## Contents

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................. 3

2. The Changing Environment ................................................................................. 4
   2.1. The Evolution of Social Media .......................................................... 4
   2.2. The Disrupted Media Landscape ....................................................... 5
   2.3. Specialist Websites ............................................................................ 6
   2.4. Rising Expectations of Next of Kin .................................................. 7
   2.5. Airline Consolidation and Fragmentation ........................................ 7
   2.6. Outsourcing ......................................................................................... 7
   2.7. Increased Government Involvement ................................................. 8
   2.8. The Global “Leadership” Crisis ......................................................... 8

3. Best Practice: Communication Flow and Timelines ....................................... 10

4. Developing a Social Media Strategy ................................................................. 12

5. Managing Information After an Accident: Roles and Responsibilities ....... 18
   5.1 Operating Carrier ................................................................................. 18
   5.2 Franchise Services: Operating Carrier ............................................... 20
   5.3 Franchise Services: Network Carrier .................................................. 21
   5.4 Codeshare Partner/s ........................................................................... 22
   5.5 Aircraft and Engine Manufacturers .................................................... 23
   5.6 Airport Operator ................................................................................. 24
   5.7 Air Navigation Service Provider ........................................................ 25
   5.8 Ground Handling Agents ..................................................................... 26
   5.9 The Investigating Body ......................................................................... 27

6. A Guide to Planning ............................................................................................. 28
   6.1 Creating a Crisis Communications Plan .............................................. 28
   6.2 Crisis Communications Team: Key Positions ..................................... 29
   6.3 Crisis Communications Team: Organization Chart .......................... 32
   6.4 Training Spokespeople ......................................................................... 33
   6.5 Exercising the Plan ............................................................................... 33

7. Sample Social Media Posts and Crisis Statement ........................................... 35
   7.1 First Tweet – Aircraft Accident ............................................................ 35
   7.2 Second Tweet – Aircraft Accident ....................................................... 35
   7.3 Third Tweet – Aircraft Accident .......................................................... 35
   7.4 Statement #1 – Aircraft Accident ......................................................... 35
   7.5 Second Statement – Aircraft Accident ................................................. 36
   7.6 First Statement – Aircraft Incident ...................................................... 36
   7.7 First Statement – Aircraft Diversion .................................................... 37

Appendix: Case Studies .......................................................................................... 38
1. Introduction

Aviation accidents and serious incidents are extremely rare. Despite the almost exponential increase in passenger numbers and flights operated since the start of the jet age, the rate at which hull loss accidents occur has steadily improved. Most communication professionals working within the industry (indeed, most airline employees) will therefore never face the unique and emotionally stressful experience of responding to an aviation disaster.

Unfortunately accidents do still happen, and the challenges of planning and managing an effective response have never been more complex. Profound – and accelerating - changes to the business, political, social and media environment have created pressures and expectations which did not exist even a decade ago.

The proliferation of social media channels, and the exponential growth in mobile smartphone use, have ensured that “breaking news” of an accident or major incident will usually appear first on Twitter, Facebook or Weibo. Photos, commentary and even streaming video may be available, in real time, to a vast global audience before the companies involved are fully aware of what happened. Flight tracker websites will allow anyone to see the aircraft’s last known position, heading, speed, altitude and other parameters, including the history of the aircraft concerned, the service history of the aircraft type and any issues related to the operations of the airline.

The first opportunity to define the event, and to shape the unfolding narrative, will belong to the people who experienced it, those who saw it, and those affected by it. The airline may be left struggling to make its message heard above the cacophony created by citizen journalists, politicians, government agencies, celebrities, “experts” and self-publicists eager to share their opinions.

This document updates previous Guidelines on Crisis Communications published by IATA in 2012 and 2014 and is intended to help communication professionals across the aviation industry understand some of the factors which have contributed to the increasing demands on airlines, manufacturers, airports and other involved parties after an accident.

It offers “best practice” guidance on roles and responsibilities in managing the flow of information; and on structuring a crisis communication plan which meets the needs of your organization. It also suggests how to integrate online platforms and social media channels to ensure that the communication response is consistent across every touchpoint.
2. The changing environment

The last decade has seen rapid and profound changes in the structure of the aviation industry; the political and social environment; and in the media landscape. The impact of these interconnected changes, underpinned by advances in communication technology, can be seen in the reaction to several recent aviation accidents and other major events. Some of these examples are described in the Appendix to this document.

2.1 The evolution of social media

Unless an aircraft “disappears” over the ocean or an unpopulated wilderness, it is virtually inevitable that someone with a smartphone will share the first photo or start streaming live video of an accident scene within moments. After the Asiana Airlines OZ214 accident at San Francisco in July 2013, the first photo was posted on Twitter in less than one minute, by a passenger waiting to board another flight. Once ignited, the social media “firestorm” spread so quickly that it generated more than 44,000 tweets within the next 30 minutes.

Three trends are facilitating this phenomenon, and its impact on the way airline accidents are reported:

I. Connectivity: Almost one-third of the world’s population actively use social media channels, and tens of thousands of new accounts are created every day. The proliferation of these channels, and the continued growth of the population participating in social media, has fundamentally changed the way the world communicates, receives and shares information.

II. Mobility: Internet-enabled “smartphones” have become the fastest-selling gadgets in history, outselling personal computers by four to one. By 2020, some 80% of adults globally (and many of their children) will own a personal smartphone. This in turn is driving an irreversible trend, which reached its “tipping point” in 2014: more than 50% of all internet usage is now on mobile devices – predominantly smartphones.

Internet connectivity now extends to passengers on many commercial aircraft. On-board wifi is on its way to becoming as much of a standard service offer as in-seat entertainment systems on most airlines, which means passengers will be able, if they choose, to share photos, videos and commentary about an in-flight emergency, in real-time, while the situation is still unfolding.

Airlines which offer on-board wifi should therefore give careful thought to their policy on whether the service would be turned off in an emergency (rather than leaving it to the discretion of the crew).
III. **Streaming Video**: At Facebook’s F8 development conference in April 2016, the company revealed its key priority in the drive to maintain its dominance of the social web: live streaming. Facebook Live quickly achieved notoriety after several shocking incidents were streamed on the platform as they occurred. With companies like Facebook, Twitter and others focusing their efforts on this technology, the quality, speed and availability of streaming video will improve rapidly.

The rapid improvement in video technology and network bandwidth is not only benefiting “citizen journalists”. Professional broadcasters can now use smartphone applications or lightweight handheld equipment to “go live” from a breaking news event over wireless or data networks without the need for a cumbersome satellite dish or even a full production crew.

2.2 **The disrupted media landscape**
Contrary to widespread belief, the global circulation of paid newspapers is actually increasing – by more than 100 million units between 2010 and 2014. However this is almost entirely due to the growing number of people buying newspapers in Japan, India and China – which together account for nine of the world’s top 10-selling newspapers. Elsewhere, there is a very different picture, with marked declines in circulation, readership and – critically – advertising revenues in Western Europe, North America and Australasia.

Most of those which survive, including many of the world’s oldest and most respected “big city” newspapers, have been relaunched as web-based multimedia platforms to compete with a new generation of online-only news portals. These “newspapers” now operate with smaller editorial teams, include more user-generated, shared and syndicated content, and are accessed via paywalls. Subscribers can view the content on smartphones or tablets.

Breaking news of major events is covered by rolling “live blogs” which copy or link to photos, videos and commentary posted on other online sources, including social media channels. Long-form analytical coverage, written by more experienced or specialist reporters, will not appear until the following day, or possibly in a weekend edition of the print newspaper, also available online. But by that time the public’s perception may already have solidified.
The same commercial pressures are affecting broadcast news operations, which find it difficult to attract large audiences (and therefore to maintain advertising rates) unless a major crisis is in play. Coverage of Malaysia Airlines MH370 led the prime-time evening news on all three major US TV networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) for 11 consecutive nights in March 2014 – an unprecedented level of domestic interest when only three American citizens were among the 239 people on board.

Television news requires pictures. As editorial budgets decline, the best (and cheapest) source of images is often citizen journalists who experienced or witnessed the event and caught it on their smartphones. News organisations will often be alerted by applications such as Dataminr, which constantly scours the internet for the sudden appearance of a cluster of social media posts which may indicate a breaking news story. If a genuine crisis is unfolding, Dataminr allows the professional news team to very quickly identify the location and potential scale of the event, and to find potentially important eyewitness comments and images.

