



**DEALING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA  
AFTER AN AVIATION ACCIDENT**

**BEST PRACTICES IN THE  
AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

**GUIDELINES FOR AIRLINES, AIRPORTS,  
MANUFACTURERS**

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## 1. Introduction

Accidents or serious incidents with passenger or cargo aircraft often attract overwhelming public interest, particularly if they involve large numbers of fatalities or a well-known and respected operator. Online and conventional media channels can flash “breaking news” to audiences around the world before the airline itself is fully aware of the event. The airline and other involved parties – which may include the aircraft and engine manufacturer, airport, air navigation service provider and the investigating body – will be inundated with requests for information and explanations, from numerous directions.

Any organization which appears to be floundering in its response, or which fails to quickly reassure its numerous internal and external stakeholders, may suffer serious damage to its reputation, to its key relationships, and to its ongoing business. Companies must be prepared to engage proactively with the news media and with other audiences to ensure that they are seen to respond swiftly and appropriately, and that they intend to do “the right thing”.

These “best practice” communication guidelines are intended to help airlines, manufacturers, airports, investigating bodies and other involved parties to communicate effectively after an aircraft accident or major incident, to protect their own reputation and the reputation of the industry itself.

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 publication, IATA has detailed Emergency Response Planning (ERP) guidance materials on how to prepare for these rare events from an operations perspective.

## 2. First principles

### **Be proactive**

A key challenge for any company involved in a crisis is to minimize negative or hostile media coverage which can undermine the confidence of customers, employees, investors, business partners and other stakeholders. There is no chance of influencing the media coverage if you refuse to engage with reporters or hide behind “legalese” or “no comment”.

While what you will be able to say will be limited, you should aim to establish yourself as a credible and trusted source of information about what your company is doing, as quickly as possible. The aim is to show that your organization is supportive, engaged, very concerned and responding responsibly. Once you have issued a first “holding statement” acknowledging your involvement, maintain a steady flow of information through the news media and via other communication channels – for example, the company website. Focus on your response to the event, and what you are doing to mitigate the consequences.

### **Be quick to establish yourself as the best source of information about your organization and how it is responding**

Airlines and other involved parties no longer have the traditional “golden hour” in which to gather information before issuing a statement. With the proliferation of Social Media channels like Twitter, Flickr and YouTube, there are numerous examples of eyewitnesses posting comments, photos and videos of aviation incidents within minutes of the event. This includes “tweets” from survivors who were on board the aircraft itself. The development of onboard internet access suggests it is only a matter of time before someone broadcasts live commentary and/or images of an aviation emergency from an aircraft which is still airborne.

If your organization is involved in an accident or major incident, you should aim to issue a brief “holding statement”, confirming your involvement, as quickly as possible. Without it, you will surrender your opportunity to influence the developing news coverage. This first statement should contain whatever factual information is available, however limited, together with a commitment to release further updates. You should also describe the immediate steps you have taken in response to the event, and what you intend to do next.

The holding statement should also be posted on the company website and used as the basis for an initial internal bulletin to employees and for communications with other important stakeholders (for example, customers or business partners).

### **Be honest**

One of your key objectives must be to establish – and maintain – credibility. This will ultimately depend on the audience’s perception of the honesty and sincerity of the statements you make. If you lose credibility - and with it, the trust of your audience - they will stop listening, or will disregard any further comments you make.

Acknowledge the facts. Do not hide behind evasions, obfuscation or legal jargon. If you have been involved in a major accident, do not try to pass it off as an “incident” or an “operational issue”.

This will indicate that you either do not understand, or are not willing to admit, the full extent and implications of what has occurred. More dangerously, it will suggest that you have not accepted responsibility for dealing with the consequences.

Of course, it is possible that what at first genuinely appears to be an “incident” may escalate into something more serious. If the story is still developing, you should therefore acknowledge that the information you have is incomplete and may change over time. Qualify your statements with expressions such as: “the details currently available...” or “based on what we know at the moment...” This ensures that your credibility will not be undermined if the situation becomes worse.

