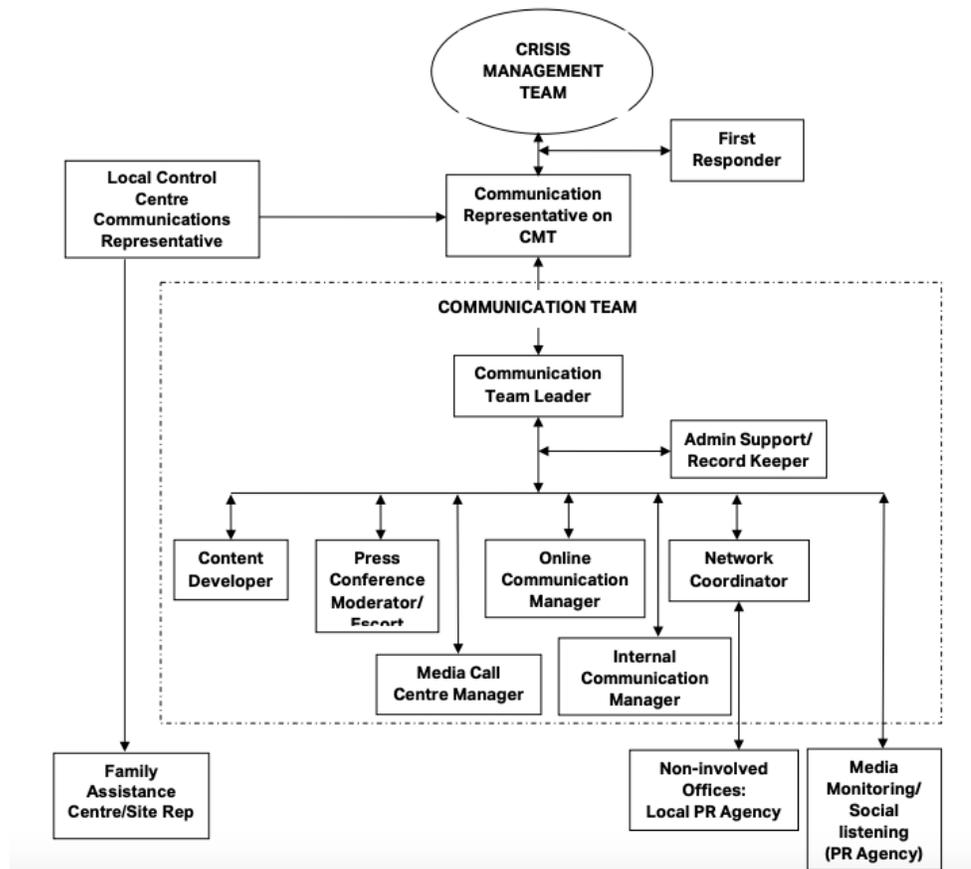


Figure 1, IATA Guidelines (2020)

With the development of new technologies and social media, the structure of the crisis management team has evolved over time. Originally, airlines would only respond to emergencies

as they came up and necessitated attention. In the past ten years, companies have had to expand their efforts in the realm of crisis communication due in part to passengers' ability to share situations instantly. This capacity of communication called for more people to address concerns and escalating situations on behalf of the airline, thus the crisis team grew.

Since passengers or employees can report news quickly via social media, airlines must be prepared to respond to accidents, miscommunications, or customer service complaints efficiently. If an airline delays or hesitates in responding, its reputation and business may suffer. The communications departments of airlines need to know how to engage with news media and key stakeholders through social media to demonstrate competence and awareness.

Importance of Preparation in the Airline Industry

The IATA highlighted several key facts regarding the importance of timely communication. The following facts demonstrate the use of technology and social media on a global scale:

- There are more mobile phones in circulation than people, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).
- 5G technology is a game-changer for volumes of mobile data, enabling the downloading of a full-length high definition Hollywood movie in four seconds.
- The real impact of continued technological development will be the affordability and availability of very high-speed data networks globally. According to the ITU, by 2030, every person on the planet will (in theory) have access to high-speed broadband internet.