2.3 Specialist websites
Flightradar24 is an aircraft tracking site which was established by two Swedish enthusiasts in 2006. It aggregates crowd-sourced data from multiple sources - primarily volunteers with ADS-B (automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast) receivers - to show flight tracks, origins and destinations, flight numbers, aircraft types, positions, altitudes, headings and speeds for virtually any commercial flight. Other sites offering similar services include Flightaware.com; Flightview.com and Radarbox24.com.

These sites can show time-lapse replays of previous flights and historical flight data by airline, aircraft, aircraft type, area or airport. If a crew “squawks” a distress code, indicating an on-board emergency, Flightradar24 will automatically alert its 330,000 followers, including news media, who can then track the progress of the aircraft in real time – or see whether the aircraft has disappeared from radar. This in turn will create an alert on applications such as Dataminr (see above).

After an accident or major incident, the flight tracker sites, and other specialist sites including Aeroinside.com; AvHerald.com; and Planecrashinfo.com can provide a full history of the flight with animations, graphs and charts; the history of the aircraft model and tail number, and previous accidents and incidents involving that airline, aircraft type, engine type or airport. This information will be instantly available to anyone with an internet connection – regardless of whether the airline involved is willing or able to confirm it.
2.4 Rising expectations of Next of Kin

The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act was passed into law in the United States in 1996, the first piece of legislation which required airlines to submit a Family Assistance plan to show how it would support victims and families after an aircraft accident. Similar legislation has spread around the world, with ICAO publishing its global Family Assistance Policy in 2013.

Regardless of what legislation may be in place, the expectations of accident survivors and families of victims is steadily increasing as a result of the activities of family advocates and associations (particularly those formed after previous accidents) and plaintiff’s attorneys. Family groups have been willing to share their experiences through the media and on the internet, while plaintiff's attorneys are quick to position themselves as alternative sources of information to the airline or the investigating bodies.

While it may be illegal in certain jurisdictions for lawyers to approach the families of accident victims directly, some law firms regularly set up dedicated websites after an accident. These sites offer to help families uncover the “real truth” about what happened to their loved ones, and to hold those responsible accountable in court. If families sign up for legal representation, plaintiff’s attorneys have been known to charge up to 40% of any award or settlement.

2.5 Airline Consolidation and Fragmentation

Since the first “codeshare” agreements were created more than 20 years ago, the airline industry has been transformed. Alliances, codeshares, franchise agreements, wet-leases and charters have created endless scope for confusion among passengers over which airline will actually operate the aircraft they are booked to fly on.

Consolidation of major airlines into holding companies; joint ventures; the launch of low-cost and hybrid brands by established carriers and the inexorable rise of the low-cost airlines – some with multiple sub-brands or operating entities – have created further complexity. For the traveling public and the news media, it has never been more difficult to establish which company would be responsible for the welfare of passengers and their families after an accident, and who should be managing the flow of information.

2.6 Outsourcing

Almost every airline relies, to some extent, on third-party contractors such as Ground Handling Agents (GHAs) to support their airport operations. But as airlines have restructured and consolidated to reduce costs, many have outsourced all of their airport operations to GHAs, particularly in overseas ports. In other cases, the airline’s local codeshare or alliance partner may also be their ground handler.
Low-cost airlines and charter operators are heavily reliant on GHAs, to the extent that if an accident occurs outside the airline’s home market, there may be no employees of that airline on scene. In which case, the airline’s only representation would be a GHA, some of whose front-line staff (such as check-in agents) may actually wear the airline’s uniform.

The potential for confusion after an accident is obvious, particularly if GHA staff are surrounded by “meeters and greeters” or journalists demanding information and brandishing smartphones which can record or live-stream any comments. The airline may then discover its “spokesperson” being quoted by the news media, even though he or she is not an employee and has no mandate to speak on the airline’s behalf.

2.7 Increased government involvement
While acts of terrorism against the aviation industry are not a new phenomenon, recent suicide attacks on Brussels and Istanbul airports have escalated the threat to a different level. Terrorism has become the default theory for any unexplained accident, particularly in the early stages, as demonstrated by the initial media coverage of the Egyptair MS804 crash in May 2016.

This in turn is encouraging government and military leaders to be far more proactive in being seen to respond to events like MS804, MH370 or MH17. While the government agency charged with investigating accidents will normally be the main source of information about the progress of the investigation itself, an airline’s ability to shape the unfolding narrative about its own actions may be severely constrained or overshadowed by the involvement of politicians and other agencies or branches of government. This includes local prosecutors or magistrates, or elected officials at the local or regional level, who may see the event as an opportunity to raise their own personal media profile.

This problem is particularly challenging for airlines which are state-owned and where the Board, CEO or members of the senior management are government appointees. But it potentially affects any airline which operates into multiple different countries, some of which may have a different understanding or interpretation of the role of the airline after a major accident than they are accustomed to in their home market.

2.8 The Global “Leadership” Crisis
Research* has shown an alarming – and escalating – crisis of leadership around the world. Put simply, an overwhelming majority of people surveyed believe that political or business leaders don’t communicate honestly and transparently; don’t demonstrate effective leadership; and don’t take responsibility when things go wrong.
While there are significant variations in the expectations and performance of leaders from different cultures, geographies and business sectors, some findings are universal. One is that in the midst of a crisis, it is not enough to simply “show empathy” or apologise for the resulting distress or disruption. If words are not aligned with actions, an “apology” is simply empty rhetoric.

To maintain and build trust, the company must accept an appropriate level of responsibility, commit to a concrete plan of action, and communicate honestly and sincerely. Above all, it requires the personal involvement of the leader – as demonstrated after several recent aviation accidents including those involving Germanwings, AirAsia Indonesia and Virgin Galactic.

The primary role of the CEO in a crisis is therefore to be visible – to the families, to the other parties involved in the response (including government agencies and regulators), to the employees – and of course, to the news media.

**"Ketchum Leadership Communication Monitor"**
3. Best Practice: Communication Flow and Timeline

Airlines, and other parties directly involved in an accident or major incident, no longer have the luxury of time to confirm information and wait for internal clearances before issuing some form of public statement – or at least an acknowledgement that they are aware of the initial reports and responding appropriately.

But once the first statement has been issued, it is essential that the airline, in particular, maintains a regular flow of information, which lasts beyond the first few hours or even days of the crisis. The precise timing and content of specific communications, actions or events (such as memorials) will always depend on the circumstances and must take account of cultural factors and the expectations of those involved or affected.

While some of the following actions may not be required, or even possible, a general guide to the potential communication flow and timelines after an accident with fatalities is outlined below (T is the point at which the airline was first notified). Note: if the accident/event did not cause fatalities, some of what follows would be inappropriate or unnecessary:

**T+15 mins:** Release first “tweet” acknowledging initial reports. Update regularly with short posts as new information is confirmed.

**T+ 60 mins:** Issue longer summary of information confirmed to date, via multiple channels and posted on website. Release new summaries hourly, or as key developments are confirmed, while maintaining regular flow of short updates.

**T + 60 mins:** Change branding to monochrome/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).

Depending on circumstances, the airline may decide to post a broadcast-quality video statement by the CEO on its website and/or YouTube, in which he/she confirms key facts and outlines the airline’s immediate priorities, with appropriate messaging. This would ensure that the CEO is “visible” early in the response, without necessarily exposing him/her to media questions at a point where 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)

**Days 2-7:**

- CEO press conference/s at/near accident location, arrival/departure airport or base for search & recovery operations
- News releases updating progress on family assistance activities
- Response to emerging issues (if appropriate and within airline’s scope)
- Daily family briefings (in private, although information may be shared or streamed live on social media by participants). *Note: new information should be shared with families first, before being released publicly.*
- CEO communication to employees
- CEO/CFO communications to investors & financial markets
- Talking points for front-line staff
- CEO communication to key customers/partners
- CEO to meet families of victims or visit injured passengers (if circumstances allow)

**Events which may require ongoing communication (Day 3 and beyond)**

- Recovery/identification/repatriation of victims
- CEO visit to accident site (if accessible)
- Memorial events (internal/external)
- Funerals (employees/passengers)
- Release of initial investigation findings
- Return to business-as-usual (phased)
- Paid advertisements expressing sorrow & thanks to community
- Future recovery of additional wreckage or remains
- Conclusion of recovery/identification process
- Release of interim investigation report
- Release of final investigation report and recommendations
- One-year anniversary (possible mass interment of unidentified remains)
- Completion of criminal/civil litigation
- Subsequent anniversaries (particularly “milestones” – 10 years etc.)
4. Developing a Social Media Strategy

An integrated, consistent and authentic communication response to an accident is essential, using all available channels to engage with its internal and external stakeholders. Challenges tend to arise when different parts of the organization “own” different channels.