### **Express regret**

In some countries (for example, Japan or other Asian societies), a formal “apology” is expected from parties involved in any incident which causes damage, inconvenience or distress to others – regardless of whether they were to blame for the event. Companies which fail to express regret or sympathy for those affected can expect to be severely criticized, particularly if there has been loss of life or serious injuries. Their relationships and standing within the local community may also be damaged.

Foreign companies, particularly those originating in more litigious societies, may see an expression of regret as an admission of guilt, and therefore an acceptance of legal liability. Indeed, your legal counsel may specifically advise against making any such statement, for that reason. However, a carefully-worded expression of regret, which does not specifically admit liability or blame, can play a critical role in establishing a positive view of the company involved, and will ease the recovery of its business. This principle applies universally.

If you are involved in an accident in a country which you are unfamiliar with, or which involves people from another culture, you should take advice on the most appropriate way to express regret and to show sincerity and respect. This may go beyond verbal statements to include bowing or making a “wai” gesture with the hands. In some cultures, an immediate offer of compensation for loss of life or damage to property is expected.

Review and cancel any upcoming company events or announcements that may be inappropriate.

### **Understand the audiences**

News reporters are just one audience you need to engage with after an accident, as they in turn will influence the perceptions of the stakeholders who will ultimately determine the true impact of the event on your business. Each party will need to consider its own list of key stakeholders, and their relative importance.

But many of these audiences overlap, and all will be sensitive to the media coverage. They include:

- Survivors of the incident (if any)
- Family and friends of those on board
- Other individuals or organizations directly affected
- Employees
- Customers (individual/corporate/loyalty program members)
- Your customer's customer (i.e. the ultimate consumer of the product or service)
- Your customer's employees (eg. airline pilots or cabin crew)
- Investors
- The financial markets
- Insurance brokers and underwriters
- Business partners
- The travel trade (eg. corporate/consumer travel agencies; tour operators)
- Codeshare/alliance/franchise partners
- Suppliers
- Service providers
- The investigating bodies (technical/judicial/criminal)
- Family advocates and support groups
- Regulatory agencies
- Local/provincial/national governments
- Embassies
- Governments whose citizens were involved or affected

### **Be clear about what you can – and cannot – provide**

In the first few hours after an accident, factual information is usually at a premium. The investigation into the likely cause may take months or even years to reach a conclusion, although the news reports may be filled with speculation and “expert” opinion.

Despite the pressure to speculate, the airline and the other parties involved should very carefully avoid discussing the potential cause(s), and should not identify specific factors that may have (or may not have) contributed to the accident (such as potential weather issues, mechanical problems, etc.) or reveal details of the investigation. Ensure that all of your employees are aware that they should say nothing to the media or other stakeholders outside of the investigation.

But do not use the investigation as an excuse to say nothing. There is a wealth of other information you can legitimately provide – for example, factual details about the flight; the aircraft and engine combination; the airline's operations and history; its training and maintenance capabilities. You can also make a statement that you have instructed your employees to fully cooperate with the investigating authorities, and that you have complete faith in the ability of the investigating bodies in determining the causes of the accident.

In many cases, it is wise to discuss potential statements with the head of the investigating authority prior to making the statement.

Collate and track all public release statements made by the investigation authority and others involved in the crisis. Whenever a specific question is asked regarding the investigation, you should always refer back to the public statements of the investigators.

### **Be consistent across all channels**

It is easy to become fixated on the news media, as the pressure they place on companies involved in an accident can be overwhelming. But there are numerous alternative channels through which you can engage, or influence, your stakeholders. The “tone of voice” used to different audiences may vary (for example, communication with families versus briefings to investors), but the messaging and factual information must be consistent.

You should assume that information or communications sent to *any* party will become known to *all* parties. As an example, internal emails can be expected to be leaked and therefore employees should be cautioned against speculation and in forwarding any information to anyone (including employees) not directly involved in the investigation.

