



Guidance Document

## **Crisis communication and reputation management in the digital age:**

A guide to best practice for the  
aviation industry

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# 1. Introduction

On 17 April 2018, a passenger on Southwest Airlines flight 1380 from New York La Guardia to Dallas Love Field became the first person to live-stream commentary and video of an unfolding aviation crisis from inside the aircraft itself, using the airline's on-board wifi service. By doing so, passenger Marty Martinez confirmed that the era of "Always On" crisis communication for the aviation industry had fully arrived.

It was a development which had long been predicted, and one of a series of watershed moments for the industry which have served to illustrate both the rapid transformation of the communication landscape and the need for organisations to adapt their response strategies accordingly. For details of Southwest's response to the accident, see the Appendix to this document (Case Studies).

This document is the latest in a series of "Best Practice" guidelines published by IATA since December 2012. It is intended to help communication professionals to understand the challenges presented by the evolving media and aviation landscapes and to serve as a guide to planning an effective response to accidents, major incidents and other reputation threats.

Aviation accidents and serious incidents are mercifully rare, with accident rates continuing to fall despite the continuous growth in the number of people flying each year. Most communication practitioners working in this industry (indeed, most airline employees) will never face the unique and emotionally stressful experience of responding to a major accident with fatalities. The corollary is that when these accidents occasionally happen, the people responding are most likely doing so for the first time.

Many practitioners who have experienced the reality of an accident response have been willing to share their insights with industry colleagues, including at IATA crisis communication conferences. As a result, there is a pool of knowledge for how accidents and major incidents "should" be handled. In this document we have attempted to outline the key points in best practices for airlines and others to consider when developing their own crisis communications plans.

No best practice guidance, however, can lead to a good result without sensitive interpretation against an evolving issue or crisis. The reality of the "always on" environment is that even apparently trivial customer service issues now have the potential to escalate into a reputational firestorm, particularly if the organisation's initial reaction is judged to be inadequate or tone-deaf.

This edition will therefore consider how aviation communicators can best position their organisation to mitigate the potential reputational damage associated with the multitude of less serious issues and challenges which airlines, airports, and other industry players face almost every day.

## 2. The evolving challenge

### 2.1: A "Global Sensor Network"

The first evidence that the emergence of social media would add a new dimension to the challenge of responding to aviation crises came in December 2008. A survivor from a Continental Airlines runway excursion in Denver tweeted a graphic confirmation that his aircraft had just crashed, moments after escaping from the fuselage.

At that point, "Best Practice" in crisis communication was still rooted in the concept of the "Golden Hour" – the notional period in which the airline crisis management team would have time to activate, meet, confirm information, determine the initial priorities and action steps and (finally) issue a brief "holding statement" to the news media via fax or PR Newswire.

A series of accidents and incidents followed, in which photos, video and eyewitness accounts shared on social media dramatically increased the visibility and speed at which these situations escalated. However it was only in November 2010 that it became fully apparent that most airlines had failed to recognise that the media environment had changed forever, and that their crisis communication plans were no longer "fit for purpose".

A Qantas Airbus A380 departing Singapore Changi Airport for Sydney experienced an engine fire and uncontained failure four minutes after take-off, which seriously damaged the wing, fuselage and critical systems. The aircraft landed safely back at Changi Airport 90 minutes later, but by then, Reuters and multiple other news agencies had already reported the A380 had crashed. These reports were based on photos and commentary which flashed across social media channels within minutes of the incident, showing Qantas-branded debris, with reports of an "explosion in the sky" and "multiple impact sites" on Indonesia's Batam Island.

Although Qantas issued a press statement shortly after the aircraft landed, confirming an "air turnaround", CEO Alan Joyce later admitted the airline had missed "this whole social media end of communication". Within weeks, Qantas reconfigured its entire communication approach, with online channels taking priority. The QF32 episode was also the genesis of this "Best Practice" initiative by IATA.

As the Southwest example demonstrated, the communication landscape has continued to evolve at breakneck speed, through the convergence of key factors including mobile phone penetration, the maturing of social media channels and – more pertinently – an exponential increase in the speed, capacity and availability of telecommunication networks. This has created what the online information management company Dataminr calls: "The world's first global sensor network of eyewitnesses".

Consider the following:

- There are already more mobile phones in circulation than people according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).
- 5G technology will be a game-changer for volumes of mobile data—enabling the downloading of a full-length high definition Hollywood movie in four seconds. Global rollout of 5G technology has already started, with many developing markets expected to leapfrog directly to 5G services.
- The real impact of continued technological development will be the affordability and availability of very high-speed data networks globally. By 2030 (again, according to the ITU) every person on the planet will - at least in theory - have access to high-speed broadband internet.

The result of this revolution is that building an aviation crisis response strategy which is truly "fit for purpose" in the Digital Age must start from the assumption that there will be pictures of the event (if not by external witnesses, by passengers themselves), and that those images will almost immediately be available to a global audience in real time.



## 2.2: Complicating Factors to Consider

The challenge of preparing for, and responding to, a major reputational crisis has arguably never been more complex than it is today. The discouraging news for communication professionals is that it will not become any easier as the external environment, and the aviation industry itself, continue to evolve.

Some of the factors which should be considered when developing a crisis communication strategy include the following:

### Industry Restructuring: A Crisis Management Challenge

Since the first “codeshare” agreements were created more than 20 years ago, the airline industry has been transformed through alliances, codeshares, franchise agreements, wet-leases and joint ventures.

The reputational risk inherent in these relationships can be seen in the now-infamous April 2017 incident in which a passenger was forcefully removed by uniformed guards from a United Airlines flight waiting to depart from Chicago O’Hare Airport, in full view of his fellow passengers.

In fact, the aircraft was operated by Republic Airlines and the uniformed guards worked for the airport. But the full reputational impact of the photos and videos taken by other passengers and shared on social media was felt by United Airlines, who marketed the flight under the United Express brand.

The resulting backlash wiped more than \$1 billion off the value of United’s parent United Continental Holdings in a single day. After initially declaring that staff had merely been trying to “re-accommodate” overbooked passengers, United CEO Oscar Munoz admitted that a fundamental overhaul of the airline’s customer service policies was required.

