



# Crisis communications and reputation management post-COVID

Evolving best practice for the aviation industry (2024)



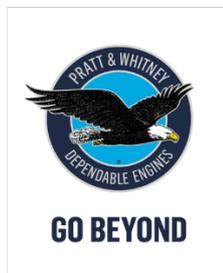


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# Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. The communication landscape post-COVID .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Changing dynamics.....	6
A loss of experience .....	6
Intensified scrutiny of “values” and “behaviors” .....	6
Transformation in media consumption.....	6
Accelerating loss of trust.....	7
2.2 Communication challenges .....	7
Acceptance of remote and hybrid working.....	7
The emergence of Generative AI and “deep fakes” .....	7
The influence of “influencers” .....	8
Cyber-bullying, trolling and doxxing.....	8
2.3 Online communication tools and channels.....	9
Chat groups.....	9
Using AI tools.....	10
<b>3. Responding to aviation crises .....</b>	<b>11</b>
The role of the operating carrier .....	11
Expectations of families .....	11
Expectations and involvement of politicians and government agencies.....	11
Reliance on third-party service providers.....	11
The involvement and influence of plaintiff’s attorneys.....	12
The interests and involvement of the insurers.....	13
<b>4. The “always on” response model.....</b>	<b>14</b>
4.1 Breaking News breaks online .....	14
4.2 Ensuring consistency .....	15
4.3 Developing the crisis communications plan .....	16
4.4 Crisis Communications Team: key positions.....	16
4.5 Crisis Communications Team: suggested organization chart.....	19
4.6 Preparing a “Dark Site”.....	20
4.7 Training spokespeople .....	20
4.8 Choosing the right spokesperson.....	21
4.9 Exercising the plan.....	21
<b>5. Managing information after an accident .....</b>	<b>22</b>
5.1 Communication flow and timeline .....	22
5.2 Co-ordination with other stakeholders .....	23
Family assistance.....	23
Legal counsel.....	24
The insurers.....	24
The investigating body .....	24
5.3 Long-term communication challenges .....	25
<b>6. Roles and responsibilities after an accident .....</b>	<b>26</b>



6.1 Operating carrier: .....	26
6.2 Franchise services: operating carrier .....	27
6.3 Franchise services: network carrier (owner of the primary brand).....	28
6.4 Codeshare partner(s).....	28
6.5 Aircraft and engine manufacturers .....	29
6.6 Airport operator .....	30
6.7 Air Navigation Service Provider.....	30
6.8 Ground handling agents .....	31
6.9 Investigating body .....	31
<b>7. Responding to a cyber attack.....</b>	<b>33</b>
7.1 The evolving cyber threat.....	33
7.2 Communications challenges .....	33
7.3 Recommendations .....	34
<b>8. Being prepared for other reputation challenges .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>9. Sample social media posts and crisis statements.....</b>	<b>37</b>
9.1 First post – aircraft accident.....	37
9.2 Second post – aircraft accident .....	37
9.3 Third post – aircraft accident .....	37
9.4 First statement – aircraft accident .....	37
9.5 Second statement – aircraft accident .....	38
9.6 First statement – aircraft incident.....	39
9.7 First statement – aircraft diversion .....	39
<b>Appendix: case studies .....</b>	<b>40</b>
1. TUI's internal communication during COVID .....	40
2. Southwest Airlines: extreme weather disruption .....	41



# 1. Introduction

This document explores some of the changes in the communication landscape since the previous edition was released in 2018. It also considers what remains unchanged: in particular, the legal and moral imperative for airlines, and other involved parties, to respond to the needs of people directly affected by an accident or major incident, and to be ready to communicate that response quickly and effectively to all internal and external stakeholders. It is intended to be used by aviation industry communication professionals as a guide to crisis communication planning.