You should therefore ensure that your messaging is consistent across all of these additional communication channels:

- The company website
- Employee intranet
- Individual or group briefings (eg. for families, employees, unions, shareholders etc.)
- Personal letters from the company
- Customer communications
- Communications from company representatives (eg. law firms/insurers)
- Social media platforms (eg. CEO blog, company Facebook page)

Don't forget that there are numerous other “touch points” through which stakeholders engage with your organization and which may influence their perceptions. They include:

- The Passenger Information Center (i.e. the emergency call center)
- Reservation agents (at ticket desks & call center)
- Front-line employees (check-in agents, cabin crew)
- Marketing materials
- Direct mailers (for example, to members of the Frequent Flyer Program)
- Advertisements
- In-flight magazine

At the very least, you should ensure that front-line employees are briefed on what they can say in response to questions about the situation from customers (who may decide to publicize what they are told). You should also review marketing and advertising campaigns to check that they do not contain inappropriate messaging or images - for example, a promotional campaign featuring an aircraft model or engine type which has just been involved in an accident.

## **Coordinate with other parties involved**

Journalists are usually highly attuned to discrepancies or inconsistencies between statements made by different parties involved in any major news story, particularly a fatal accident where issues of cause or “blame” will be a major factor in the coverage. It is therefore important that the various parties (particularly the airline, the manufacturers and the investigating body) coordinate the release of information to ensure basic facts are consistent and to minimize any perception of “finger-pointing”.

Establish communications with the investigating bodies, regulatory authorities immediately. Note that any investigation that occurs outside of your own country will most likely involve your own Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), the local CAA, the investigation authority in your own country (if applicable), and the investigation authority where the accident occurred.

As a professional courtesy to other parties involved in the accident, or who may otherwise be affected (see below), you should also provide them with advance warning or a copy of any statement which contains new information, before it is released into the public domain. This will allow them time to prepare responses to any new questions from the news media or other stakeholders.

## **Be aware of the impact your statements may have on others**

Any aviation accident or serious incident raises questions about safety. At various times, the media may focus on the safety of the aircraft and/or engine type; on pilot training, maintenance, airport equipment and procedures; air traffic control; or the regulatory environment. Every accident therefore has the potential to implicate a wide spectrum of “secondary” parties who were not involved in the original event – for example, other operators of that aircraft type, or of the specific airframe/engine combination.

A decision to ground a particular aircraft “in the interests of safety”, taken unilaterally by one airline or regulatory body, creates serious issues for every other operator of that type, regardless of whether they (or their regulator) take the same action. Similarly, statements or actions by *any* party involved in an accident may have implications for *all* parties. The image of the industry itself is damaged if individual airlines, manufacturers, service providers or regulators appear to be trying to protect their own reputation by deflecting blame or “pointing the finger” at someone else. Safety should not be a competitive issue.

### 3. Best practice for airlines

#### 3.1 Operating Carrier

The operator of the aircraft will inevitably attract the most intense media interest and demands for information after an accident. Confirmed information may be difficult to obtain, and the airline may be unable to verify or comment on “facts” obtained by journalists from other sources, including social media postings by survivors or eyewitnesses.

In the absence of hard facts about the accident or incident, the airline should focus on what it knows for certain at that point in time, particularly the details of how it has responded, and the actions taken to support those affected.

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 (eg. 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 (eg. 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; routes operated; 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; alliance, codeshare and franchise operations; crew training; maintenance; previous accidents or incidents)

\*NB: Names of passengers and/or crew members should not be released publicly until their legal next-of-kin have been notified

The Operating Carrier should avoid issuing statements or 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 onboard systems or airport equipment
- The way the aircraft broke apart, and what this might indicate
- Finding key pieces of evidence, for example 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 (eg. “Our pilots are trained to recover from unusual attitudes. They would never have done that”)
- The possibility of pilot error, or of error or wrongdoing by any other employee of the airline
- The likelihood that someone else must be to blame (eg. the aircraft manufacturer or airport)
- The role of weather or air traffic control
- The condition of human remains, and how they will be identified

### **3.2 Franchise/“feeder” services: Operating Carrier**

Many airlines, particularly regional carriers, operate in the livery, and using the flight designator code, of a larger “mainline” carrier, under franchise agreements. The smaller airline may (or may not) be owned by the airline on whose behalf it operates, but it is legally designated as the Operating Carrier, and should therefore take the lead role in dealing with the news media after an accident or major incident.