Consolidation of major airlines (like United) into holding groups; joint ventures; the launch of low-cost and hybrid brands by legacy airlines and the inexorable rise of low-cost carriers – some with multiple sub-brands or operating entities – have created further complexity. The protocols for which party will lead the communication response and the ability to get a clear, accurate and sensitive analysis of potential reputation crises require careful thought. Families, media and other stakeholders will be expecting a fully coordinated response.

### Organisation Structure:

As many flight bookings are now made online, airline websites are generally controlled 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. In some cases, responsibility for social channels may be shared between Marketing and Corporate Communications.

If ownership of different channels is shared between departments, lack of alignment between channel “owners” may result in inconsistent or potentially insensitive communication by the airline. Along with ensure appropriate use of these channels during the crisis, a key issue will also be the timing of the return to “business as usual”, when the crisis “dark site” is taken down and online channels revert to their normal branding and content. This should ideally be done incrementally and coordinated with the resumption of advertising and other promotional activity.



### Reliance on Third Parties:

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 carriers and charter operators are heavily reliant on GHAs, to the extent that if an accident occurs at or near an airport, particularly overseas, there may be no airline employees on scene. In which case, the airline's only representation would be a GHA, some of whose staff (such as check-in agents) may wear the airline's uniform.

The potential for confusion after an accident is obvious, particularly if GHA staff are surrounded by "meeters and greeters" demanding information and brandishing smartphones to record or live-stream any comments. The airline may then discover a front-line "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.

Crisis communication planning should take this into consideration. Best practice is to give clear guidance and training to their ground handlers on the airline's expectations in a crisis.

### Rising Expectations of Families:

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 are steadily increasing as a result of the activities of family advocates and associations - particularly those formed after previous accidents - and plaintiff's attorneys (see below).

Any perceived failure by the airline, or by its contractors, to meet these expectations or to provide information families believe they are entitled to receive, is likely to result in them venting their frustration on social media. This in turn will give the mainstream news media a compelling focus for the unfolding coverage, particularly if there are no other facts to report. The aviation community needs to look no further than the media's reporting of Malaysia Airlines MH370 in 2014 to see the reputational damage which may ensue.

### The Involvement of Government Leaders and Agencies:

Aviation accidents which result in mass fatalities have always attracted the involvement of Government leaders and agencies. However, the increased visibility of these events has encouraged Government leaders to play a much more prominent role in the response, not least so they can be "seen" taking control. This was certainly the case with major events such as Egyptair MS804, Malaysia Airlines MH370 and MH17 and the Germanwings accident.

In addition, ever since aviation security was dramatically overhauled in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the possibility of "terrorism" has become the default theory for almost any unexplained aviation accident, particularly in the initial media coverage and social media conversations. This creates additional pressure on Governments to reassure their constituents.



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 constrained or overshadowed by the involvement of other branches of Government. This includes politicians (potentially the Head of State), local prosecutors or magistrates, or other elected officials.

This problem is particularly challenging for state-owned (or controlled) airlines where the Board, CEO or members of the senior management are Government appointees. But it is important for any airline to understand the regulatory and political environment in every market to which it operates, and to identify the potential challenges this may create.

### **The Influence of Family Attorneys:**

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 truth" about what happened to their loved ones, and to hold those responsible accountable in court.

Plaintiff's attorneys may also be quick to position themselves as alternative sources of information. Some supposedly independent "experts" rushing to share their opinions after an accident are actually positioning themselves as potential advocates to assist families in future lawsuits. If families sign up for legal representation, plaintiff's attorneys have been known to charge up to 40% of any award or settlement.

This phenomenon is not confined to the United States, although most family attorneys will attempt to have cases brought to court there (as the state of manufacture of the airframe, engines or key systems). US courts have historically awarded higher damages after previous accidents.

The airline cannot prevent families from seeking legal representation, but it should monitor the activities of plaintiff's attorneys and where necessary, correct any misinformation or misleading speculation which they may generate. The airline should also be mindful that any public statements, or communication with families in the aftermath of an accident, including by third parties working on behalf of the airline, may be used against them by plaintiff's attorneys in future litigation.

A key strategy for any airline in a crisis is to ensure that family members understand that the airline is fully focused on meeting their needs as best it can. Establishing a relationship of trust, transparency and confidence with family members will be challenging. As the relationship with family members is likely to be a long one—years or even decades—persuading the families, that the airline is trying to do the right thing by them is invaluable.

### **Flight Tracker Websites**

Flightradar24 aggregates data from multiple sources, primarily thousands of volunteers with ADS-B (automatic dependence surveillance-broadcast) receivers around the world. It shows 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.

If a crew "squawks" a distress code, indicating an on-board emergency, Flightradar24 will tweet an alert to its 460,000 followers, who can then track the progress of the aircraft in real time – or see whether the aircraft has disappeared from radar. After an accident or major incident, the flight tracker sites can display 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, previously seen only by airline flight operations departments and investigators, will be instantly available to anyone with an internet connection. That includes family attorneys looking for "evidence" to build a case that negligence or wrongdoing caused the accident.





### **"#Fake News" and the Decline in Trust:**

So-called "Fake News" (erroneous reporting) has always been with us, as the early coverage of Qantas QF32 demonstrated. But the term has become "weaponised", largely for political reasons, to undermine trust in the news media and de-legitimise dissenting opinion or the exposure of wrongdoing.

This has exacerbated a wider loss of confidence in political and business leaders and in other "official" sources of information. If the basic facts of an event are open to interpretation, and nobody fully trusts the media reports, it becomes ever more challenging for an organisation's message to be heard and accepted by its intended audience.

There is no easy solution to this conundrum. But the most effective way for an organisation to maintain trust is to remain true to its stated identity and values and to deliver on the promises it makes. In a genuine crisis, that means acknowledging the reality of the situation, accepting an appropriate level of responsibility and committing to a concrete plan of action focused on the needs of those affected. In short, the organisation should say what it is doing, and do what it says.

Above all, the CEO must be seen to embody the organisation's values through his/her personal involvement and behaviour during the crisis. The reputational value of being able to position the CEO as an authentic, caring and effective leader in the worst of circumstances has been demonstrated after numerous aviation tragedies, including those involving Southwest Airlines, Germanwings, AirAsia Indonesia and Virgin Galactic, among others.