- As an airline’s website is normally commercially focused (selling and booking tickets) it is most often operated by the Commercial Department (Marketing or Sales). Similarly, the airline’s presence on other online channels such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram may be used by the Commercial Department primarily to advertise fare promotions, new routes, service offerings or for destination marketing. While there is usually no issue with the communications department taking leadership of these channels in a crisis, after an accident, there may well be internal tension over how quickly the website and other social media channels should return to “business as usual” – for example, taking down the crisis “dark site” and restoring the normal promotional messaging and images. Similar issues may arise when considering when to relaunch advertising or new fare promotions, or the appropriate messaging during the transition back to normal operations.

- A starting point for developing an online crisis communication strategy is to determine which social media channels are already used by the organization, and who manages them. This may be at several levels – personal, divisional, regional or corporate. To ensure consistent messaging across all channels, the administration rights for all of the company’s social media channels should either be consolidated within one department, or the individual account “owners” should be named in the crisis communications plan, so they can be easily reached in a crisis and instructed to post the updates released by the communications team.

- Branding on all online channels should be changed after an accident with fatalities, as a mark of respect and acknowledgement of the human tragedy. This should be done within one hour of confirmation that lives have been lost, and synchronized across all touchpoints. Typically, this involves “greying out” the airline logo. A hash-tagged phrase may also be posted on Facebook and other platforms, which allows condolence messages to be grouped and tracked. The airline may also create a memorial symbol or logo which can be used on all its online platforms.
• The decision on when to transition back to the normal promotional branding is sensitive, and should be synchronized with other communications and marketing activities. The transition may be done in phases, with unaffected markets used to test the audience response. “Transitional” branding and images may also be used if appropriate – for example, smiling faces of cabin crew on the website or Facebook page, but with the “crisis” hashtag still displayed.

• Individuals within the management team who use social media personally (for example, a high-profile “celebrity” CEO) should also be persuaded to limit their comments to the approved messaging, which must remain authentic. Other employees should also be reminded of the company’s social media policy.

• Monitoring online conversations (“social listening”) about the company is an essential form of intelligence, particularly during a crisis, and will allow the company to adapt its communication strategy and engage more effectively with key influencers as the story develops. There are numerous free and paid online tools which allow companies to monitor online conversations, to measure sentiment about particular issues, and to analyze the impact of the company’s own social media activities.

• This includes monitoring “live streaming” channels such as Facebook Live or Periscope (owned by Twitter), which are rapidly gaining in popularity (see section 2.1iii). Similarly, it is important to monitor the detailed technical information about the flight path and the aircraft involved which will quickly be available to any interested party on sites like FlightRadar24, Flightaware.com, Flightview.com or Aeroinside.

• Decisions on whether to actively engage with online conversations about the crisis situation, whether on owned or third-party platforms, should be a policy decision made at a senior level. Staff designated as online “spokespeople”, should have received appropriate training and be clear on the communication strategy and messaging. The company’s own social media platforms may be used to engage directly with customers, to acknowledge their concerns or answer questions in real time – for example, about potential service disruptions a result of the event. When responding to online conversations or posts, respond in the same medium – Twitter to Twitter, or Facebook to Facebook.
4.1 Using Online Channels:

Company Website
The company website is a primary communication channel, and usually a major source of revenues for airlines, through online booking. It is also one of the first places journalists, customers and others will look for information about an accident or major incident, and how it might affect ongoing operations (for example disruption at an airport). All public statements should be posted to the website, with the link referenced in news releases and social media posts.

It may also be effective to launch a “live blog” on the website, with rolling updates and information about the unfolding situation and the company’s response to it, with links to statements made by other involved parties or agencies (similar to the “live blogs” now commonly seen on online news portals after a major event).

- A “dark site” should be prepared during “peacetime”. This is a dedicated site which can be activated almost immediately (within minutes) after notification of an accident and replaces the normal home page on the website. The “dark site” would normally be activated in the event of an accident with fatalities, although it may be appropriate in other circumstances, depending on the nature of the event and the degree of media/public interest (for example a massive systems failure which creates extensive disruption).

- For lesser events (or for non-airline parties involved in an accident), a short statement posted on the website may suffice. Consider hyperlinking key words in the statement to more detailed information for those who wish to find it.

- The “dark site” should be branded very simply, with logos changed to monochrome and without any of the promotional material which normally appears on the home page. It should display the latest statement on the situation. Previous statements should be archived and available via a link. Customers should be able to click through a link to reach the standard home page so they can continue to make online bookings or access other information. However, any inappropriate images should be removed from the home page after an accident – for example photos of smiling cabin crew, or promotions involving the route flown by the aircraft involved.

- Other material which may be provided on the “dark site” includes:
  - Background information on the aircraft and engine type
  - Background information on the company and its operations
  - Summary of the company’s response to date
  - Link to video of statements made by the CEO or other senior executives
Some organizations publish a “blog” from the CEO on their website. Blogs are usually less formal in tone than other forms of executive communication, and are intended to show the “human” face of an otherwise impersonal organization. In the event of an accident or serious incident, a CEO blog can be an effective means of demonstrating a genuinely “caring” response by talking about the personal impact of the event and what it meant to the author. But it needs to be carefully worded to avoid appearing glib or insincere. If the sentiments expressed are not authentic, the blog should not be published.

Twitter
Twitter is the most widely used “micro blogging” service, with millions of users posting short messages (tweets) to their online followers every day. Twitter is available in more than 30 languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Arabic. However in China the most popular micro-blogging service is Sina Weibo, which has more than 260 million active users of which 91% use the service on mobile devices.

Any Twitter user can become a “follower” of anybody who tweets, and anyone receiving a tweet can reply to everyone copied on the message, or “retweet” it to their own followers. This can create an exponential surge in the number of users talking about a compelling story. Twitter has become a primary source of breaking news, particularly in fast-developing situations like an aircraft accident.

A tweet from a survivor or eyewitness can reach tens of thousands of users around the world in minutes, including “mainstream” journalists who monitor Twitter. The 140-character limit (now increased to 160 characters for re-tweets) does not provide space for explanation or context, but Twitter allows companies to post instant updates to a potentially global audience, and to link to more detailed statements or to videos posted elsewhere.

Using Twitter
- A Twitter feed should be established in “peacetime” and used for regular announcements and promotions. This will build a dedicated follower community of customers, fans and mainstream journalists.
- Hashtags (#) should be combined with keywords to “tag” the subject matter of a Twitter post – for example: “#(flight number)” or “#(flight number) response”.
- After an accident with loss of life, “grey out” the company logo on Twitter as a mark of respect. This should continue until the airline’s branding is restored on all online channels
- Use a maximum of two hashtags per tweet. Hash tags allow followers to group and identify Twitter conversations on this topic.
- Tweets can be used to update followers on the latest information on the company’s response (for example: “#(flight number). Passenger information center now open. Call 800 1234 5678”).
• Posts should include links to more detailed sources of information – for example, statements posted on the company website or a video on YouTube
• Twitter can be used to post links to statements made by other parties, or to “retweet” messages which are supportive of the company’s position. A retweet always includes the Twitter username (@xxx) of the person who posted the original comment. This extends the longevity of the post by ensuring it appears again, possibly several times
• Exercise caution when using Twitter’s automated “retweet” button, as this simply forwards the entire message to your own followers without an additional comment. If you wish to add a comment before forwarding the tweet, retweet the post manually.
• Share Twitter content with the audience on other networks by re-posting tweets on Facebook and LinkedIn, when appropriate. A tweet can also be embedded into the website. Click on the date in the upper-right-hand corner of a tweet. Then click More and select Embed Tweet. Copy the code and add it to the website.
• Develop a policy on whether the company would respond to tweets containing the company name (Twitter handle) in a crisis. Many companies use Twitter as a customer relations channel and maintain a dedicated social media team with specific protocols for timing and tone of responses, or this function may be outsourced to an external agency. In a crisis situation, the sheer number of people posting comments may preclude responding to individual tweets (apart from posting new information to all followers, as above). But this should not be left to the discretion of individual employees or agency staff.