These considerations have several important implications for the airline industry. With continuously evolving social media platforms, images and videos can be made available almost

immediately to a local audience. This comes with a reputational risk for airlines, in the event that they do not respond to customer commentaries appropriately.

In light of this need for preparation of responses, organizations like the IATA, as well as individual airlines, have created guides to communication tactics and strategies to be implemented in times of crisis. Companies are judged on their responses, so it is necessary to avoid statements that are inadequate or tone-deaf, based on the circumstances.

Guides like the one produced by the IATA include specific guidance for airlines in various situations. These range from a true crisis, likely a crash, to the lesser serious customer service issues. Below is a timeline that the IATA provided regarding when and what should be in immediate communications from an airline. Many airlines adapt this template or create their own defensive or crisis plan, so as to be ready in the case of an emergency.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| T+15 mins: | Release first "tweet" acknowledging initial reports. Update regularly with short posts on Twitter as new information is confirmed. |
| T+ 60 mins: | Issue a longer summary of information confirmed to date, via multiple channels and posted on website. Ensure this information is also shared with employees. Release new summaries hourly, or as key developments are confirmed, while maintaining a regular flow of short updates. |
| T + 60 mins: | Change branding to monochrome and remove promotional images and messaging from all online platforms. Dark Site activated. Ensure consistent messages/information appears on every online platform, with simultaneous updates |
| T + 3 hrs: | First media appearance/statement by most senior executive to arrive at location where families, media and authorities are congregating (usually at/near the accident scene or arrival/departure airport). The airline may decide to post a video statement by the CEO online. This would make the CEO "visible" early in the response, without exposing him/her to media questions while confirmed information is scarce. |
| T + 6 hrs: | First in-person press conference with CEO or most senior executive available (may be at HQ, departure/arrival airport or accident location) |
| T + 6-24 hrs: | Further statements, media interviews and press conferences as relevant information is confirmed (may be done jointly with emergency services, response agencies, airport operator, Government representatives or investigating body) |

Figure 2, IATA Guidelines (2020)

Creating a defensive plan includes several key components, some being public and some private. It is important to show the gathering of known facts first, and to make it clear the airline is still investigating and will report findings. This transparency builds trust in the public eye, and it gives the airline time to finding the right words to calmly and professionally report an issue or a disaster. Having responses, tweets, news releases, and other communication drafted beforehand helps to quickly and efficiently get key information out to stakeholders in the time of a crisis.

When a disaster hits, there are multiple points of media attention. These include things like the airline's headquarters, the accident site, and every airport where the airline flies. These sites are likely to get visits from local reporters looking for local angles through which to tell the story. Before the widespread use of social media, news coverage originated from what the airline said, and airlines had much more control over the stories that resulted from accidents or stories initiated by the airline itself. The airline could choose how to present news before the public knew about a given situation. With the use of social media, sometimes the world can know about a defensive situation or even a crisis before the airline does, leaving it to play catch up rather than leading the story. The primary site of attention might change throughout the course of the incident with the use of social media.

Another element that has changed over recent years is the process of deciding what is worth responding to, and what is not. In the past, one person had the role of applying their discretion to make this call. This person had to decide if a trivial event would blow up, and thus would require a response, or if it was not a big deal. With the use of social media and new technologies, there are more people involved in this process, as more seemingly trivial situations have the potential to blow up and potentially garner negative attention for the airline.

A major milestone in the use of public relations and crisis communication tactics within the airline industry was September 11. United and American Airlines were faced with a crisis on an international scale that was the first of its nature and magnitude. After the two planes crashed into the World Trade Center's North and South Towers, the country faced a turmoil like it had never seen before. The situation had intense emotional consequences on the nation, as well as massive effects on businesses, with the airline industry taking a particularly hard hit. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack, "the most effective managers maintained high levels of visibility in their own organizations" (Argenti, 2002). The CEOs and other leaders who showed compassion, decisiveness, candor, and visibility comforted many and fostered a sense of trust.