### **Cultural Issues:**

With the exception of a handful of domestic carriers, almost every airline operates internationally, connecting different countries and carrying passengers and crew of multiple nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. Even purely domestic flights may also carry a mix of nationalities, cultures and religious faiths on board. It is therefore inevitable that passengers and families will have different expectations after an accident or major incident.

The ability of an airline to communicate effectively after an accident may vary significantly from country to country, depending on the political, social and cultural environment. If the airline is not aware of local expectations of its role and responsibilities, it runs the risk of inadvertently making a bad situation worse. Much of the criticism levelled at Asiana Airlines in the US media after the OZ214 accident in San Francisco in July 2013, for example, was based on Asiana's perceived lack of understanding of how an airline was expected (even required) to respond to an accident on US territory.

But if the same situation had occurred with a US carrier operating into Korea, the challenge facing the airline would have been no less complex. Any airline responding to an accident or major incident in another part of the world needs some understanding of the regulatory environment, the likely involvement of Government and other official agencies, the media (and social media) landscape and the needs and expectations of passengers and their families. Also, the ability to communicate with them – quickly - in their own language.

An essential ingredient in developing a crisis communication plan is therefore to assess the landscape and any relevant cultural or regulatory considerations in every market where the airline operates.

Consider the following basic questions:

- Who, in the markets affected by the accident, will advise the communications department and provide a frank and ongoing assessment of the airline's performance at meeting local expectations?
- Does the airline employ its own staff in this market (ie do we have our own office and/or a senior executive who could act as a spokesperson)?



- If not, who represents the airline, and what (if anything) has been agreed about the support they would provide in a crisis?
- Do we have a local alliance or codeshare partner? If so, what support (if any) have they agreed to provide in a crisis?
- Who would control the flow of public information after an accident or major incident (eg, which branch of Government or regulatory agency)?
- Would the airline be allowed/expected to conduct its own media briefings or issue statements? In what language/s?
- What are the most-used social media channels in this market?
- Does the airline already have a presence on these channels? If so, who "owns" the airline's social media presence and posts content?
- Does the airline use a PR agency in this market? Or a network agency with a local office/affiliate? If so, what support would they provide to the airline in a crisis?



## 3. The “Always On” Response Model

### 3.1: Recommended Structure

It has become something of a cliché to observe that “breaking news now breaks on Twitter”. Nonetheless, initial reports of most airline incidents, disruptions or service issues are now most likely to appear online in the form of photos, video or comments from people who experienced it, or those who saw it.

If the airline concerned is unaware of the developing conversation or (in particular) key decision-makers have not seen the photos or video, there is little chance of influencing the narrative, let alone injecting factual information into the conversation.

Several airlines have adapted to the “always on” environment by remodelling their crisis communication strategy around two key elements: 24/7 social listening and a physical connection between the operations and communications departments. At American Airlines’ headquarters near Dallas-Fort Worth, members of the communications team sit on “the Bridge” in the operations control centre alongside the duty manager, constantly monitoring social media alerts around the clock.

If any incident involving an American Airlines flight is mentioned on social media, the facts can be verified almost immediately with the crew or the team at the airport concerned. Even if information is still being confirmed, being aware of the incident and seeing the photos or video at the same time as the news outlets which use identical monitoring tools will gain American’s communications team a vital head-start in preparing for the inevitable flood of calls from reporters.

For the operations team, access to real-time intelligence and images showing how incidents or service disruptions are being portrayed by people at the scene is also invaluable. In some cases, this intelligence will be a major factor in developing the operational and customer service response.

Clearly, not every airline has the resources to base members of the communication team in the operations centre 24/7. The operations department itself may also resist the presence of “outsiders” in the inner sanctum. But “always on” crisis communication relies on the organisation’s ability to see, assess and respond to any situation or reputation threat as it develops, in real time. Social listening is therefore a pre-requisite for a timely response: the “Golden Hour” has been reduced to minutes.

### 3.2: Ensuring Consistency

Striking the right tone when communicating the response to an incident, disruption or service issue is never easy. It becomes even more challenging when internal ownership of online and offline communication channels is fragmented.

- A starting point for developing an integrated 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 – divisional, regional or corporate.
- Ideally, any social media post, even during “business as usual”, should be vetted by Corporate Communications for a final “sensitivity check”. Communications (not Marketing) is the only department specifically tasked with constantly monitoring the external environment for reputation threats - which an inappropriate post may create or accelerate. Preventing self-inflicted social media storms is easier than trying to contain them.

- If Corporate Communications does not have editorial control over the organisation's social media presence, it should be granted "over-ride" authority in a crisis, so content can be replaced or amended quickly. There are numerous examples of airlines (and other organisations) failing to remove images of smiling faces or other inappropriate or insensitive content from their online channels in the midst of a crisis. This is invariably due to lack of internal coordination or oversight.
- After an aviation accident with fatalities, the best practice is to change the branding on all online channels as a visible mark of respect for the human tragedy. This should happen as soon as fatalities are confirmed, and be synchronised across all touchpoints. The airline logo is converted to monochrome and a hash-tagged phrase may also be used. This allows conversations to be grouped and tracked. A memorial symbol or logo can also be created - for example, Fort Lauderdale Airport posted an image of memorial candles on its website after a mass shooting of passengers in a terminal in 2017.
- A "dark site" should be prepared in advance, to replace the home page on the website almost immediately (within minutes) after notification of an accident. This would normally happen only after an accident with fatalities, but it may be appropriate in other circumstances. 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. All public statements should be posted to the website, with the link referenced in news releases and social media posts.
  - Other material which may be provided online 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 CEO blog on their website. Blogs are usually less formal in tone, and can be an effective means of highlighting the CEO's personal involvement and reaction in a crisis. But authenticity is the key: any disconnect between promises made by the CEO and the actual experience of customers, families or other affected parties, will quickly erode credibility.
- It may also be effective to launch a "crisis blog" on the website, with rolling updates and information about the unfolding situation and the company's response to it. This could include 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).
- The decision on when to transition back to the normal promotional branding is sensitive, and should be synchronised with other communication 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. After the Germanwings accident, the first new fare promotion was only published after three weeks had elapsed, but the branding remained monochrome and the hashtag #InDeepMourning was still prominent.
- 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.
- Staff designated as online "spokespeople" to handle queries from customers and other parties should have received appropriate training and be clear on the communication strategy and messaging.
- It should be noted that in some circumstances (for example, after the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka), the authorities may shut down popular social media channels in order to prevent the spread of inflammatory content or images. Companies should have a backup plan to ensure they are able to communicate effectively even without access to social platforms. Similarly, channels such as Twitter and Facebook are blocked in China, which has its own unique social media ecosystem.