Press releases 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 or denied. If this relationship is not acknowledged and clarified, it may cause considerable confusion among the news media, families, and other stakeholders. In addition to the “best practice” guidelines described in section 2(a), 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 “mainline” carrier on whose behalf the flight was operated
- The support which the “mainline” carrier is providing to survivors and/or to family members of those on board
- The support which the “mainline” carrier is providing to the Operating Carrier (eg. logistics; activation of its call center to handle enquiries about passengers; assistance in establishing family assistance center/s)

### **3.3 Franchise/"feeder" services: Mainline Partner**

After an accident involving an outsourced franchise or feeder operation, any attempt by the Mainline Partner to distance itself from the accident or from the Operating Carrier will raise serious questions about its behaviour and integrity, and the way it treats customers. It is therefore in the interest of the Mainline Partner 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, the Mainline Partner should focus on the following in any statements or responses to questions:

- Expressing 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)
- Describe the actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims
- Describe assistance provided to the Operating Carrier (eg. logistics; activating telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center)
- Defer all other questions to the Operating Carrier, or to the investigating body

The Mainline Partner 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

### **3.4 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 any 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
- Describe the actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims
- Describe assistance provided to the Operating Carrier (eg. logistics; activating telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center)
- Defer all other questions 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

#### **4. Best practice for aircraft and engine manufacturers**

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 investigation 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 judgements or reach conclusions about the likely outcome of the investigation.

In statements to the news media, the aircraft and engine manufacturer 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 (eg. 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 tends to exonerate the aircraft or engine type or implies 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. Best practices for airport operators

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 demand access to the accident site, or a suitable vantage point.

The airport operator has 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 (eg. the Operating Carrier). Where appropriate, joint press 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 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 (eg. 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

## 6. Best practice for air navigation service providers

There have been numerous examples of accidents which implicate the Air Navigation Service Provider – 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 Air Navigation Service Provider (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 tends to exonerate individuals or the ANSP itself, or which implies 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

## 7. Best practice for investigating bodies

The investigation body is normally the main source of information about the progress and conclusions of the technical investigation into any aircraft accident or serious incident. All 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 investigation 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 (eg. daily press briefings, press releases, statements posted on website)
- Statements of initial findings and resulting safety recommendations (if any)
- 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

## 8. Best practice for using online and social media platforms

### 8.1 The impact on “breaking news”

The proliferation of Social Media channels has created a new dimension to the challenge of influencing breaking news coverage of a major aviation event. To illustrate how Social Media can lead the conventional news media, and the problems this creates for the parties involved, consider how your organization would cope with the following scenario, which occurred in November 2010:

- Wide-body aircraft suffers uncontained engine failure on climb-out, four minutes into the flight. Crew faced with a cascade of failures due to serious damage to aircraft systems. Aircraft remains airborne for 1hr 39 minutes while crew assess damage and dump fuel before returning for an emergency landing at the originating airport
- 40 minutes after the engine failure, while the aircraft is still airborne, a 24-hour TV news channel reports “breaking news” of an explosion overhead a populated area
- 6 minutes later, first “tweet” by a viewer about an “aircraft crash”, identifying the location. Starts a flood of tweets from other users talking of an “aircraft explosion”, which alerts other news organizations to the story
- Within 15 minutes, AP newswire quotes local police chief confirming aircraft debris found – this report “re-tweeted” by CBS News producer in New York
- 20 minutes later, Bloomberg identifies the airline. Every major international news organization now following the story
- Photos of aircraft debris posted on Flickr, appearing to show the airline’s logo – numerous responses confirm the airline’s identity
- 1hr 27 minutes after the event, Reuters reports “breaking news” of a crash, identifying both the airline and the aircraft type
- 12 minutes later, aircraft lands safely at the originating airport, despite suffering significant structural damage
- Passengers with smartphones almost immediately start uploading photos, videos and commentary onto Social Media channels
- 2 hours after the engine failure occurred (and 20 minutes after it landed), the airline issues its first statement, confirming the safe emergency landing and denying the aircraft has crashed

### 8.2 General guidelines

Social Media platforms are a potentially powerful tool for engaging and interacting with audiences such as employees or customers. But Social Media programs which work (or appear to work) for other organizations may not be appropriate for you. As with any other form of communication, you should be clear about which audiences you need to reach; the reason for doing so; and the most appropriate channel for engaging with them.