From all of these situations, airlines have learned from each other. As technology and social media platforms have developed, they have become an integral part of everyday life. Airlines have had to learn how to interact with stakeholders effectively through these channels in times of crisis.

METHODOLOGY

First, I gathered secondary research from various sources, including textbooks, databases, scholarly journals, and books, to better understand and explore the concepts and research questions I wanted to study.

Next, I focused on conducting my interviews with people in the airline and communication industries. I completed the TCU Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol forms for my study, which are necessary to keep research safe, professional, and ethical. I explained the purpose of my research, as well as my methodology for recruiting participants and

respecting their right to confidentiality. I also submitted my topic guide for my interviews and consent forms that the participants would sign.

Once I received my IRB approval, I reached out either by phone or email to request an interview. I attempted to talk with people from different airlines and different departments to get a comprehensive view of the industry. Through connections with professors, personal contacts, and other professionals in the field, I used “snowball sampling” to recruit people with unique perspectives to add to my research. If they were willing to participate in my study, I sent them the “Consent to Participate in Research” form, so that they were fully informed about the scope of my study before the interview was conducted.

After securing my interviewees, I used a guide (included below) to conduct the interview. I conducted the interviews either via email or phone, in pursuit of a geographically diverse sample. I began each interview by introducing myself and sharing the goal of my research. I made sure that each participant understood that their participation was voluntary and confidential. The guide below provided consistency to the interviews, and I asked specific follow-up questions to each participant to gain a deeper, individualized understanding.

My topic guide of questions for our discussions was as follows:

- Introduction
 - Name, age, other demographics (voluntary)
 - Profession and position (include length of time worked there)
 - Could you describe your career path so far and how you’ve gotten to the position you’re in right now? What sort of training did you have before you got this job?
 - Could you share any experience you’ve had with crisis or defensive communication?

- Crisis Communication
 - How much of the airline's crisis plan is devoted specifically to social media?
 - How do you define a crisis? How do you categorize different levels of crisis?
 - What are some of the challenges of dealing with the complexity of the layers of defensive and crisis situations?
- Crisis Team
 - What skills do you look for on a crisis team?
 - How many members on the team are social media experts?
- Change Over the Years
 - How was crisis communication handled ten years ago? How has it changed during your career?
 - What are the upsides and downsides of using social media and modern technology during a crisis situation?
- General Concluding Questions
 - Could you talk generally about the importance of crisis communication?
 - In what way does crisis response look different that it did ten years ago, as a result of social media and new technologies?
 - Anything else you'd like to talk about/share with me? Are there any other people you think would be willing to talk to me about this topic?

After the interviews, I looked for emergent themes and trends among the interviews which guided my findings. I incorporated secondary research, while sharing new findings from

my interviews. By analyzing both existing data and new information, my thesis provides insight into the impact of social media on crisis communication in the airline industry.

I created this guide to be a baseline for my interviews, while still leaving room for improvisations and free-flowing conversation. Using the guide helped give each interview certain commonalities to facilitate conversations about specific themes that I wanted to analyze. My goal was to get to know each participant individually, but also tie insights to my overall theme and research purpose.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research centered around the following questions, intended to help guide both my secondary research and my interviews:

- How has crisis communication been handled in the past, specifically in the airline industry?
- When did major companies begin using social media (during crisis and defensive situations), and how was it received by the public and key stakeholders? Did the transition happen suddenly or gradually?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using social media in a crisis situation? Does social media help or hurt an airline's ability to respond and protect its brand? What has been the role of social media in creating or causing crises or defensive situations?
- How do airlines currently handle crisis situations? How do they prepare, execute, and follow up in terms of communication?