## 3.3 Developing the Crisis Communication Plan

The day after an accident is not the time to develop a crisis communication plan. 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 initial response, at least for the first few hours.

The plan itself is less important than the planning process, which involves thinking through all of the elements discussed in the preceding sections: the external environment, the complicating factors which may derail the response, and how you would organise and deploy your own internal resources and capabilities.

If your organization has limited resources, consider where you could find external help. Focus on what you can do with your current resources, rather than on what you can't.

The main elements of a robust crisis communication 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 and employee communications, 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 (see section 8)
- 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)

## 3.4 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 communication team may need to be supplemented by external resources, for example from a Public Relations agency or colleagues from other parts of the organisation. Bear in mind it may need to operate multiple shifts, particularly in the early stages of the response. Individuals cannot remain effective if they are expected to work long days amid the pressures of a crisis for an extended period, without a break.

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. Each function requires a checklist to ensure key actions are not overlooked.



### 1. Communication Representative on the Crisis Management Team (CMT)

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. Also, for ensuring that all communication channels are properly coordinated and that information and messaging is consistent. 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 and other stakeholders via news releases, social media posts, interviews and press conferences and ensuring that media enquiries are being managed effectively.

### 3. Content Developer

The Content Developer is responsible for drafting all written materials or other content used in response to the crisis, including news releases, backgrounders, briefing documents and statements (eg video statements).

### 4. Online Communication Manager

The Online Communication Manager is responsible for managing the company's social media and online channels. The Online Communication Manager also coordinates 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 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. Network Co-ordinator

The Network Coordinator is responsible for maintaining contact with offices and PR Agencies across the network, 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.

### 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 reporters are provided with updated statements and talking points. A summary of media enquiries should be provided regularly to the Communication Team Leader.

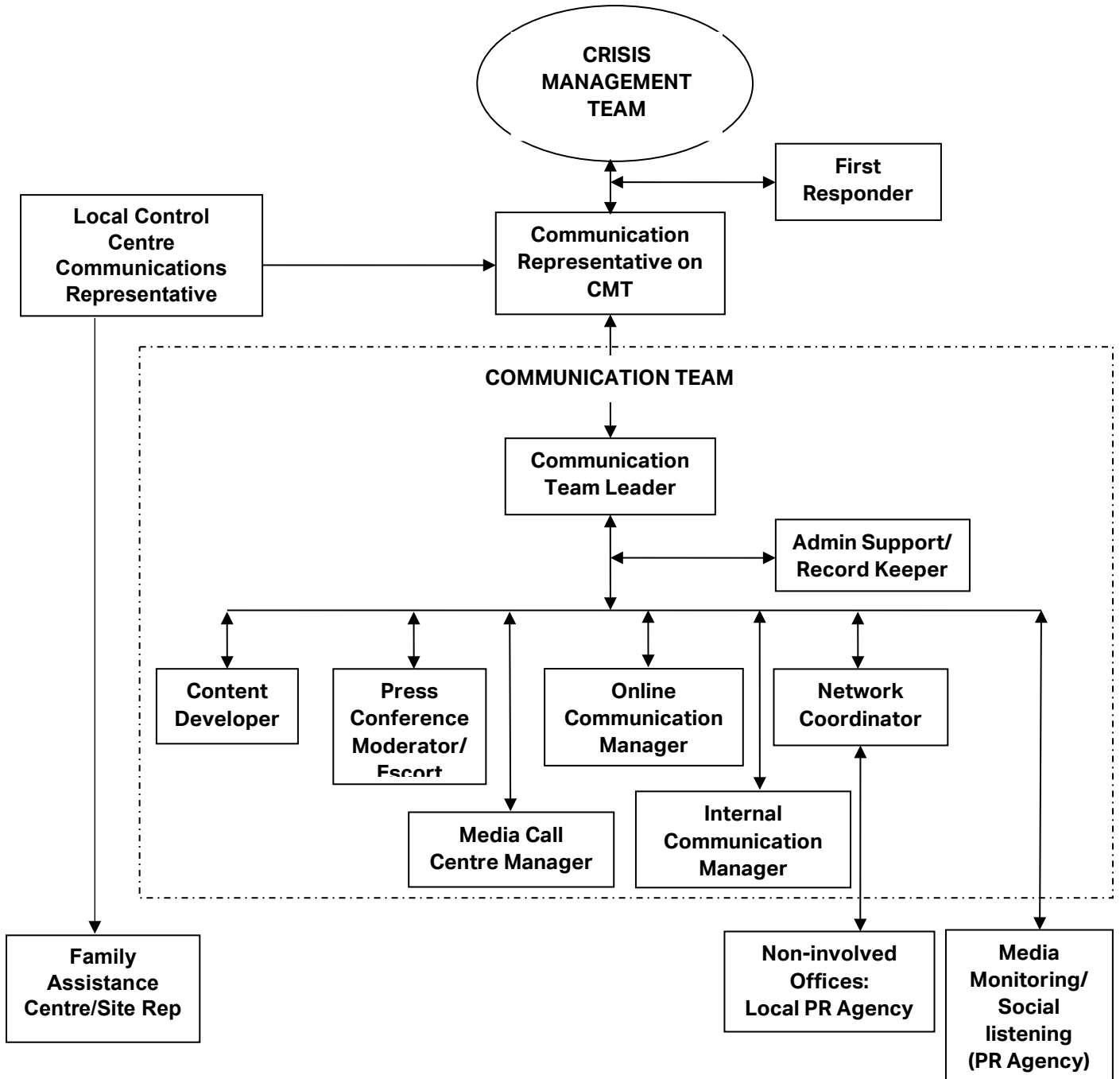


## 9. Communication Representative/s on the Go-Team

The Communication Representative/s on the Go-Team is/are responsible for travelling 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. Members of the communications team may also be advised to change their email signoffs to include "Follow us on Twitter" during the crisis.