Facebook
With more than 1.7 billion active users (as of mid-2016), Facebook is arguably the best social media channel for engaging with customers and “fans” of the company. In “peacetime” the company’s Facebook page can be used to promote new products and services and to engage in conversations with customers. In a crisis, it becomes an invaluable addition to the company’s overall communication response.

Using Facebook
• The Facebook page should be treated as a primary communication channel after an accident or serious incident. Any statements and information published on other channels should be posted to Facebook, and updated at the same time.
• After an accident, the cover photo and any colorful images on the Facebook page should be reviewed and temporarily replaced by somber or plain branding (“grey out” the logo). Inappropriate or insensitive images, for example pictures of smiling cabin crew, should be removed. This should continue until the branding on all online channels is restored.
• Because users can post their own comments and refer to other sources of information, conversations on the Facebook page should be monitored and a policy established for responding to comments, or for correcting any misinformation or incorrect statements which are posted.
Facebook can be a useful channel for engaging directly with customers in a crisis – for example, by responding to their questions in real time.

Particular attention should be paid to posts by employees. If the post contravenes the company’s social media policy, it should be deleted or hidden. Inappropriate or abusive posts can be hidden by hovering the cursor to the right of the offending post. The “hide” button will appear. When this is clicked, a dialogue box will appear which asks if you want to hide all current and future posts by that user.

The “Facebook Live” application may contain real-time streaming images of the accident scene or other key developments (including supposedly private next-of-kin briefings). This channel (and other live streaming applications such as Periscope) should be constantly monitored by the social listening team.

You may choose to stream media briefings on Facebook Live, although you should consider whether to show only the CEO/senior executive statement, or continue streaming during the question/answer session afterwards, during which the media may become hostile or persistently demand answers to questions which you cannot answer.

YouTube
An estimated 300 hours of video material are uploaded onto YouTube every minute (according to Google, which owns the channel) and there are more than 4 billion video views each day. TV coverage of aviation accidents is commonly uploaded to YouTube, including amateur video taken by eyewitnesses. Many companies, including airlines, have created their own dedicated “TV channel” on YouTube, through which they regularly post videos to be viewed by customers and other followers. A dedicated YouTube channel can be customized with the company’s corporate branding and include images, links and relevant information.

Using YouTube

- Even if the airline does not operate a dedicated YouTube channel, statements from the CEO or by other senior executives after an accident can be uploaded to YouTube. The video should be publicized by posting the link on the website and on Twitter.
- When uploading videos to YouTube, choose the appropriate category and use keywords (“tags”) to describe the content. The tags will allow users to find the video via the YouTube search engine.
- As with Facebook and other social media sites, other users may post comments in response to anything posted on YouTube. You should monitor these comments and make a policy decision on whether to respond to any negative or misleading statements.
- YouTube is owned by Google, and user accounts are identified by the individual’s Google+ profile. The company profile should be established on Google+ before posting to YouTube.
5. Managing Information After an Accident: Roles and Responsibilities:

Numerous parties will be involved in the response to an aviation accident or serious incident. To a greater or lesser degree, all will face pressure to provide information to the news media and other parties, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the event. Depending on the circumstances, this may include the airline, emergency services, the investigating body, government agencies, arrival and departure airports, codeshare or franchise partners, third-party contractors, air navigation service provider and the aircraft and engine manufacturers.

To avoid confusion and inconsistency, it is important that each party understands its role in the response, the kind of information it can legitimately provide, and the appropriate messaging to use. In other words: stay in your lane!

5.1 Operating Carrier:
The operator of the aircraft will inevitably attract the most intense public interest and demands for information. With the likelihood that “breaking news” will appear on social media channels almost immediately, the airline should be prepared to issue a first acknowledgement of the event (or that it is aware of emerging reports) within 15 minutes of notification. This first brief message would ideally be posted on one or more of the airline’s social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook and also appear as a link on the main website. Note: if you are unable to confirm that the initial reports are correct, use conditional language (“We are working to establish the facts”). Do not confirm information which you are unable to verify through the airline’s own channels.

The first message should include the following:

- Confirmation that the airline is aware of the event, or has seen initial reports
- Any factual information which is already verified (flight number, aircraft type, origin/destination, nature of the event)
- Commitment to provide further information as soon as it is available

Further factual information can be posted as it becomes available, but the airline should aim to release a more complete summary of what is known to date (a “holding statement” or “Statement #1”) to the media and posted on the website and other online channels. The airline may also choose to respond with factual updates to comments posted to its “owned” social media platforms, or on third-party sites.

The first summary (“Statement #1”) should include the following:

- Confirmation of the nature of the event
- Expression of regret and concern for those on board
- Factual information which has been verified (flight number, aircraft type, origin/destination, number on board, where and when the event occurred)
- Actions taken by the airline since it was notified - for example, opening an emergency enquiry center, mobilizing support teams
- Immediate priorities for the airline – for example, dispatching a “Go-Team” to the scene, or contacting loved ones of those on board
As the situation develops, facts should be clarified in successive statements, which should focus on the actions taken by the airline. These statements can be issued via a combination of traditional news releases and social media channels. Short-message platforms like Twitter can be used to alert users to new information, with a link to more detailed communications posted on the airline’s website or Facebook page.

After the initial acknowledgement, future statements from the operating carrier should include some or all of the following:

- Expressions of regret and concern for the wellbeing of passengers and crew members and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the flight (e.g. flight number; aircraft type; origin; destination; number of passengers and crew; departure time; where and when the incident occurred; codeshare partner/s involved)
- Specific actions the airline has taken since it was notified of the event (e.g. activating crisis management center/s; activating a passenger information center; deployment of special assistance teams; establishment of family assistance center/s; care and support provided for survivors and/or families; financial assistance; memorial ceremonies)
- Factual information about the aircraft (aircraft and engine types; dates of manufacture and acquisition; flight hours, number of flights; how many in the fleet; seating configuration; cargo capacity; maintenance history)
- Factual information about the crew (names*; designations; operating experience; type ratings; history with the airline)
- Factual information about the passengers on board (number of passengers; names*; nationalities; number of adults/children)
- Expression of support for the investigation
- Factual information about the airline (history; company structure; network; aircraft fleet; crew training; maintenance; previous accidents or incidents)

*NB: Names of passengers and/or crew members should not be released publicly (if at all) until their legal next-of-kin have been notified, and only then in close coordination with the authorities.

The Operating Carrier should avoid commenting on any of the following:

- How the investigation will be structured, and what it will focus on
- Information in the maintenance records
- The possible cause/s of the accident – for example, failure of on-board systems or airport equipment
- The way the aircraft broke apart, and what this might indicate
- Finding key pieces of evidence, e.g. flight data or cockpit voice recorders
- The actions of the crew before the accident, or what they might have done to prevent it
- The possible relationship between crew training and the accident
- The possibility of pilot error, or of error or wrongdoing by any other employee
- The likelihood that someone else must be to blame
- The role of weather or air traffic control
- The condition of human remains, and how they will be identified
5.2 Franchise services: Operating Carrier

Many airlines, particularly regional carriers, operate in the livery, and using the flight designator code, of a larger “Network” carrier, under franchise agreements. The smaller airline may be owned by the Network carrier on whose behalf it operates, but it is legally designated as the operating carrier (AOC holder), and should therefore take the lead role in dealing with the news media after an accident or major incident.

As a general rule, published statements should be issued under the letterhead and in the name of the operating carrier, and any spokespeople quoted in statements or appearing at press briefings or interviews should be employed by the operating carrier. However, the fact that a franchise flight carried the livery, flight number and passengers of another airline cannot be ignored. If this relationship is not acknowledged and clarified, it may cause confusion among the news media, families, and other stakeholders.

In situations where the Operating Carrier is a wholly-owned subsidiary of a larger group), it may also be appropriate for the Group to stand alongside or even lead communications after an accident, particularly if the likely cause raises wider issues for the Group itself. As ever, a previously agreed policy between the Group and the subsidiary may need to be reviewed in light of the particular circumstances (for example, the response to the Germanwings accident in 2015, in which the Deutsche Lufthansa Group CEO took a leading role).