## Best practice for using Social Media:

- Develop your Social Media policy in “peacetime” – do not attempt to engage with online audiences “piecemeal” in the midst of a crisis
- Perform an audit of all Social Media channels already used by the organization. You may find that sales or marketing staff, for example, already use sites like Twitter for sales promotions. Don’t overlook sites which may be operated by overseas offices
- Identify the audiences you wish to reach online – and then focus on the channels which are most likely to reach them. Once you have identified the appropriate Social Media platforms, focus only on these channels
- If a decision is made to develop an online presence on platforms like Facebook or Twitter, ensure that these channels are fully integrated with your ongoing communication program, so they are regularly updated and become regarded as a prime source of news and information about the organization. This will enable you develop a dedicated “follower” network over time, with which you can engage in a crisis
- Remember that any online channel (even if it appears to be password-protected) is potentially open to anyone. Your postings may also be forwarded or “re-tweeted” with added commentary
- Include monitoring of Social Media channels as part of your conventional media monitoring program. There are numerous low-cost or free-to-use programs which allow you to track online conversations about your organization, your competitors, or the industry generally
- Include monitoring of employee unions activity on social media and websites and consider providing them with direct feed of your statements
- If you decide to engage with online conversations about your organization, this should be a policy decision made at a senior level, and not left to junior staff members. Once you have decided to engage, it is very difficult to withdraw
- Determine who will be your “spokespeople” – in other words, which members of staff will be responsible for posting information on Social Media platforms, and for engaging in online dialogues on behalf of the company (if that policy decision has been made). Ensure that these staff have the appropriate training and are clear on your communication policy and messaging
- Never hide behind anonymous user names – make clear that any postings or comments are made on behalf of the organization
- If you are building a Social Media presence for the first time, work on the assumption that you will face a major crisis on the day your sites go “live”. In other words, ensure that you have the appropriate resources to cope with a flood of online enquiries and comments, and that you are prepared to track and correct any inaccurate or hostile Social Media postings about the organization, from Day One
- After an accident or major incident, any online postings should appear on all Social Media channels operated by the company – do not overlook channels used primarily for sales or marketing purposes. Any inconsistency in your messaging or approach across different channels may be noticed and commented on by online audiences and by the news media

### **8.3 Company website**

The company website is a primary communication channel, and one of the first places journalists, customers and other audiences will look for information about an accident or major incident, and how it might affect your ongoing operations. You should refer to the website in press releases, statements and Social Media postings – but only if you have posted updated information on the site.

Best practice for using your website:

- For airlines, prepare a “dark site” during “peacetime”. This is a special site which can be activated almost immediately (i.e. within minutes) after notification of an accident and replaces the normal home page on the website. Only activate the “dark site” in the event of an accident with fatalities
- For lesser events (or for non-airline parties involved in the accident), a link displayed prominently on the home page is sufficient, using the words “For more information on the incident involving xxxx, click here”
- The “dark site” should be branded very simply, without any of the colourful logos or images which normally appear on the home page. It should display the latest statement on the situation. Previous statements should be archived and available via a link
- You should also display a link to the “normal” home page, as you should not prevent customers from being able to use the site for online bookings etc.
- Other information you may wish to provide via the “dark site” includes:
  - Background information on the aircraft and engine type
  - Background information on the company and its operations
  - Summary of previous accidents or serious incidents (where appropriate)
  - Links to public statements and reports from the investigating bodies
  - Summary of the company’s response to date
  - Video of statements made by the CEO or other senior executives
- Once the “dark site” is active, refer to it in all your press releases and other statements so audiences are directed there

### **8.4 Third-party websites**

There are numerous examples of third parties (for example, law firms or family groups) setting up websites which are positioned as “official” sources of information about an accident. The purpose of these websites is usually to solicit business from people considering legal claims for compensation, or to offer advice and information about the status of the investigation and any associated litigation. Family associations may also form after an accident, and may create websites as online “memorials” to the victims.