### 3.5 Crisis Communication Team: Suggested Organization Chart





## 3.6 Training spokespeople

Dealing with the media in the midst of a 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 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 to deal with journalists. Training should ideally be provided by specialists with experience of responding to multiple crises, delivered either in person or via online/virtual reality-based programs (which may be more cost-effective for widely dispersed teams such as airport managers).

Crisis communication training should provide:

- An overview of the challenges the organization will face after an accident, and what audiences expect to see and hear
- Understanding the “always on” communication landscape
- How the news media work, and what they will look for
- 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

Executives who have undergone training may benefit from a short refresher or specific preparation before delivering a press briefing in a crisis or doing any interviews. This should focus on the specific messaging to be delivered that day, and the appropriate responses to questions which the reporters are most likely to ask.

## 3.7 Choosing the right spokesperson

In principle, the CEO should be the primary spokesperson after an accident, to indicate that he/she has taken personal responsibility for overseeing the response and understands the impact on those affected. The CEO will normally be responsible for communicating with a range of other stakeholders, including survivors, family members, Government leaders and agencies, investors and partners.

However there may be situations in which the CEO is either not immediately available or is not an effective communicator. The communications team should therefore develop a roster of suitable alternates who are:

- In a position of responsibility (ie, a member of the executive committee)
- Have personal charisma and can speak with authority
- Have prior experience of dealing with the news media
- Have undergone crisis communication training



If the accident occurs away from home base, the most senior executive available at or near the accident scene (usually an airport or country manager) should be the local “face and voice” of the airline until the CEO or the “Go-Team” arrives. This includes communicating with the news media, families, the authorities and other involved parties.

## 3.8 Exercising the plan

Do not leave your crisis communication plan on the shelf gathering 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.

Communication 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.



## 4. Managing Information After an Accident:

### 4.1 Communication Flow and Timelines

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.

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



### 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
- Responses 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.
- Ongoing CEO communication to employees
- CEO/CFO communications to investors & financial markets
- Talking points for front-line staff
- CEO communication to key customers/partners

### Events which require communication planning (Day 3 and beyond)

- Recovery/identification/repatriation of victims
- CEO visit to accident site (if media present)
- Memorial events (internal/external)
- Funerals (employees/passengers)
- Release of initial investigation findings
- Return to business-as-usual (phased)
- Conclusion of recovery/identification process
- Release of interim investigation report
- Release of final investigation report and recommendations

## 4.2 Co-Ordinating With Other Stakeholders

### Family Assistance

The people who most avidly follow the statements made by the airline and other parties are the families and loved ones (next of kin, or NOKs) of those who were on board. They will also track the media coverage and may monitor or participate in online conversations on social channels.

NOKs should be at the centre of the airline's operational response to the accident. Effective communication with NOKs is therefore essential for them to understand the nature of the response, and to mitigate the risk of their relationship with the airline turning adversarial (although it is no guarantee, particularly if plaintiff's attorneys become involved).

It is important that the communications team coordinates the content and timing of external announcements with the Family Assistance team, to ensure families are briefed before information is released publicly. Equally, the communications team should be involved in developing the materials used in the family briefings by airline executives, to ensure messaging is consistent and that any potential issues are addressed appropriately.



As most family members present will have mobile phones and might therefore decide to record or live-stream the “confidential” briefing, always assume that anything said to families may become public. In practice, families tend to discourage each other from recording what are inevitably sensitive and emotional conversations and briefings.

### Legal Counsel

There can be an inherent tension in the relationship between the communications team and the organisation’s legal counsel at any time, but particularly in the midst of a crisis. But legal review of public statements is necessary to avoid prejudicing the company’s position in future litigation or when negotiating potential settlements. The main problem is the trade-off between the need for careful legal review and the pressure on the communication team to respond, sensitively and in real time, to a barrage of questions and speculation.

There is no easy way to square this circle, particularly in the “always on” environment, but both parties ultimately share responsibility for mitigating both reputational and legal risk. The best approach is for the legal and communication teams to talk through potential issues or areas of concern in “peacetime”, lay out any potential “red lines” and establish a modus operandi for working together in a crisis. That includes agreeing on appropriate language and pre-clearance of standard templates for statements or social media posts.

### The Insurers

Many communication professionals may not be aware of the relationship between the organisation and its insurance broker, or what risks are covered by insurance. In order to operate legally, every airline must carry a minimum level of insurance to cover the risks associated with an accident in respect of passengers, baggage, cargo and third parties. This includes losses from acts of war, terrorism, hijacking, sabotage, unlawful seizure or “civil commotion”.

The hull loss policy triggered by an accident typically covers reasonable costs incurred by the airline in responding to an accident or major incident, although the definition of “reasonable” will depend on what has been negotiated between the broker, the airline and the underwriters.

The policy may include the cost of engaging external communication resources (for example, a PR agency), so the communication team should discuss the level of cover with the airline’s risk manager. Also, it’s important for communicators to understand the coverage limits on family assistance support (for example, the definition of NOK, and how many NOKs per family will be allowed to travel to the accident site or be accommodated in the Family Assistance Centre).

NOKs who believe they were denied support or compensation which they were entitled to receive are an obvious potential source of negative social media posts and media coverage. Communications to the NOKs from lawyers acting on behalf of the insurers should also be reviewed, as the recipients will probably blame the airline if the tone or content is perceived to be insensitive or overly legalistic.

### The Investigating Body

Under ICAO Annex 13, the State of Occurrence is responsible for leading the investigation of aviation accidents or major incident (or the airline’s State of Registration if the accident occurs in international waters). The roles of the airline, the investigating body and other involved parties in releasing information after an accident are described in detail in section 5 of this document.



It is advisable for the airline's communications team, where possible, to establish a cooperative relationship with their counterparts at the investigating body, if such a department exists. The US National Transportation Safety Board, the French Bureau d'Enquetes et d'Analyses (BEA) and the UK Air Accident Investigation Branch, among others, employ communication professionals who are happy to provide guidance to their airline counterparts, including at events such as IATA communication conferences.

## 4.3 Long-Term Considerations for the Airline

Although the airline will eventually return to normal operations and other parties involved may "move on", the crisis is never truly over. For the airline itself, and for all those affected by an aviation tragedy – particularly the families – the memory will remain in perpetuity, even if the airline subsequently goes out of business.