In addition to the “best practice” guidelines described in section 5.1 above, a franchise or “feeder” airline should therefore also include some or all of the following in its public statements or in comments to the news media:

- The nature of its relationship with the “Network” carrier on whose behalf the flight was operated
- The support which the “Network” carrier is providing to survivors and/or to family members of those on board
- The support which the “Network” carrier is providing to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activation of its call center to handle enquiries about passengers; assistance in establishing family assistance center/s)
5.3 Franchise services: Network Carrier (owner of the primary brand)
After an accident involving an outsourced franchise or feeder operation, any attempt by the Network carrier to distance itself from the accident or from the operating carrier will raise questions about its integrity and commitment to its customers. It is therefore in the interest of the Network carrier to be seen to support the smaller operating carrier and that statements from the two companies are consistent.

While the operating carrier should take the lead in dealing with the news media in most circumstances (see above), the Network carrier should focus on the following in any statements or responses to questions:

- Expression of concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Acknowledgement that the accident/incident involved a franchise service operated on its behalf, and carrying its customers (ticket-holders)
- Actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims
- Assistance provided to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activating telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center)

All other questions should be deferred to the operating carrier, or to the investigating body.

The Network carrier should not:
- Deny or downplay the existence of the franchise partnership
- Speak on behalf of the operating carrier
- Issue statements or make any comments which contradict or are inconsistent with statements made by the operating carrier
5.4 Codeshare Partner/s

The proliferation of codeshare and alliance partnerships has made it increasingly likely that two or more airlines may be involved in the same incident – either as the operating carrier or as a codeshare partner whose flight designator code is carried on that service, and whose passengers or crew members may be on board. In such cases, the operating carrier should always take the lead in dealing with the demands of the news media. However, it is important that codeshare partner/s are prepared to respond to questions from journalists or from other stakeholders.

The Codeshare Partner should focus on the following:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Acknowledgement that the accident/incident involved a codeshare service on which its own customers (ticket-holders) and/or crew members may have been on board
- Actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims
- Assistance provided to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activating a telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center/s)

All other questions should be deferred to the operating carrier, or to the investigating body.

The Codeshare Partner should not:

- Deny or downplay the existence of the codeshare partnership
- Speak on behalf of the operating carrier
- Issue statements or make any comments which contradict or are inconsistent with statements made by the operating carrier
5.5 Aircraft and Engine Manufacturers
(Also applies to suppliers of key systems or components)
After an aircraft accident or serious incident, the primary role of the aircraft and engine manufacturer is to support the accident investigation and to keep the operating carrier and other operators informed of any relevant information or recommendations which may result from the investigation.

The manufacturers will normally be in constant contact with the airline’s flight operations or engineering departments after an accident. A similar dialogue should also be maintained with the airline’s Public Relations staff, to ensure they have access to the latest information and to ensure that responses to the news media and other stakeholders are consistent from both parties.

While the manufacturers will often attract intense media interest, particularly if the performance of the aircraft or engines appears to be a factor, they are strictly bound by the “party” rules on the release of information which are normally imposed by the investigating body. However, the manufacturers still have a role to play in providing factual background information about the specific aircraft or engine type, as long as the information is not intended to encourage journalists to make judgments or reach conclusions about the likely outcome of the investigation.

In statements to the news media, the aircraft and engine manufacturers should focus on:
- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the aircraft or engine type (serial number; date of delivery; flight hours; number of flights; number in service; number of operators)
- Expressions of support and commitment to the accident investigation
- Description of actions taken in response to the accident/incident (e.g. deployment of accident investigation team)
- Safety record of the aircraft or engine type
- Actions taken (if any) as a result of the investigation

The manufacturers should not:
- Comment or speculate on the progress or likely outcome of the investigation
- Selectively “leak” information which is intended to exonerate the aircraft or engine type or imply that other parties or factors were responsible
- Comment on or publicly dispute statements made by the investigating body
- Attempt to discredit or undermine the investigating body, or its findings
5.6 Airport Operator

If there is an accident or serious incident at or near an airport, the airport itself will become the focal point of media attention. Journalists will congregate in the terminal area attempting to find company spokespeople, eyewitnesses and the friends and family of those on board. TV crews and photographers will also request access to the accident site, or a suitable vantage point.

Depending on the circumstances, the airport itself may be temporarily closed or suffer serious disruption as a result of the accident, so it will need to communicate quickly with passengers and with airline station personnel, ground handlers and other airport users.

The airport operator will have an important role to play in dealing with the news media on-site and coordinating any press briefings or media access to the accident scene. If the airport has a media center, this should become the location of media briefings by any of the parties involved (e.g. the operating carrier). Where appropriate, joint briefings may be arranged which could involve the airport authority, emergency services, operating carrier and/or the investigating body.

The airport itself should also be prepared to respond to questions from journalists. Any statements or comments from the Airport Operator should focus on the following:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the circumstances of the accident/incident
- The progress of the search and rescue operation
- Facilities and equipment which the airport has provided to support the search & rescue or recovery operations
- Support provided by the airport authorities to the operating carrier (e.g. assistance in establishing a reception center for “meeters and greeters”)
- The impact on the ongoing operation of the airport
- Actions which the airport has taken to mitigate the impact on other airlines and to minimize passenger inconvenience

All other questions should be directed to the operating carrier, the emergency services or the investigating body.

The Airport Operator should not:

- Speak on behalf of other involved parties – for example, the operating carrier
- Be the first to release information about the number of injuries or fatalities, or their identities
- Speculate about the potential cause of the accident/incident
- Comment on the accident investigation
5.7 Air Navigation Service Provider (ANSP)

There have been numerous examples of accidents which implicate the air navigation service provider (ANSP) – for example, mid-air collisions or accidents in which questions were raised about the information or instructions given to the crew by air traffic controllers. In these cases, the ANSP can expect to become one of the targets of media and public attention as well as being a party to the investigation.

The ANSP should be prepared to respond to questions from journalists, and from other stakeholders (for example, employees). Any statements or comments should focus on the following:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the circumstances of the accident or incident
- Expression of support and commitment to the investigation
- Description of actions taken in response to the accident/incident
- Factual information about the nature of the service provided by the organization, its resources, operating structure, ownership etc.
- The training and experience levels required of front-line staff such as air traffic controllers
- Actions taken (if any) as a result of the investigation

The ANSP should not:

- Comment or speculate on the progress or likely outcome of the investigation
- Selectively “leak” information which is intended to exonerate individuals or the ANSP itself, or imply that other parties or factors were responsible
- Comment on or publicly dispute statements made by the investigating body
- Attempt to discredit or undermine the investigating body, or its findings
5.8 Ground Handling Agents
The role of Ground Handling Agents (GHAs) in a crisis is a matter for contractual agreement with the airline concerned and is fraught with issues of legal liability and insurance coverage. In many cases, GHAs do not include specific responsibility for crisis support in their Service-Level Agreements, although it is advisable for airlines to discuss this issue with their GHAs and, if crisis support is required, to offer appropriate training. GHAs can play a valuable role in supporting an airline after an accident away from home base.

In terms of support for the communications team, this may include:

- Activating a local PR agency to provide media monitoring, translation and distributing statements in the local market
- Attending and reporting back on any press conferences conducted locally by the airport, emergency services or local authorities
- Monitoring and reporting back on any comments made by families or other involved parties to the news media
- Ensuring its staff do not make any comment to the media (or post messages about the accident on their own social media channels)
5.9 Investigating Body
The investigating body is normally the main source of information about the progress and conclusions of the technical investigation into any aircraft accident or serious incident. Other parties invited to participate in the investigation are generally required to accept rules prohibiting the disclosure of information on the progress or findings of the investigation, unless that information is released by the investigating body itself.

As the investigation team comprises recognized experts in their respective fields, there is usually enormous interest from journalists in any information they provide, particularly in the first few days after an accident. The investigating body should therefore consider holding regular press briefings and maintaining a flow of information as it becomes available.

Statements or comments to the news media from the investigating body could include:

- Factual information about the accident or incident (aircraft and engine types; operator; circumstances of the accident; persons on board; number of injuries and/or fatalities)
- Actions taken by the investigation body to date (deployment of investigation team; name of investigator in charge; parties invited to participate in the investigation)
- Structure of the investigation team and focus areas
- Potential timeline for the investigation
- Timeline and channels for the release of further information (e.g. daily press briefings, news releases, statements posted on website)
- Statements of initial findings
- Date and location of any public hearing
- Date when the final investigation report will be published
- Summary of key findings and safety recommendations, if any

The day after an accident is not the time to develop a crisis communications strategy. While every crisis situation is different and may throw up circumstances and issues which were not anticipated, having a plan provides an invaluable frame of reference to guide the response to any situation.