In each case, the airline should be careful not to allow the name or URL of these websites to be associated or confused with the airline’s own website. While you cannot prevent third parties from creating websites dedicated to a particular accident, you can minimize the potential for confusion by immediately registering any domain names which they might try to use.

These could include:

- Air xxxx accident.com
- Air xxx Flight xxx accident.com
- Flight xxx.com
- Flight xxx accident.com
- Air xxx accident information.com
- Flight xxx information.com

## **8.5 Facebook**

Facebook is arguably the best Social Media channel for engaging with customers, employees and “fans” of the company, as it is the most widely-used. Many people within your target audiences will already have their own Facebook pages and be familiar with using it. Numerous airlines operate Facebook pages, and several are also the subject of unofficial pages created either by critics or “fans” of the airline.

If you have a Facebook page, it should be treated as a primary communication channel after an accident or serious incident. You should post the same statements and background information that are displayed on the company website, and update them at the same time. The major difference is that Facebook users can add their own comments and refer users to other sources of information. You should therefore constantly monitor your Facebook page and take a policy decision on whether to respond to negative comments, or to correct any misinformation or incorrect statements which are posted.

## **8.6 YouTube**

Hundreds of hours of video material are uploaded onto YouTube every day. Some airlines have created their own dedicated “TV channel” on YouTube, through which they communicate regularly with customers and other audiences. It has also become a primary source of images of aviation accidents and incidents, some of which are posted by people directly involved (for example, passengers or eyewitnesses).

Even if you don’t have your “own” YouTube channel, you should consider posting video of statements made by your CEO or by other senior executives after an accident. As with Facebook and other Social Media sites, other users may post comments in response to anything you place on YouTube. You should monitor these comments and make a policy decision on whether to respond to any negative or misleading statements.

## **8.7 Twitter**

The use of this “micro blogging” service is growing rapidly, with millions of users posting short messages (“tweets”) to their online followers every day. Any Twitter user can become a “follower” of anybody who tweets. Anyone receiving a tweet on their computer or smart phone can forward or “re-tweet” it to their own followers, which can create an exponential surge in the number of users talking about a compelling story or issue.

Twitter has therefore 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. The 140-character limit does not allow space for detailed explanation or context. But companies which use Twitter as an “instant messaging” service are usually perceived to be showing a greater degree of transparency and a willingness to engage with the online audience.

If you decide to use Twitter as a “news feed” service, best practice includes:

- Determine your Twitter policy in advance. If you decide to set up a Twitter news feed, are you going to tweet about every operational incident, however trivial? If not, what are the criteria for deciding which incidents will be publicized?
- Be equally as careful in validating information before releasing it on Twitter as you would for any other channel
- Never post anonymously, or under an assumed name. Use a Twitter name (@xxx) which makes it clear that messages are posted on behalf of the company (for example, “@Airxxx newsfeed”)
- Place a hash tag (#) in front of key words in your message – for example: “#Flight xxx” or “#xxx accident”. This “tags” the subject matter and allows you (and other users) to “group” and identify Twitter conversations on this topic
- Monitor the online conversation using a hash tag tracking service such as Hashtags.org, Twemes, Tweetchat, Tweetgrid or Twitterfall. Twitter itself provides a limited search function which allows you to follow grouped conversations
- Use tweets to update followers on the latest information on the company’s response (for example: “#Flight xxx accident. Passenger information center now open. Call 800 1234 5678”)
- Direct followers to other, more detailed, sources of information - for example, the company website
- Any postings (including comments made in response to criticism) must be consistent with the organization’s overall messaging strategy.

## **8.8 Online forums**

There are numerous online forums dedicated to the aviation industry. Some are “members-only” and intended to be used exclusively by people working within a specific community (for example, members of a cabin crew union). Others can be accessed by anyone with an interest in the subject, such as the Professional Pilots’ Rumour Network, ([www.PPRUNE.com](http://www.PPRUNE.com)).