Media interest in the story may die down for long periods but will spike again periodically, often around anniversaries. But there may also be other developments – discovery of more wreckage or evidence, for example. Or the release of a new book or TV documentary about the accident. Ongoing litigation by the families may also provoke a sudden surge of media attention. In each case, the airline should anticipate these developments and be ready to respond.

Some airlines have attempted to distance themselves from accidents – even to the extent of refusing to allow the airline's name or logo to be used at any permanent memorial. But others have actively embraced the memory of the tragedy and committed to supporting ongoing memorial activities in perpetuity, out of respect for the passengers and to honor their own employees who were lost.

In April 2006, Japan Airlines opened a museum (the Safety Promotion Center) near Haneda Airport in Tokyo to display parts of the wreckage and personal memorabilia from the JAL123 accident in 1985. JAL uses the museum to reinforce the importance of an effective safety culture among its own employees, encouraging them to see for themselves the consequences of a system failure. A memorial ceremony is also held every year at the accident site on the anniversary of JAL123, attended by the airline, family representatives and Boeing.

More recent examples include Lufthansa Group, which developed an extensive family and community engagement program in the aftermath of the Germanwings tragedy, which included creating an independent charitable foundation to fund causes or activities associated with some of those who died. Other airlines have launched similar initiatives.

Some of the future milestones or developments which would require a sensitive and planned communication response therefore include:

- One-year anniversary (with possible mass interment of unidentified remains)
- Potential future recovery of additional wreckage or remains
- Announcement/dedication of accident memorial
- Completion of criminal/civil litigation
- Subsequent anniversaries (particularly "milestones" – 10 years etc)
- Announcement of family/community engagement programs or initiatives in memory of those lost

## 5. Roles and Responsibilities After an Accident:

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. 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. 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 the airline's social media platforms and also appear as a link on the main website. Note: if you are unable to confirm the initial reports, 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
- An appropriate hashtag (eg #flight number update)

Updated information can be posted as it becomes available, but the airline should periodically release a more complete summary of what is known to date on the website and other online channels.

The first summary 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 focus on the actions taken by the airline. 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. A JPEG image of an infographic containing key information such as telephone numbers can be inserted into a Twitter post to save characters (and can be repeated in all subsequent tweets).

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 (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; 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, eg flight data or cockpit voice recorders
- Actions of the crew before the accident, or how they may have prevented 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 regional airlines operate franchise services under which they carry the livery, and use the flight designator code, of a larger "Network" carrier. 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 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 for the Operating Carrier 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 (eg. 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 (eg. 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 (eg. 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 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 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 (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 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 be the location of media briefings by any of the parties involved (eg. 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 (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
- Release information about the identities of people killed or injured
- 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)
- Are aware of the risk of making statements to people who may be filming them with mobile phones

## 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 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, 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

## 6. Responding to a Cyber Attack

### 6.1 The Emerging Cyber Threat

The European Commission currently regards cyber security as the number one challenge for the air transport industry. This reflects both the growing number of cyber attacks on airlines, airports and other industry players and the convergence of information technology with operational technology, which is creating new and critical areas of vulnerability across the industry. This is particularly true for airlines which are upgrading customer service offerings through the introduction of digital applications.

SITA's 2017 Air Transport IT Trends Survey found that 95% of airlines and 96% of airports were either planning or already rolling out major cyber security programs, making it their top Information Technology (IT) investment priority. Only 35% of airlines and 30% of airports believe they are prepared to deal with cyber attacks, while 81% of all large aviation companies have already reported cyber security breaches.

Cyber crime (attempting to access sensitive personal information or "ransomware" attacks) is estimated to be a US\$1.5 trillion business - more than double the annual revenues of the entire aviation industry. It accounts for 90% of all cyber attacks, according to the online security company Kaspersky.

However the cyber risk extends beyond the embarrassment of being unable to protect customers' personal information, which has become a recurring issue for travel companies and airlines. The data breach discovered by Cathay Pacific in 2018, for example, compromised the personal data, including credit card details, of more than 9.4 million customers. An arguably more sinister threat is targeted attacks designed to disrupt or disable critical systems, which has the potential to wreak havoc on airline and airport operations, causing large-scale delays, cancellations and security issues.

### 6.2 Communication Challenges

The major challenges for communication professionals considering how to prepare to respond to a cyber breach are:

- Lack of understanding of the complexities of cyber security leading to an inability to confidently explain specialized IT concepts and terminology to the media and other stakeholders.
- The nature or impact of a cyber attack may not be immediately apparent, and may manifest as a "rolling" crisis which gradually escalates in severity.
- Increasingly, Governments require companies which have experienced data breaches to promptly notify both the authorities and the affected customers, ensuring that the story will quickly become public.
- Targeted cyber attacks designed to "take down" a company may disable or compromise internal IT systems such as emails, making it impossible for the staff to communicate with each other.
- It may also be necessary to avoid using email or company phones to discuss the situation internally, to avoid alerting those responsible that the attack has been discovered before contingencies for its mitigation and the identification of the culprits are put in place.

## 6.3 Recommendations

Preparing to respond to a cyber attack should be approached in the same way as other potential disruptions or reputation risks:

- Identify the most likely scenarios or risk factors, in consultation with the IT department
- Agree the terminology which will be used to describe the nature of the event and the impact on the company's IT infrastructure, bearing in mind that it must be comprehensible to non-specialists
- Determine the external parties (police, regulatory authorities) which may be involved if a cyber attack is confirmed
- Determine the regulatory requirements for disclosure (to regulators and customers) in the event of a data breach which compromises customer data
- Become familiar with General Data Protection Regulations and any requirements/provisions which may apply to communications by the airline
- Develop a backup plan for how the communication team would operate if the company's IT or communication systems (telephones, email) were disabled or compromised. This may include plans to work remotely using personal computers, telephones and email or messaging services which do not interact with the company server.
- Ensure the communications department is notified immediately whenever a cyber attack is suspected or confirmed, even if the Crisis Management Team has not (yet) been activated
- Activate social listening to monitor any conversations about the cyber attack and the impact on customers
- Focus messaging on the actions being taken to mitigate the impact on customers and restore normal operations. Emphasize cooperation with the relevant authorities to investigate the nature and source of the attack.