Invest the time to create a robust communication plan in “peacetime”, and on training and exercising the people who will implement it. If your organization has limited resources, or does not employ full-time communication professionals, consider where you could source external help to deal with the full spectrum of communication challenges you would face in a crisis. Focus on what you can do with your current resources, rather than on what you can’t.

6.1 Creating a crisis communications plan

A crisis communications plan should describe how the company will mobilize its communication resources to support the response and provide guidance on roles, responsibilities and actions for each member of the communication team.

The main elements of a robust crisis communications plan include:

- Statement of company communication policy, including the names (or positions) of authorized spokespeople
- Outline of the communication organization, and its interface with the corporate Crisis Management Team (the head of communications should sit on the CMT)
- Protocols for ensuring all available communication channels are properly coordinated and that information and messaging is consistent to all audiences
- Description of functional roles and responsibilities, and candidates
- Checklists for each functional role, outlining the main tasks
- Templates for initial statements, including the first online posts, which can be issued immediately after key information is confirmed. Templates should be developed for various possible scenarios, including accident; serious incident; diversion; hijacking/security incident; service disruption
- Database with phone and email addresses of important internal and external contacts (including primary media outlets, online influencers and service providers)
- Standard forms and documentation (for example, media call logging form, press conference registration form)
6.2 Crisis communication team: Key positions
The crisis communication team is responsible for developing and implementing the company’s communication strategy and for ensuring that it is able to communicate rapidly and effectively with key internal and external stakeholders across multiple channels.

In a crisis, the company’s own communications team may need to be supplemented by external resources, for example from a Public Relations agency. At a minimum, the team should be capable of executing the following functional responsibilities. Actual designations for each position will vary within each company, but the broad division of responsibilities between functions remains the same. If resources are limited, one individual may be responsible for two or more functions.

1. Communication Representative on the Crisis Management Team
   The Communication Representative on the CMT is responsible for providing strategic communications advice to the CEO and members of the CMT, and for ensuring that the airline is providing accurate and timely information to internal and external stakeholders, via all available channels. Also, to ensure that all communication channels are properly coordinated and that information and messaging is consistent to all audiences. This position is normally filled by the Head of Communications.

2. Communication Team Leader
   The Communication Team Leader is responsible for the overall management of the Communication Team and for ensuring that the communication strategy is executed. This includes managing the flow of information to the media via news releases, social media posts, interviews and press conferences and ensuring that media enquiries are being managed effectively, at head office and at other locations.

3. Editorial Writer
   The Editorial Writer is responsible for drafting all written materials, including news releases, backgrounders, briefing documents and statements delivered by company spokespeople.

4. Online Communication Manager
   The Online Communication Manager is responsible for managing the company’s social media and online channels and ensuring that new information is posted promptly. The Online Communication Manager is also responsible for coordinating online activities with other departments such as the commercial team, monitoring online conversations about the situation and advising on whether the company should engage with online conversations by posting responses on “owned” or third-party social media platforms.
5. **Internal Communication Manager**
The Internal Communication Manager is responsible for ensuring that all statements issued externally are provided to employees via internal communication channels such as blast emails, company intranet, bulletin boards or platforms such as Yammer. This includes liaising with operational departments to ensure that front-line employees such as cabin crew, call center agents or airport staff are provided with guidance on how to respond to customer enquiries.

6. **International Co-ordinator**
The International Coordinator is responsible for maintaining contact with overseas offices and PR Agencies and for ensuring that they receive updated information as it is released from Head Office. This includes ensuring that media enquiries are managed effectively in markets affected by the crisis and that local media coverage is being monitored and reported to Head Office.

7. **Media Monitoring Co-ordinator**
The Media Monitoring Coordinator is responsible for ensuring that all relevant electronic, print and online media coverage is collated and reported to the Crisis Management Team. This includes social listening to ensure that relevant conversations on social media are monitored, particularly any images which are posted.

8. **Media Enquiry Center Manager**
The Media Enquiry Center Manager is responsible for supervising the team answering incoming media calls, and for ensuring that agents responding to the media are provided with updated statements and talking points. A summary of media enquiries should be provided regularly to the Communication Team Leader.

9. **Communication Representative/s on the Go-Team**
The Communication Representative/s on the Go-Team is/are responsible for traveling to the scene of the event and coordinating all communication activities locally. This includes arranging press briefings and interviews by the senior executive on-site and ensuring that the Communication Team Leader is kept informed of developments at the scene.

If the resources are available, more than one communication representative may travel with the Go-Team, or other members of the communication team may “rotate” to the accident location and provide some backup and relief.

It may also be helpful to assign a member of the communications team to the Family Assistance Centre (FAC), where family interviews and briefings are conducted. There is often intense media pressure around the FAC, with journalists attempting to interview family members or even to attend the confidential briefings. Family members should not be prevented from talking to the media if they wish to do so – but equally, they should be protected from unwanted media intrusion.
Family members should also be advised not to take photos or videos within the FAC, or to post information from the family briefings on social media sites. However it is always possible that one or more family members will record (or even live-stream) family briefings on their smartphones. Executives designated to brief family members should therefore be aware that their comments may become public.

In a crisis, traditional means of communication such as mobile phone or e-mail can become deluged with incoming information. Careful consideration should be given to using “group chat” apps such as Line or WhatsApp as a means to keep everyone apprised of the latest information.
6.3 Crisis Communication Team: Organization Chart

CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM

First Responder

Communication Representative on CMT

COMMUNICATION TEAM

Communication Team Leader

Admin Support/Record Keeper

Editorial Writer

Press Conference Moderator/Escort

Online Communication Manager

International Coordinator

Internal Communication Manager

Family Assistance Centre/Site Rep

Media Call Centre Manager

Non-involved Offices: Local PR Agency

Media Monitor/Social listening (PR Agency)
6.4 Training spokespeople
Dealing with the media in the midst of a major crisis, particularly with the added emotional stress of responding to a fatal accident, is not “business as usual”. Spokespeople must understand how to defend the organization under pressure from aggressive reporters who may have more information than they themselves do. Front-line operational or commercial managers based far from Head Office (for example, airline country managers or station managers) may be the first company representatives to reach the scene, and may have no previous experience of dealing with the news media.

Anybody designated as a potential spokesperson in a crisis should receive appropriate training. This includes senior executives who may have previously received “media training” or who may feel that they are already familiar with how journalists work. Crisis communication training should provide:

- An understanding of the challenges the organization will face after an accident, and what audiences expect to see and hear
- How the news media work, and what they will look for
- The impact of social media on breaking news coverage
- The role of company spokespeople
- How to deliver key messages
- The importance of non-verbal communication
- Handling different interview situations – live, recorded, “down the line”, ambush, press conference
- Interview techniques – “blocking and bridging”
- How to hold a press conference

6.5 Exercising the plan
Do not leave your crisis communication plan on the shelf and allow it to gather dust. The moment you most need it, the plan will be out of date, nobody will understand their roles, and key players may no longer be with the organization. Ensure that you review or update your plan at least every six months. Check contact lists and the nominated candidates for key positions. Ask whether the current version of the plan still reflects the “real world”, or if it is now outdated as a result of organizational changes, or changes in the external environment.

At least once per year, conduct an exercise to test the plan and to ensure that everyone understands their role, and the purpose of the plan. An exercise may be a simple table-top or a full-scale input-response exercise run by a “control team”. Accidents do not happen with plenty of warning, during working hours. Neither should your exercises. Run no-notice exercises at inconvenient times, or when key players are absent. This will provide a far better indication of your true capabilities, and your ability to respond effectively to a major event which occurs at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

The proper time to prepare for an accident or serious incident is before it occurs, and these preparations should be exercised on a routine basis. In addition to this document, IATA has detailed Emergency Response Planning (ERP) guidance materials on how to prepare for these rare events from an operations perspective.
Communications exercises which you may consider running include:

- **Notification exercise**: Check contact numbers are valid and key players can be reached quickly
- **Slow walk-through**: Take a potential scenario and ask a series of questions of your team. Check whether your current plan provides the answers
- **Tabletop**: Run through a simple scenario and test one aspect of the plan – for example, developing updated press statements
- **Input-response exercise**: Test the entire communication plan by using an exercise control team to provide “inputs” via phone calls, emails, social media posts and “news reports”.