- What practical efforts and organizational patterns changed within airlines with the onset of social media usage? How has social media changed the content of what airlines say in a defensive or crisis situation?
- How do companies, especially airlines, measure the success or overall effectiveness of their communication efforts?
- Has social media changed the nature of response in the airline industry? If so, how? Has social media changed the tactics of response, the messaging, or both aspects?

FINDINGS

After conducting industry research and six interviews with airline professionals, I found several common themes and factors that influence the use of social media in crisis communication. Generally, social media has had a massive impact on how airlines communicate with key stakeholders in a crisis. This shift can be traced back to the widespread use of smartphones, which allow people to report anything they deem important. With the development of social media platforms, airlines have the advantage of being able to reach key audiences quickly and directly. Social media has created difficulties for airlines as well, such as trivial situations gaining more attention than they previously would or customers' desire for constant interaction. In order for an airline to effectively communicate during a crisis, preparation and planning is essential.

One important takeaway is that defensive and crisis communication serve to protect people and benefit stakeholders. I found several definitions of crisis communication, but I have chosen to focus my analysis on the following culmination of ideas: "a crisis is a violation of stakeholder expectations, which threatens to or actually disrupts the organization; it is a risk that

needs to be managed publicly and requires the dedication of resources and time.” As I researched and talked to professionals, it became clear that there are many different levels of a crisis, and that airlines have similar ways of categorizing crises. Furthermore, many of the airlines’ strategies, specifically regarding social media, that are used to deal with crises are comparable.

Of my six participants, four were middle-aged white men, and two were middle-aged white women. The shortest career in the airline industry was five years, and the longest was just over 30 years. The job titles of the participants included marketing, public relations, and communications directors, pilots, and crisis communication experts. Each perspective provided unique insights into the effect that the development of social media has had on communications strategies in the airline industry.

RESULTS

My research showed that defensive and crisis communication are important in maintaining transparent and honest relationships with key stakeholders. While there are varying levels of severity, frequency, and specific strategies for any given situation, it is clear that airlines have to be ready to respond appropriately when faced with any type of incident. The methods of communication that were used ten years ago have shifted in recent years, with the corporate use of social media and new forms of technology. The participants I talked with provided insight into how the airline industry has adapted and evolved its communication strategies with these changes. Regardless of the form of news media being used, airlines are held to a high standard of clarity, openness, and speed in their responses in a crisis situation.

Participant B proposed that there are two “buckets” of categorization of crises: those that deal with issues and reputation management (day-to-day concerns, customer service issues,

social media influencers, operational issues) and those that call for emergency response communication (storm disruptions, the pandemic, aircraft incidents, injuries). Similarly, Participant A suggested that there are two types of crises. The first is routine crises, which industries know about and should be prepared to handle. The second is atypical crises, which tend to attract a lot of media attention, pose a severe threat, and generate some type of moral outrage. In either case, if one or two public relations people can take care of a defensive situation, they do, as not all things deemed “social media crises” are true crises. Depending on the degree of severity, an airline might pull together a team of people to handle a more serious crisis. Participant B emphasized that an airline’s response depends on both the scale and severity of a situation. There is a difference between a singular issue to manage versus massive impacts, such as many flights being delayed, injury, loss of life, or investor relations. The airline that Participant D works with has a multidisciplinary crisis response team, called the Emergency Operations Center, that evaluates the event to determine the appropriate response level. Participant D spoke to the importance of responding quickly yet taking the time to investigate the situation to ensure that it is a factual response.

The point at which airlines’ communication strategies changed can be traced to a few pivotal developments. According to Participant A, the combination of 24-hour news stations, smartphones, and social media platforms allowed more time for people to report stories about remote places. This made risks and crises visible and public, when they previously could have been minimized or censored. Participant B said that around 2014 it became common to find out situations on social media rather than the Operations Control Center (OCC) of the airline. In particular, Twitter became a hub for sharing breaking news within the airline industry. Social media became a new form of media for airlines to communicate with their stakeholders.