## 7. Being Prepared for Other Reputation Challenges

It can be tempting to think that crisis communication in the aviation industry is focused exclusively on the response to accidents, incidents or major operational disruptions. But like any consumer-facing business, airlines (and to some degree airports) must also be prepared to respond to a wide variety of potential reputational threats, particularly those which may be fuelled by damaging content posted on social media.

Any situation in which customers feel that a company or brand has not delivered the product or service which was promised, or which they believe they were entitled to receive, may therefore set off another social media "firestorm". This is particularly true if customers are offended or angry, or if they believe their "rights" or a "social moral" has been infringed.

The underlying issue can range from the apparently trivial (refusing to allow a passenger to book a separate seat for an "emotional support animal") to the tragic. The airline itself may not even be directly responsible for the incident, but nonetheless may find itself caught in the backlash, as these two incidents demonstrate:

- In July 2016, a teenage girl died on a British Airways flight from London to Nice after suffering an extreme allergic reaction to sesame seeds contained in a baguette she had bought in the terminal. Although no blame could be attached to the airline, BA was nonetheless criticised because cabin crew did not attempt to revive her with a defibrillator as the aircraft descended towards Nice. Cabin attendants stated at the inquest two years later that their training required them to remain by the exits during the approach.
- Ryanair was heavily criticised in October 2018 after an elderly passenger on a flight from Barcelona to London Stansted was racially abused by a man sitting in an adjoining seat. Inevitably, the incident was filmed by fellow passengers and widely shared on social media, prompting outrage at the cabin crew and the airline itself for their apparent failure to protect the lady, or to have the abusive passenger removed and arrested.
- The latter incident was indicative of a growing expectation, particularly among younger consumers in developed societies, that organisations, companies and brands should not just adhere to, but be seen to model a consistent set of values, standards and behaviours, particularly on issues such as racism.
- According to the research firm Nielsen, 73% of millennials (people who reached adulthood in the early 21st century) and 77% of "Gen Z" (those born between 2001-2015) are willing to pay extra for products and services from companies "dedicated to social and environmental change".
- While the belief that companies and brands should embody a "purpose" is not confined to young consumers, the marketing publication AdWeek noted in April 2018: "These emerging generations have considerable spending power and demand more from brands. Does your brand have a set of values? If so, are you acting on these values or silently standing on the sidelines? For those content to stand back, these consumers will happily move on without you".
- Values and culture are also an integral part of any organisation's employer branding. The recruitment company Randstad's 2018 survey of 175,000 employees in 30 countries found that companies with a "positive" employer brand receive twice as many applications from potential candidates. More than 50% of respondents would not work for a company with a poor reputation, even for a higher salary.



For aviation communicators, this increasingly means their organisation or brand will be expected to have a “point of view” on a wide range of issues which may once have been thought irrelevant to airlines, airports or manufacturers. They include:

- Racism
- LGBTI rights
- Marriage equality
- Gender diversity
- Pay equality
- #MeToo (sexual harassment)
- Animal rights
- Human trafficking
- Immigration
- Climate change
- Gun control
- Employees’ right to wear clothing or symbols associated with religious faith

Communication practitioners should therefore consider the following questions:

- What are the issues on which we should (or may be expected to) have a “point of view”?
- Are these issues relevant to our business/industry, or are they of genuine concern to our customers, employees or the community/ies in which we operate?
- If we articulate a position on a given issue, does it authentically reflect our business and culture?
- If challenged, can we demonstrate our stated values in practice – for example through specific training, Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives or partnerships with relevant charities or NGOs?
- Is our position on a given issue likely to cause a negative reaction from any of our stakeholders?
- Is our position aligned with the stated position or policies of the Government (particularly for state-owned airlines)? If not, are we prepared to defend our position if challenged?
- Does the CEO personally embody our stated values in his/her behaviour and statements?
- Does the CEO personally support the positions we are taking? If so, will this change if a new CEO arrives?

The potential for reputational risk arises if there appears to be a disconnect (“say-do gap”) between the organisation’s stated values or position on a specific issue and their actions and behaviours - or those of their employees. Forrester found in 2015 that 82% of employees surveyed were familiar with their organisation’s values – but only 67% lived up to them.

This is particularly true if the CEO or other senior executives are revealed to have behaved in ways which directly contradict the company’s values – for example, to have bullied or sexually harassed subordinates or expressed racist, homophobic or misogynistic opinions. It is therefore important that communicators ensure that the CEO and senior management are fully aligned and support the company’s “Mission, Vision, Values” statement and its positions on the issues outlined above.

On certain issues which are relevant to the entire industry (for example, sustainability, climate change, human trafficking, gender diversity), IATA has articulated positions on behalf of the member airlines. These position statements can also be used by individual carriers.



## 8. Sample Social Media posts and Crisis Statements

### 8.1 First tweet – Aircraft accident

#(flight number>alert. We are investigating reports of an incident involving flight xxx (origin) to (destination). More information shortly".

### 8.2 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".

### 8.3 Third tweet – Aircraft accident

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

### 8.4 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).



## 8.5 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).



## 8.6 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)

## 8.7 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

### Southwest 1380

Southwest Airlines flight 1380, a Boeing 737-700 en route from New York's La Guardia Airport to Dallas Love Field on 17 April 2018, experienced an uncontained failure of the #1 (left) engine 20 minutes into the flight. Engine debris damaged the fuselage and smashed a window, causing rapid depressurization of the cabin. A passenger sitting next to the window was partially sucked out of the window and died, while eight other passengers suffered minor injuries.

The crew initiated an emergency descent and diverted to Philadelphia International Airport, where the aircraft landed without further problems. It was the first fatal airline accident for a U.S. passenger carrier since the crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407 in February 2009, and the first accident involving Southwest Airlines to cause the death of a passenger.

It was also the first time that a passenger on board a flight streamed images of an unfolding crisis in "real time", using the airline's on-board wifi service. Passenger Marty Martinez paid the \$8 connection charge and went live on Facebook to say goodbye to family and friends, assuming the aircraft would crash. The video was widely shared on social media and on news channels, along with graphic images of the passenger cabin and external damage posted by other passengers after it landed.