After each exercise, conduct an immediate de-brief to capture key learning points and ensure the plan is updated and improved. Exercises may include other departments, or overseas offices. You may also wish to include third parties (for example, codeshare partners) in your exercise.

Time invested in preparing, training and exercising your communication plan is never wasted, even if you never experience an accident or major incident.
7. Sample Social Media posts and Crisis Statements

7.1 First tweet – Aircraft accident
#(flight number)alert. We are investigating reports of an incident involving flight xxx (origin) to (destination). More information shortly.

7.2 Second tweet – Aircraft accident
#(flight number)alert. (Airline) regrets to confirm flight xxx (origin) to (destination) involved in an accident at (location). Response teams mobilized. More information to follow.

7.3 Third tweet – Aircraft accident
#(flight number)alert. Media Statement 1 – (flight number) accident. Released at (time, date). (Link to statement published on company website)

7.4 Statement #1 – Aircraft accident

XXX bulletin #1 Issued at (time), (date)

ACCIDENT TO XXX FLIGHT XXXXX:
(Airline) regrets to confirm that flight (number) from (origin) to (destination) has been involved in an accident at/near (location). The aircraft was a (aircraft type)

At this time, search and rescue operations are in progress. It is believed that there were (number) passengers and (number) crew on board the flight, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest.

(Airline) has established/is working to establish a passenger information center, and a toll-free number is available/will be available shortly for family or friends of those who may have been on board the aircraft.

The toll-free number (if available) is: (give number). For those calling from outside (country), please call (give international country code or alternative numbers). Updated information will also be posted on the XXX website and on Twitter at @(airline name) #(flightnumber).

Note to Editors: We ask that members of the news media do not call the XXX Telephone Enquiry Center, as this line is reserved for family members seeking information about those who may have been on board. Please direct your calls to XXX’ media hotline, (give number).
7.5 Second statement – Aircraft accident

XXX bulletin #2
Issued at (time), (date)

ACCIDENT TO (AIRLINE) FLIGHT XXXXX:
(Airline) can now provide further details on the accident to flight (number) from (origin) to (destination) earlier today.

The accident occurred at/near (location) at (time) while the aircraft was (phase of flight). The aircraft was a (aircraft type)

We deeply regret to confirm that there are a number of fatalities among those on board, although we do not have further details. Search and rescue operations are still in progress, and we will release additional information as soon as it becomes available.

(Airline) Chief Executive XXX said: “Everyone at (airline) is deeply shocked and saddened by this tragic accident and our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of our passengers and colleagues on board the flight (number)”.

It is believed that there were (number) passengers and (number) crew on board the flight, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest. (Airline) has established/is working to establish a passenger information center, and a toll-free number is available/will be available shortly for family or friends of those who may have been on board the aircraft.

The toll-free number (if available) is: (give number). For those calling from outside (country), please call (give international country code or alternative numbers). Updated information will also be posted on the (Airline) website: (give address) and on Twitter at @airlinename #flightnumber

Note to Editors: We ask that members of the news media do not call the XXX Telephone Enquiry Center, as this line is reserved for family members seeking information about those who may have been on board. Please direct your calls to XXX' media hotline, (give number).

7.6 First statement – Aircraft incident

XXX bulletin #1
Issued at (time), (date)

INCIDENT TO (AIRLINE) FLIGHT XXXXX:
(Airline) can confirm that flight (number) from (origin) to (destination) was involved in an incident today at/near (location) when (describe nature of incident). The aircraft was a (aircraft type)
The crew of flight (number) (describe actions of crew), in accordance with standard operating procedures. The aircraft landed safely at (airport) and there were no injuries to the passengers and crew on board.

It is believed that flight (number) was carrying (number) passengers and (number) crew, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest. Our priority now is to ensure that passengers are rebooked on other flights and can continue their journeys without further delay.

(Airline) regrets the inconvenience caused by today’s incident. The incident will be investigated by (name investigating body) and (airline) will cooperate fully with the investigation.

Updated information will also be posted on the (Airline) website: (give address) and on Twitter at @(airlinename) #(flightnumber)

7.7 First statement – Aircraft diversion

XXX bulletin #1
Issued at (time), (date)

DIVERSION OF (AIRLINE) FLIGHT XXXXX:
(Airline) can confirm that flight (number) from (origin) to (destination) diverted to land at (location) today, after (describe nature of in-flight incident).

The aircraft landed safely at (time) and there were no injuries to passengers or crew members on board. The aircraft was a (aircraft type)

The crew of flight (number) (describe actions of crew), in accordance with standard operating procedures. It is believed that flight (number) was carrying (number) passengers and (number) crew, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest.

Our priority now is to ensure that passengers are rebooked on other flights and can continue their journeys without further delay. (Airline) regrets the inconvenience caused by today’s diversion.

The incident will be investigated by (name investigating body) and (airline) will cooperate fully with the investigation.

Updated information will also be posted on the (Airline) website: (give address) and on Twitter at @(airlinename) #(flightnumber)
Appendix: Case studies

Malaysia Airlines MH370

Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 disappeared on 8 March 2014 while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 people on board. The crew last contacted air traffic control when the aircraft was heading north-east towards Vietnamese airspace, less than one hour after departure. MH370 diverted from its planned track shortly afterwards and normal transmissions from the aircraft stopped. The Boeing 777-200ER was carrying 12 Malaysian crew members and 227 passengers from 15 countries.

Analysis of radar traces and a series of electronic “handshakes” with Inmarsat's satellite communications network revealed that the aircraft had turned back and flown across the Malaysian peninsula and the northern tip of Sumatra before heading south. The Malaysian Prime Minister announced on 24 March 2014 that Flight MH370 had ended in the southern Indian Ocean. Small pieces of debris have since been recovered, but the final resting place of MH370 is still unknown.

MH370 became the world’s number one news story throughout most of March and April 2014, leading the main news programmes on all three major US domestic TV networks for 11 consecutive nights after the aircraft disappeared – an unprecedented level of interest for an event in which only three American citizens were involved. The story also dominated global news channels like CNN, the BBC and Al Jazeera, with interminable speculation about the possible causes of the disappearance.

Malaysia Airlines activated its emergency response procedures in the early hours of 8th March, and made the first public announcement that the aircraft was missing shortly after it had been due to land in Beijing, followed by a press conference in Kuala Lumpur later that morning. But while the airline maintained a steady flow of statements focused on its actions to care for the MH370 families and to support the ongoing search effort, there was very little substantive information to share.

Control of the media operation was taken over by the Malaysian Government, which held daily press conferences in Kuala Lumpur attended by more than 800 journalists. The airline had little influence over the conduct of these briefings, even though its CEO stood on the podium alongside the Acting Minister of Transport and other officials.

The airline also had limited control over the content or timing of statements made by the Malaysian Prime Minister, senior military officials and other agencies, and often scant advance warning of significant announcements. This became a particular challenge when trying to ensure that family members were notified by the airline before new developments became public. This ultimately resulted in some families (and the news media) blaming the airline for “miscommunication” for which it was not responsible, or claiming that the airline had somehow “withheld” information which it did not have.
AirAsia Indonesia flight QZ8501

On Sunday 28 December 2014, an AirAsia Indonesia Airbus A320 went missing over the Java Sea while operating flight QZ8501 from Surabaya to Singapore with 155 passengers and seven crew members on board. The aircraft lost contact with Air Traffic Control at 07.24am Singapore time, shortly after the crew requested permission to divert around a storm system. The A320 was declared overdue at Singapore’s Changi Airport at 08.30, but it took a further two days for the wreckage to be found.

AirAsia Indonesia is a 49%-owned joint venture with local partners and one of nine separate operating carriers within the AirAsia Group, which is based in Kuala Lumpur. Even though a family reception centre had been opened at Changi Airport shortly after the flight was due to land, nothing had been posted on social media channels about the missing A320 until AirAsia issued its first statement at 11.42am in Malaysia.

AirAsia Group CEO Tony Fernandes is an unusually high-profile “celebrity CEO”, with more than one million followers on his personal Twitter account and numerous other business interests including part-ownership of Queen’s Park Rangers football club in the UK. As the “face” of the AirAsia brand – not least to the Group’s more than 17,000 employees – his personal involvement was pivotal in establishing a positive perception of the company’s response to the loss of flight QZ8501.