## 2. The communication landscape post-COVID

### 2.1 Changing dynamics

#### A loss of experience

The pandemic saw many people leave the airline industry including senior colleagues with hands-on experience in responding to crisis situations. The same has been seen in mainstream news outlets, where editorial teams have been consolidated or downsized. The result is that aviation accidents and other crises are even more likely to be covered by relatively inexperienced reporters who may not have much (if any) background knowledge of the industry. The influence of “mainstream media” reporting of aviation crises is also considerably diminished - particularly for younger people, who now rely on other sources of information.

#### Intensified scrutiny of “values” and “behaviors”

Since 2000 there have been profound social changes, particularly in Western societies. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is a priority for many companies. Businesses are increasingly expected by consumers, employees or other stakeholders to “take a stand” on social or cultural issues or on broader topics such as climate change. Any failure to match words with actions may itself provoke a reputation crisis and/or consumer backlash.

A study by the consultancy McKinsey<sup>1</sup> in Brazil found that “Businesses must...more than ever, practice what they preach when they address marketing issues and work ethics”. The study noted: “In a transparent world, [Gen Z, those born around the turn of the millennium] don’t distinguish between the ethics of a brand, the company that owns it, and its network of partners and suppliers. A company’s actions must match its ideals, and those ideals must permeate the entire stakeholder system”. This includes the way companies – and their leaders – behave in times of crisis.

#### Transformation in media consumption

One of the consequences of the ubiquity of smartphones and easy connectivity to high-speed data networks has been a transformation in the way most audiences access news content – particularly among Generation Z. According to the US-based research company Morning Consult, as of January 2024, the top three sources of “news” for under-25s are 1) YouTube; 2) Instagram; and 3) TikTok.

In most developed economies, the popularity of news in print and traditional broadcasting is in sharp decline as the popularity of online/on demand channels is increasing.

There are two obvious corollaries: firstly, the physical “real estate” on which the content is read or viewed has shrunk from the size of a broadsheet newspaper or television to a mobile smartphone screen. Secondly,

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<sup>1</sup> McKinsey: Generation Z and its implications for companies, November 2018



smartphone users are overwhelmingly more likely to scroll through content quickly, partly because of the sheer volume of material that appears in their personal news feeds.

Mainstream news organizations such as CNN have responded to this fundamental shift in audience behavior by going “all-in” on digital platforms, with content optimized for viewing on mobile devices (vertical format, rather than landscape). The key metric is no longer the number of copies sold, the readership, viewership or even the number of page visits. To sustain online advertising rates and boost visibility to search algorithms, online content must drive “engagement” – how long people view content and what they do with it (ie, “like”, share, comment or click through to a related story or feature).

## Accelerating loss of trust

The Edelman Trust Barometer, published annually by the US-based public relations agency, has documented a decline in trust of political leaders and the media for more than two decades. The headline finding of its 2022 report was that “Distrust is now society’s default emotion”, with nearly 6 in 10 of the 36,000 people surveyed, in 28 countries, saying they tend to distrust a piece of information until they see evidence that it is trustworthy. The 2024 study noted that most respondents believe “establishment leaders” deliberately try to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations, with the worst offenders being the media (distrusted by 64%); government leaders (63%), and business leaders (61%). The same report found that Governments are generally seen as “far less competent and ethical than businesses” (scoring an average of 52% less than businesses in terms of “competence”).

The 2022 Edelman study also stated that CEOs (and/or business owners) are expected to embody the values and culture of the company they lead, and of the employees who work there. Respondents expect their CEO to “take a public stand” on issues such as the treatment of employees (89%); climate change (82%) and discrimination (80%). This also holds true in times of crisis. Under the intense scrutiny of customers, employees, investors, partners, regulators, and other stakeholders, the CEO is expected to be personally visible in leading the response to any crisis. He or she should acknowledge the reality of the situation, accept an appropriate level of responsibility, and commit to a concrete plan of action to address the needs of those affected. Mouthing platitudes or making promises that can’t be fulfilled risks escalating the crisis and destroying both reputation and – ultimately – enterprise value. To audiences who expect authenticity but are inclined to distrust what they see and hear, it’s more important than ever that the CEO “steps up” to say what the company is doing and ensure that it does what it says.

