

PUBLICATION

Four Crisis Management Lessons From the Disappearance of Flight MH370

Authors: Sara Turner

May 1, 2014

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 is no doubt a tragedy that will live in our collective memories for years to come. It is also an important example of crisis management in a world addicted to the speed of information that only social media can provide. This article will cover the top four lessons every company can learn from the airline's handling of this crisis and how these lessons can be implemented on even a much smaller scale.

1. It's not just what you say, it's how you say it.

Adopt a "Cringe Test" with respect to any communications you make after an incident. If a proposed communication makes anyone on your team cringe, don't send it. A good example of this is when Malaysia Airlines sent a text message to the MH370 family members informing them that they believed all had been lost. This communication may have met every item on their checklist – timing, direct communications with the families, etc. – but it wasn't the right thing to do. Designate at least one person on your team to review everything that goes out before it does and have them apply the Cringe Test. Sometimes even when something appears to meet your criteria, it is just the wrong approach and appears to the outside world as insensitive or inappropriate.

2. Timing is everything.

Communicate what you know quickly (as soon as you know it) and comprehensively. In a situation like an airline crash, waiting an hour to communicate once you find out might be too long. In today's social media culture, time races by. In this instance, Malaysia Airlines was able to communicate that they had lost contact with the plane right away. Even if they didn't have any additional details about where or why, it was important to get the information they did have out right away. Getting out what you know, as soon as you know it, is very important so that you are able to set the storyline and control the message. If you wait even an hour or more, and social media is already going rampant, you will be struggling to catch up and will have lost any opportunity to set the tone; the storyline will be set for you. If the information you release later turns out to be incorrect, you need to be ready to change that release on the spot as well. It is important not to release information that is pure speculation, but once facts are known, get them out. Usually rumors created on social media are far more damaging than the truth.

The news cycle has changed – it used to be that a business would have to get its press statements out on a "next business day" basis. This meant communicators generally had at least 24 hours and perhaps until the next business day to think about the form, style and substance of what they wanted to say before getting out materials for the news media. This time frame has dramatically changed in the world of the internet, the 24/7 news cycle and social media. A business has to be communicating constantly to stay ahead of the relentlessly updating news cycle.

3. Use the tools you have.

Almost every business today has a website. When a serious or tragic event strikes, one of the action items ought to be to remove potentially offensive items from your website. The same goes for canceling any scheduled advertising campaigns. In this case, Malaysia Airlines took all of the advertisements off their website, including items advertising new routes. This can be implemented even on a much smaller scale when, for instance, a certain product line or a specific location is impacted. You can also significantly reduce commentary on topics you would prefer not "go viral" by shutting down the comment feature on your Facebook pages, websites and other social media presences as soon as an incident occurs. From a legal perspective, you will also want to use your resources to begin monitoring and conducting research related to social media immediately to identify any possible witnesses or any potential plaintiffs. The information available in the hours following an accident may not be accessible forever and collecting what you can in real time is important.

4. Your legal team should be part of the response team from day one.

At what point should you bring in your legal team? Many businesses either have an in-house public relations specialist or will hire an outside public relations firm right away. Often, however, bringing in the legal team won't happen until later in the game. This can be an expensive decision. As we have seen in the Malaysia Airlines case, one lawsuit has already been filed (and subsequently dismissed).

Even in a much smaller scale crisis, plaintiffs' lawyers are quickly thinking about lawsuits that exploit family members while the grief is fresh and raw, so they will file the suits and conduct discovery right away. Be sure to get your defense team involved before the first complaint is filed, as evidence gathering must start immediately after the tragedy. Your attorneys can advise you on hiring an accident investigator and can review proposed public statements from a different point of view. Otherwise, you might disclose information in a manner that is not appropriate or risk taking actions that would negatively impact your defense strategy later in an inevitable lawsuit.

You can also use your legal team to help you reach out to claimants in situations where a lawsuit is inevitable. Sometimes you can prevent a lawsuit from ever getting filed. In this case, Malaysia Airlines put the victims' families up in hotels and assisted in their travel to the locations where they could wait for news of their loved ones. Overtures such as this can make a big difference in how potential plaintiffs and juries respond later. Most importantly, the public image of the business suffers less when it does the right thing by the families of its affected customers.