Fernandes arrived at company headquarters shortly after QZ8501 disappeared, and quickly assembled a group of executives to accompany him on a flight to Surabaya. While en route, he began posting a series of comments on his own Twitter feed describing his personal devastation and his commitment to supporting the families involved. His comments reinforced the core messaging in AirAsia’s official statements, which were published on all its online channels and released to the news media.

In Surabaya, Fernandes regularly briefed journalists and spent several days with family members waiting for news of the missing passengers and crew. When the aircraft was finally located, Fernandes memorably told the media that, as AirAsia’s leader, it was his “personal responsibility” to take care of the families of everyone involved, including those of his own employees. This included escorting the family of the first flight attendant to her funeral, and ensuring that all crew families received the same treatment and compensation payments as passengers’ relatives, despite different insurance arrangements. Fernandes remained personally involved throughout the response, including doing video calls with family members when he was unable to attend meetings in person.

AirAsia’s response to the loss of QZ8501 was widely commended, including in the United States, where AirAsia does not operate and the brand is virtually unknown. The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal both cited Fernandes as an example of how a CEO should react in the aftermath of a major accident, while PR
Week said he had provided “a lesson in crisis management…a textbook public relations response”.

**Germanwings Flight 4U9525**

Germanwings Flight 4U9525, a scheduled Airbus A320 service from Barcelona to Dusseldorf, crashed into the French Alps on 24 March 2015 after the co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz, initiated a steady descent towards the mountains. All 144 passengers and six crew members were killed in what was the first fatal crash in the history of Germanwings, a low-cost subsidiary of the Lufthansa Group established in 2002.

Lubitz had previously been treated for suicidal tendencies and declared “unfit to work” by a doctor, but hid his illness from his employer and reported for duty as normal. The revelation that the co-pilot had deliberately crashed the aircraft after locking the captain out of the cockpit came two days later from the French prosecutor leading the criminal investigation, based on information from the cockpit voice recorder.

Lufthansa Group policy stipulated that the Operating Carrier should take the lead as the public “face” of the response to any major event, supported by the full resources of the Group. However it was agreed that Lufthansa Group CEO Carsten Spohr and Germanwings CEO Thomas Winkelman would appear together at all media briefings and other public events to publicly acknowledge their shared accountability.

Germanwings issued the first public statement on Twitter at 11.49am (just over an hour after the crash), saying it was “investigating” breaking news reports of a fatal accident in the French Alps. The same information was posted on its Facebook page, suggesting that visitors check the Germanwings website for further updates. Unfortunately the website “crashed” due to the volume of traffic and remained unavailable for approximately two hours.

Before the crash was confirmed officially, a statement from Carsten Spohr was posted on the Lufthansa Facebook and Twitter pages, shared and retweeted by Germanwings. Both companies activated their “dark sites” shortly afterwards, using monochrome branding which remained in place for the next month, together with the hashtag #indeepsorrow. The other Lufthansa Group airlines, including Austrian, Brussels Airlines and Swiss, also changed the branding on their websites and social media channels.

Daily summaries of factual information were published on the Germanwings website, with links posted to Twitter and Facebook. Both Lufthansa and Germanwings also answered user comments and enquiries on Facebook and Twitter, redirecting them to the emergency telephone hotline or customer service, as appropriate. An online condolence website was also launched a week after the crash, in five different languages, where users could leave messages for the affected families.

Lufthansa Group’s response to the 4U9525 crash emphasized yet again the importance of rapid (and sustained) engagement with key audiences via online channels, even during the “breaking news” phase when very little factual information may be available. Also, the need to ensure that the CEO is positioned visibly at the centre of the response, not only with conventional media briefings and interviews, but also through their personal engagement with families, response teams and on social media.
Brussels Airport Bombings

Two suicide bombers, carrying explosives in large suitcases, attacked a departure hall at Brussels Zaventem Airport shortly before 8am on 22 March 2016. A third bomb was detonated at the Maalbeek metro station in central Brussels. The attacks killed 35 people, including the three bombers, and more than 300 others were injured. The attacks were the deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium’s history.

Brussels Airport was closed for 12 days after the explosions and partially reopened at less than 20% of its capacity and with check-in facilities relocated to a temporary structure. The departure hall did not reopen fully for 40 days, although the airport has since returned to normal operations. During the closure of Brussels Airport, flights were either cancelled or diverted to nearby Amsterdam Schiphol or to regional airports in Belgium including Brussels South-Charleroi and Ostend-Bruges.

The first indication that a serious event was under way came on Twitter, with a photograph showing smoke above the terminal building posted eight minutes after the first explosion. The European Air Traffic Control agency Eurocontrol posted confirmation that Brussels Airport was “unavailable until further notice” approximately 20 minutes later, as the airport was being evacuated. Brussels Airport itself tweeted confirmation of the explosions at 8.41am, telling people to avoid the airport area.

The “home” carrier Brussels Airlines, part of the Lufthansa Group, was severely disrupted after the attacks and forced to relocate operations to four alternative hubs: Frankfurt and Zurich for US and Africa-bound flights and Antwerp and Liege for regional flights within Europe. This created a massive logistical challenge which included repositioning aircraft, crew and ground support services; arranging new take-off and landing slots, and transporting passengers between Brussels and the temporary airports.

Brussels Airlines used online platforms as its primary communication channels, posting regular updates on its website and Facebook page and tweeting short statements with links to more complete information, particularly about cancelled and rescheduled flights. The airline’s social media team was augmented by 140 volunteers from across the company, with additional support from Swiss and the Lufthansa Group. They worked 24/7, responding to up to 5,000 passenger comments and questions per day, usually specific enquiries about bookings.

As the situation developed, the airline’s communication strategy was based on three key pillars of its response: sympathy and caring for the people affected (including its own employees); maintaining operations, despite the relocation of some flights to other airports; and recovery efforts going on “behind the scenes”.

Brussels Airlines maintained a steady stream of stories which showed the “human” face of the company and the determination of its staff to help passengers overcome the temporary inconvenience resulting from the attack. It also decided not to engage in the hugely sensitive discussion about additional screening measures, which caused additional delays when the airport reopened. Four months after the attacks, Brussels Airport recorded the second busiest July in its history, only 3% below passenger numbers for July 2015.
**Emirates Flight EK521**

On 3 August 2016, Emirates Flight EK521, a Boeing 777-300 carrying 282 passengers and 18 crew from Trivandrum, crashed while attempting a go-around after landing at Dubai International Airport. The aircraft climbed less than 30m above the runway before its speed decayed and it hit the runway again, this time with the landing gear partly retracted.

The impact tore off one engine and started a fire in the starboard wing, which quickly spread. Emergency services reached the aircraft less than 90 seconds later and tackled several fires while the passengers and crew were evacuated. Nine minutes after the aircraft came to rest there was an explosion in the centre fuel tank, which killed one of the firefighters.

In total, 24 people on board EK521 were injured, along with several of the firefighters, and it took more than 16 hours to bring the blaze under control. The airport was closed for more than five hours and reopened with one runway unusable. A total of 63 flights were diverted to Sharjah or Jebel Ali and a further 246 departures were cancelled. The disruption affected more than 23,000 passengers temporarily stranded in Dubai and created “ripple effects” throughout the networks of the two home carriers, Emirates and FlyDubai.

As the operating carrier and airline most affected by the partial closure, Emirates took the lead on the communications response, but in close coordination with the airport communications team. While Emirates focused on care of the passengers and crew on EK521 and the effect on other flights, Dubai Airport discussed the efforts to cater for disrupted passengers and to return to normal operations as quickly as possible. A separate statement was issued regarding the death of the firefighter and support for his family.

Emirates issued a stream of updates on its social media channels and the website as new information was confirmed. Branding was also changed to monochrome across all its online properties, acknowledging the seriousness of the accident. A personal statement was issued from the Emirates Group CEO and chairman Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum (also chairman of Dubai Airports) and posted to Facebook and the Emirates website, with a link on Twitter. A videotaped version of the statement was positioned on the Emirates channel on YouTube and the subsequent press conference was also recorded and an edited version posted on YouTube and on the Emirates website.

Analysis of the conversations about EK521 on social media channels revealed more than 74,000 posts about the accident. This included videos of the accident scene taken by staff on the airport ramp or directly involved in the response, in contravention of their terms of employment. This highlighted the challenge of trying to ensure that employees of airlines, airports or third-party contractors do not post sensitive images or comments about the response to a major incident on their personal social media channels.