Participant D highlighted the speed and ease at which information can be captured and spread with social media, as well as how this has changed how airlines must respond in a crisis. This change has happened relatively quickly, as Internet channels have evolved from Facebook to Twitter to Instagram and more recently even TikTok.

With the dawn of these new social platforms, airlines have faced new challenges and new types of crises. Participant C noted that “some accidents were trivial, some were scary, but any one of them, at any time, held the potential for news coverage – any every piece of news coverage affected the image and reputation of the airline.” This demonstrates the importance that the new media channels had on how airlines viewed coverage, whether originating from a news organization or a passenger’s smartphone. Because now anyone can be a reporter, more categories of crises exist that were previously unknown or unseen. Participant A asserted that online analytics allow airlines to identify risks earlier, so as to be aware as soon as possible when facing a bad situation. Social media metrics also allow airlines to see when something is spreading or not spreading among key stakeholders. These metrics allow trends to be tracked on a daily basis, which can help airlines know which situations may need more attention and which have blown over. Regardless of the type or severity of the crisis, Participant D emphasized the value of responding in a way that supports the airline’s guests and employees.

One part of defensive and crisis communication that is fundamental to all other communication strategies is preparation. Participant C said, “My view was that every airline (in fact, every company) must look at a PR disaster as something that inevitably will come. Only when a company has that mindset can it truly prepare, because otherwise, when the disaster hits, you spend precious time thinking to yourself, ‘I can’t believe this is happening to my company.’ I wanted the airline to be conditioned to think, ‘Ok, it’s happened and I’m ready, because this is

what I've prepared for.” Preparing ahead of a crisis is crucial to being able to maintain a favorable reputation. This includes not only what is to be done, but who will do what. Deciding in advance who will be in charge of each piece helps the team to function smoothly during a crisis situation. Participant C stressed the importance of crisis preparation: “You have to respond with the speed of lightning... That means getting as much ready in advance as you can, so that when the event happens, you don't have to waste time thinking about things that you could have gotten ready beforehand – like staff assignments, deciding where the TV crews will park their satellite trucks, and a hundred things like that.”

Another key aspect of a crisis communication plan is assembling a crisis team. Prior to the widespread use of social media, media relations skills were essential. Having good writers and people who understood news media were necessary to an effective communication strategy. Now, it is important to have a wide range of skills on the team. Participants B and D said that they look for past experience and skills with defusing conflict, customer service experience, problem solving in real time, social media experts, and public relations professionals. Participant A said that a solid strategy is to train everyone in crisis communication, and then activate only whomever is needed at any given point. It is important the members know how to work as a team, practice decision-making, and are able to withstand ambiguity and take action. While Participant A emphasized the value of integrating social media into all aspects of the airline to best reflect what is going on in the organization, Participant D shared that their airline's social media team is not connected to the public relations team. In terms of the number of people on the team, Participants B and D, from smaller airlines, have two to three people that work on social media exclusively. Participant B said that one of these experts works 50/50, balancing proactive scanning with monitoring current issues going on. In an emergency, Participant B said that they

dedicate two additional people to social media, working around the clock until the crisis is under control. Participant D said that their airline's crisis team consists of compassionate, analytical people who perform well under pressure, take the initiative, and are team players. To further develop this sense of collaboration, teams attend crisis training, and the airlines conduct frequent drills involving a variety of crisis scenarios.

When reflecting on the use of social media within the airline industry, it has come with several advantages for both airlines and their publics. One upside of the use of social media in crisis situations is that airlines can sense the problem sooner and get a quick read on how people are responding to the airline's communication. If people are afraid, upset, or confused, airlines can engage in social listening and respond in an appropriate way. According to Participant A, social media allows airlines to directly tell their story, which is a great way to put out a message or update quickly. While this comes with the pressure to use the platform correctly, people tend to appreciate the openness and candor on behalf of the company that inherently comes with the use of social media. Participant D said that another benefit of using the latest technologies and social platforms is that these are how people consume their information, so reaching them through new channels is more engaging than relying on traditional news outlets.