The Southwest communications team, which had already been alerted by the operations center, started receiving media calls within minutes of Martinez appearing on Facebook Live. They posted confirmation of the incident on Southwest's online channels and continued to publish updated statements and videos throughout the day. This included sharing content on employee channels which generated more than 310,000 page views. Two video statements from CEO Gary Kelly were the most viewed content ever on the airline's internal communication portal, SWA Life.

Subsequent media interest focused on two key storylines – the investigation of potential metal fatigue in the engine fan blades and the exemplary performance of the crew, captained by a female former US Navy fighter pilot. Southwest (which only operates Boeing 737s) announced a commitment to inspect all fan blades within 30 days and posted video of the maintenance process online. The airline also released a statement from both pilots, as they had already been identified in the news coverage.

Southwest changed its digital branding to plain blue with a monochrome logo for the first three days, gradually transitioning back to its normal personality after 10 days. Advertising and other promotional activities were cancelled, and 500,000 copies of the next in-flight magazine were scrapped so the CEO's column could be re-written. The communications team also 'scrubbed' all photos, B-roll footage and other assets for anything which might appear inappropriate in the circumstances.

Overall, the accident generated more than 45,000 media "hits" and 260,000 mentions on social media. The news coverage was mainly (56%) negative, but conversations on social media were more balanced, with 46% negative, 32% neutral and 22% positive. In particular, the airline's communications response was widely praised as being timely, empathetic and transparent.



## Aeromexico Connect Flight 2431

An Aeromexico Embraer ERJ190 operating a domestic flight from Durango to Mexico City under the Aeromexico Connect brand crashed on take-off on 31 July 2018, after apparently encountering wind shear from a severe microburst over the airfield. The ERJ190 had just lifted off when it lost altitude and crashed at the end of the runway. All 103 passengers and crew on board survived, although the aircraft was destroyed by fire.

A few passengers suffered serious injuries but most escaped relatively unscathed. Multiple survivors began posting photos on social media immediately after escaping from the wreckage, while others streamed images of themselves at the accident scene on Facebook Live, even as the fire took hold. One passenger filmed the entire accident sequence and evacuation from inside the cabin, with the video being posted online and replayed by mainstream news channels. TV crews also quickly reached the scene and started interviewing survivors about their "near-death" experience.

The accident illustrated the challenge airlines face in attempting to influence the unfolding coverage of an accident or major incident in the Digital age. The Aeromexico communication team at head office received their first alert 34 minutes after the crash, by which time photos and video of the accident itself and the aftermath were already visible to a global audience, with survivors being interviewed on major news channels. The first "official" confirmation came in a tweet from the Governor of the State of Durango, who subsequently became one of the primary sources of information for the media. One minute later, the airline issued its first statement on Twitter and other channels.

The early media coverage was critical of Aeromexico, highlighting complaints about the initial lack of information. However the tone of the reporting changed once Aeromexico focused the communication on the fact that everyone on board the ERJ190 survived, and its efforts to assist those affected, including the crew members. Aeromexico also decided to work collaboratively with the state Governor and other local entities and let them help with confirming information such as the status of the people injured and when they were discharged from hospital.

Aeromexico's CEO held a press conference at 9:00 pm the same day of the accident. Then he met the Governor in Durango the morning after and held a joint press conference. In its public statements, the airline also acknowledged the support of the local authorities in responding to the accident. More than 4,000 news stories appeared, most of which included photos and videos taken by passengers. But only 8% of the media coverage was negative, with the main focus on the successful evacuation and the airline's support for survivors. The reputational impact on Aeromexico was minimal, shown by the 1.8% increase in the airline's share price in the three days after the accident.



## Germanwings 9525, Two Years On

Lufthansa Group's ongoing response to the Germanwings crash in 2015 is a valuable reminder of the need for airlines to think carefully about how they would manage the long-term impact of a major loss and their continued engagement with the individuals and communities who were directly affected.

On the morning of 24 March 2015, Germanwings flight 4U9525, an Airbus A320-200, took off from Barcelona's El Prat Airport with 144 passengers and six crew on board. The A320 was heading for Dusseldorf but unexpectedly began a controlled descent, crashing into a mountain in the French Alps 100km northwest of Nice. It quickly emerged that this was a deliberate act by the co-pilot Andreas Lubitz, who had locked the captain out of the cockpit. Unknown to the airline, Lubitz had been receiving psychiatric treatment and had been declared unfit to fly by his doctor.

Germanwings (since absorbed within sister company Eurowings) was the low-cost short-haul subsidiary of Lufthansa Group. Its crisis management procedures called for the Operating Carrier to "take the lead" on the response after an accident, including communication. Under the circumstances, the policy was superseded by the need for Lufthansa Group to take control.

Lufthansa Group Chairman and CEO Carsten Spohr, a former A320 pilot who still holds his captain's licence and graduated from the same Lufthansa Flight Training centre in Bremen as Lubitz, became the "face and voice" of the response. His performance as Lufthansa's primary spokesperson, and his obvious shock that a fellow pilot had caused the tragedy, was widely seen as a key factor in containing any reputational damage to the Group.

But after the initial impact faded, Lufthansa still faced the challenge of demonstrating its lasting commitment to the families of the passengers and crew. A post-emergency organisation was established, with 15 different workstreams to manage all issues relating to flight 9525, including family communication, return of belongings, memorials and financial support. A EUR15 million Relief Fund was created three months after the crash, with an independent board of trustees which included family representatives. The aim was to support the education of children who lost parents on board, but it also provides additional funds for families in hardship and projects linked with the memory of individual victims.

A major focus was engaging with families on creating appropriate memorial ceremonies and symbols in the multiple locations connected with flight 9525. This included launching a design competition to solicit a permanent memorial at the crash scene, which is inaccessible and can only be viewed from a distance. A five metre "Solar Orb" filled with personal mementoes of the victims was unveiled on the second anniversary of the tragedy at a ceremony attended by families – one of four memorial sites in the area. Other permanent memorials were created in Germany and Spain.

Lufthansa's core principles during the post-emergency phase have been to act with "transparency, honesty and humanity". It has also communicated regularly with families in their own languages, across multiple channels including a secure family website. The airline has also committed to respecting the families' views on all key decisions, and to maintaining close relationships with the authorities in each location, particularly near the site of the crash.