Best practice for engaging with online forums:

- Conduct an audit of online forums which are likely to be used by specific audiences which are important to the organization – for example, employees
- If necessary, register for any forums you have identified as priority targets so you can monitor conversations and post information when appropriate
- Never join forums or post comments under a pseudonym. If you are joining the forum on behalf of the organization, create a username which clearly identifies you (for example, “Air xxx Communications”)
- Ensure that any information or comments posted are identified as official statements, and are consistent with your overall messaging strategy
- Remember that any material you post can be copied and forwarded to anyone. Work on the assumption that anything you say, even on “member-only” forums, may become known to the news media, or to other stakeholders such as family members.

### **8.9 Web Logs (Blogs)**

Many organizations publish “blogs” from the CEO or other members of the senior management team in order to demonstrate transparency and speak directly to key audiences such as employees or customers. Blogs are often less formal in tone than other forms of executive communication, and are intended to show the “human” face of a large and otherwise impersonal organization.

In the event of an accident or serious incident, a senior executive 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 this needs to be very carefully worded to avoid appearing glib or insincere. If the sentiments expressed are not authentic, do not publish the blog.

Best practice for using blogs:

- Conduct an audit of all blogs published across the organization, including any run by the sales and marketing teams. Identify the purpose of each blog, and the intended audience
- Treat all blogs as you treat any other communication channel in a crisis. Ensure that the information provided, and the messages used, are consistent with the organization’s overall communication strategy
- If there has been an accident with fatalities, ensure that blogs do not resort to “corporate-speak” or “legalese”. They should be used to express a genuine human response to the loss of life and to express sympathy for those affected
- Remove any inappropriate images (eg. the smiling face of the blogger), company slogans or a cheerful signoff (“Thanks for keeping us moving forward with xxx!”).

## **8.10 Employee Social Media Policy**

Everyone within the organization is potentially a spokesperson. This applies particularly to employees who use Social Media channels to keep in touch with friends and contacts around the world. Employees who identify their connection to the company (for example, on their LinkedIn profile, or Facebook page), may be tracked down and “befriended” by unscrupulous journalists or other interested parties (for example, lawyers) after an accident. These new “friends” can then access their photo albums and read comments by them or by other work colleagues in their network.

While you cannot prevent employees from using Social Media channels in their personal time, you should introduce an Employee Social Media Policy which includes the following:

- Guidelines on whether employees can access Social Media channels during working hours (some may need to do this in the course of their work)
- Prohibition on posting photographs or video taken on company premises, or in the course of their employment with the company, on Social Media sites
- Prohibition on posting comments on Social Media sites relating to their work for the company, or about senior executives, their supervisors or colleagues
- After an accident or serious incident, issue a reminder to all employees not to post information, or to engage in online discussions, about the event.

## 9. Being prepared

The day after an accident is not the time to develop a crisis communication strategy. 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 fulltime 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.

### 9.1 Creating a Crisis Communication plan

The main elements of a robust Crisis Communication plan include:

- Statement of company communication policy, including authorised spokespeople
- Outline of the communication organization, and its interface with the corporate Crisis Management Team (the head of communications should sit on the CMT)
- Description of functional roles and responsibilities, and candidates to fill them
- Checklists for each functional role, outlining the main tasks
- Templates for initial “holding statements” which can be issued immediately after key information is confirmed (for various possible scenarios, including aircraft accident; serious incident; diversion; hijacking or other security incident; service disruption)
- Contact lists for important internal and external contacts (including media lists and service providers)
- Standard forms and documentation (for example, media call logging form, press conference registration form)

### 9.2 Training your spokespeople

Dealing with the news media in the midst of a major crisis, particularly with the added emotional stress of dealing with a fatal accident, is not “business as usual”. Spokespeople need to understand how to defend the organization under pressure from aggressive reporters who may know more about the situation than they do. Front-line operational or commercial managers based far from head office (for example, country managers or airline 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”
- Handling different interview situations – live, recorded, stand-up, “down the line”, “ambush”
- The importance of non-verbal communication
- Interview techniques – “blocking and bridging”
- Holding a press conference

### **9.3 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.

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 publication, 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 postings 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. Remember the old military adage:

**“Fail to prepare = prepare to fail”**

## **10. Feedback**

Feedback and comments about these guidelines are welcome. Please write to us at [corpcomms@iata.org](mailto:corpcomms@iata.org).