While the advantages are clear, the use of social media also presents challenges to airlines. Participant A spoke about the idea that people may expect interactions during a crisis. If an airline is known for being responsive and suddenly stops responding, this could cast the airline in a negative light, even though a crisis is not necessarily the time to debate or have a dialogue. Another downside that Participant B mentioned is that engaging with people on social media can be distracting to the operation of the airline. When the communication team deals with problems all day that should be customer service issues, the challenge of resource management

arises. Participant B also talked about the assumption of guilt that comes with customer complaints: “If the airline chooses to address a crisis through social channels, the public often automatically assumes that the airline is in the wrong. When this happens, the airline can’t just roll over, but it also doesn’t want to get into a back-and-forth argument publicly.” Participant D highlighted the fact that it can be easy for information on social media to be misconstrued and rapidly spread. One of the challenges is to ensure events captured on social media are not taken out of context and incorrectly portrayed as a crisis scenario.

When asked about working together versus competing with respect to crisis management, all the interviewees emphasized the importance of collaboration. Participant B said, “We never compete on safety. Competition comes with customer service, but safety is our priority.” Participants B and D mentioned that their crisis teams attend the National Transportation Safety Board’s (NTSB) annual training, which includes communication and aircraft incident response conference. Participant C worked with two major airlines to develop and implement defensive and crisis plans. Many of the airlines have similar processes, teams, and strategies in place. Participant D noted that the airline industry is very collaborative. “For example, competitor airlines who participate in NTSB training openly and freely share their experiences with responding to crises.” Participant D said. “We understand that any airline crisis ultimately hurts the entire industry.” The airline industry has learned the importance of working together over the years. Major crises related to airlines tend to linger in the public consciousness, especially those involving loss of life. Smaller, more trivial defensive situations tend to be forgiven more easily. Passengers generally do not hold grudges against airlines but hold a general perception of the industry in their minds. For this reason, it is crucial that airlines learn from each other’s communication strategies in order to maintain a favorable public opinion.

Because anyone can post really anything on social media sites, it is impossible for airlines to control which situations blow up and which blow over. While occasionally social media can be used to spread good, heartwarming stories involving pilots, flight attendants, or an airline in general, the majority of media attention is focused on the negative things. There is immense value in controlling the imagery of an accident or situation; bad pictures can make a story look worse than it actually is or cause panic in the public eye. Participant C recounted one disaster at a major airline and highlighted the role that the imagery played: “For the first time in aviation history, a major airline disaster had been captured on videotape as it happened. Within an hour, TV monitors worldwide were filled with the terrible image: an aircraft approaching for a landing from the right of the screen, going fast, passing over some telephone wires and a fence...a dip of the wing at the last second, the wing striking the ground...and a flaming cartwheel as the plane disintegrated across the runway and into the adjoining cornfields.” This demonstrates the idea that imagery can be spread quickly via news media and social platforms and plays a substantial role in situating a crisis in the public mind.

From a pilot’s perspective, crisis communication looks a little different. In-air crises are only one type of crisis an airline may face, though they tend to be the most visible to the public. Pilots play an important role in the communication process; while their personal words might not be as important as the company’s, their actions and attitudes can help prevent or minimize a crisis.

According to Participant E, pilots are trained in crisis management. They memorize emergency checklists and plan courses of action in advance. “We have a set of designated steps to follow in any given situation. For example, if a light that’s supposed to come on doesn’t, we don’t immediately alarm passengers,” Participant E said. “It’s important to appear confident and

stay calm so we don't cause a panic." Since passengers have the ability to stay online while in flight, the way that the flight crew acts in a crisis directly affects things that people may post on social media or share with friends.

The strategy for crisis management is based around memorization of checklists and things the pilots and crew need to do. While this training is the backbone in an emergency situation, there is also an element of improvisation and adaptation that is often necessary in an in-air crisis. "A captain's communication style affects the dynamic between crew members and how passengers perceive the situation," Participant F said. "Relying on flight attendants and co-pilots is essential, because it really takes a team to ensure safety for all passengers."

Both pilots I spoke with emphasized the idea that their priority in a crisis is safety. "While I am concerned for my airline's reputation, my number one priority is the safety of my passengers and crew," Participant E said. "In the moment, it is much easier to focus on the logistics of landing the plane or whatever needs to be done instead of thinking about bigger consequences for the airline." Participant F mentioned the impact that the competency, attitude, and friendliness of the pilot has in a crisis situation on board. "I do what I can to contribute to a favorable public impression of the airline, but ultimately, I am primarily concerned with providing a safe experience to everyone on board," Participant F said. While pilots play an important role in handling in-air crises, this is part of a much bigger picture for the airline as a whole.

Overall, crisis communication plays a vital role in the management of an airline. There is a lot that goes on behind the scenes, and the public only sees the response that is the result of the process. Better preparation leads the airline to a better position to effectively deal with crises. Participant A said that the plan, while essential, is just the set of guidelines; the importance of the

crisis team and how they work together cannot be overlooked. “As an airline, all we sell is safety,” Participant B said. “The stakeholders must trust the airline to get them to their destinations on time and safely. Communicating this message, proactively or in response, inspires confidence.” Both Participants B and D spoke to the idea that social media has emerged as a critical component of their respective airlines’ crisis plans. Social media is the main public channel through which initial information and frequent updates are disseminated in a crisis, and thus needs to be integrated into all communication efforts. Participant D concluded, “An effective crisis communication plan is integral for companies to be able to quickly and effectively address a crisis by supporting affected customers and employees, correct an issue or issues that led to the situation, minimize disruptions to the business, and protect the brand.”

DISCUSSION

The research that I collected provided valuable insights regarding both the importance of crisis communication in general, as well as the role that social media has played within the airline industry. There are five main categories of crisis communication elements that airlines need to develop: preparation, monitoring, gathering information, responding, and following up.

To begin, preparation is crucial. There are several aspects of the preparation for a defensive or crisis situation. One of these is writing a specific, detailed plan with templates of copy for a variety of potential crises. For the airline industry, this could include things like a crash, an aircraft malfunction, or a loss of situation. These are all things that an airline could expect to happen at any given time and should have a response plan ready. Another aspect of preparation is the crisis team. Assigning individual tasks to team members and making sure they understand the overarching strategy is important. The way that the team interacts, both publicly

and privately, sends a message that should be consistent with the messaging produced regarding the crisis. An airline in a crisis does not want to be perceived as flippant or ill-equipped, so airlines need to train public relations and social media teams to stay calm and circulate the information necessary in a clear way. Having all of this preparation done before a crisis hits allows the airline to respond in the best way possible.

Next, monitoring trends on social media can be advantageous to airlines. By tracking trends and hashtags on social media sites, airlines can stay up to date with what stakeholders are saying and thinking about the company. Monitoring social activity also allows airlines to see customer complaints and other smaller issues that can be dealt with quickly and quietly, so as to avoid these issues becoming bigger problems. When airlines successfully address an emerging crisis before it escalates, they save themselves the bad publicity and damaged reputation that might come if the issue were to intensify.

In the instance that a crisis or defensive situation warrants a response from an airline, it is important that the airline gather all information possible before crafting and publishing a response. This could include things such as the details about an aircraft involved in an accident, the people on board, the location of the incident, and the time it occurred. By gathering this information before releasing a public response, airlines can gauge the situation more appropriately and produce communications that match the severity of the crisis.

This leads to the fourth step in crisis communication, which is the actual process of the airline responding to the crisis. There are many different methods and channels airlines can use to relay messaging during a crisis. Even within social media channels, the airline could post a video, short message, link to a longer statement, photo, or a graphic. These all would have a different effect on the audience, and the atmosphere of the situation should be considered when

choosing the most appropriate method. Just as important as the channel used to communicate is the message that is produced. Choosing the right words to convey the proper combination of the airline's values, compassion and sympathy, and the basic information about what happened is crucial. The response will be evaluated by the public, so balancing apologies with facts is necessary to maintain a favorable reputation.

Finally, airlines need to monitor the public opinion of their communications after they are published. Following up with subsequent posts or answering questions that arise is a vital part of crisis communication. Monitoring what key stakeholders are saying about the situation or the airline's message is an important way to understand how people are reacting and prevent the situation from escalating.

Defensive and crisis communication have changed with the widespread use of social media. Airlines now have the ability to communicate directly with stakeholders and produce an authentic, controlled message. This comes with new challenges, however, as people have the ability to publicly express their opinions and reactions, which could be detrimental to an airline's reputation. It is essential for airlines to keep up with the latest trends and interact with stakeholders in a professional, appropriate manner during a crisis.

CONCLUSION

After conducting research and analyzing my results, I came to three major conclusions about this subject. First, social media has created a net positive outcome for airlines and their communication strategies. Second, airlines need to appropriately plan mobilization logistics and responses in order to be prepared when a defensive or crisis situation arises. Finally, it is

essential for airlines to integrate social media efforts with the public relations team, so as to avoid internal structural divides that become visible to the public in a crisis.

First off, the development of technology and new social media platforms have changed communication in both positive and negative ways. There were five main positive outcomes that I found, which are the ability to engage in social listening and issues monitoring, the capacity to produce direct messaging, the capability to connect with key stakeholders easily and quickly, the opportunity to build an open and authentic relationship with the public, and the benefit of engaging with stakeholders through the channels that they regularly utilize. When using social media in a defensive or crisis situation, the four main disadvantages are the challenge of resource management and operation of the airline, the expectation of interactions and responses during a crisis, the assumption of guilt that comes with publicly acknowledging elements of a crisis, and the ease of spreading false or misconstrued information or images. After weighing these pros and cons, I have concluded that social media has had a net positive effect on airlines' communication strategies.

Secondly, preparation is absolutely essential for an airline to maintain a favorable perception and reputation, both during and after a crisis. This includes elements such as assembling a team, assigning duties, and making sure all those involved are trained in crisis communication strategies. Part of this training comes from studying past incidents and learning from other airlines' mistakes. I found that airlines frequently work together on the crisis communication front, as safety is the key message for all airlines. It is crucial for airlines to choose an appropriate response strategy and channel, and to uphold company values in all communications produced.

Lastly, the incorporation of social media into other areas of the airline is necessary in order to produce a consistent, credible message. I found that there is a structural problem with how many airlines use social media; some separate social media teams from those trained in crisis management, rather than training the social media team in this area. The root of this issue of separation stems from the fact that the crisis team existed before the social media team, and as social media has evolved, the two have not merged. I concluded that the social media team should not be separate from the public relations team, but instead the two should be intimately connected. In a crisis situation, social media should not be viewed as a form of marketing, but a critical communication outlet. When the social media team is not connected with the crisis response, the airline is missing consistency that the public can easily see through.

My main takeaway from my research is that social media is a valuable tool that airlines need to incorporate in their defensive and crisis communication strategies. When used correctly, social media channels provide beneficial advantages to both airlines and stakeholders. Whether an airline has taken the time to understand these channels and prepare tactical responses becomes evident when a crisis emerges. In the future, airlines need to be aware of changing trends on social media and have strategies in place to effectively use social media channels in a crisis.

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