## 2.2 Communication challenges

### Acceptance of remote and hybrid working

The COVID pandemic saw a step-change in traditional working patterns. While social distancing required employees to work from home during the worst of the pandemic, many companies have subsequently accepted degrees of remote working. This clearly has implications for communications teams, particularly if they need to respond in real time to an unfolding crisis.

Potentially, team members “working from home” could be mobilized more quickly using communication tools such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. However, these tools are entirely dependent on access to a stable internet connection. Users must also stay online to track the information which is being shared at that moment. These platforms therefore can’t fully replicate the in-person interaction and dynamics of a team working under pressure in a fast-breaking crisis, being in the same room and with access to multiple information sources.

### The emergence of Generative AI and “deep fakes”

In 2023, ChatGPT became the fastest-adopted communication tool in history, reaching more than 100 million users within the first two months of its launch. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled tools are not new: online



customer service portals widely use AI-powered chatbots to answer and screen customer enquiries or complaints, while translation apps such as Google Translate rely on AI to instantly (if imperfectly) translate text or the spoken word.

However, the new generation of tools such as ChatGPT, Bard, Genesis and Perplexity add another dimension, because they can respond to questions or prompts by searching vast amounts of "learned" material instantly to generate content which mimics human patterns of speech or writing. With AI, it has also become possible for almost anyone to use generative AI to produce realistic photos, audio and videos which are almost impossible to distinguish from the "real thing".

MIT professor Sinan Aral has written that "Fake News" is 70% more likely to be shared or re-tweeted, because of its novelty or surprise value or because it is specifically designed to provoke an emotional response such as anger, fear, hatred or disgust<sup>2</sup>. Where this fake content is produced by generative AI, it is challenging to detect, even if the content generation systems insert "watermarks" as they can be removed or obscured. Fake content is another source of noise in a crisis that corporate communicators must overcome ensure their voice is heard.

Establishing an engaging social media presence before a crisis is critical. In a crisis, the company will then be in a position to use its online presence to quickly engage with an audience to which it is already connected. This gives the company the opportunity to influence the narrative with authoritative, credible statements and content which portray the company as responsible and committed to doing the "right thing".

The use of AI-enabled tools such as ChatGPT by communications teams can have some powerful and positive attributes for communications teams. These, and the necessary precautions, are discussed in section 2.3.

## The influence of "influencers"

In crisis situations, the ability to mobilize credible, authoritative, and independent external advocates who are willing to share their expert opinion and perspective can be invaluable. These external sources may be able to credibly counter damaging misinformation or reinforce the position taken by the company involved, particularly if they are well-recognized for their technical expertise. Suitable candidates might include specialist journalists; industry analysts; retired pilots or investigators; former executives with trade bodies; or academics.

Mobilizing external influencers is generally not part of the initial crisis response but can be helpful in long-running situations where the organization concerned has come under prolonged criticism to which it is unable to fully respond using its own "voice". As with any campaign, the key to success is having a strategy. Identify potential influencers and begin the process of engaging with them to create an "educated circle" who could be mobilized to support or explain the company's position. Of course, this can only happen if the influencer genuinely believes the company's position. It's also important to ensure that the influencer's personal and/or professional credibility and independence is not compromised. If external influencers need to be compensated for their time, any payments or benefits should be disclosed transparently.

## Cyber-bullying, trolling and doxxing

An unfortunate by-product of the ubiquity of social media, and the anonymity which it can provide, is that it has created myriad opportunities for people to harass or intimidate others online. A survey by Johns Hopkins University in 2021, for example, found almost 1,500 incidents of online harassment of local health officials in the United States during the first year of the pandemic, with 57% of local health departments reporting episodes of staff being targeted with personal threats, "doxxing", vandalism and other forms of harassment.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Hype Machine", Aral, Random House, 2020



Such cyberbullying is not uncommon in a crisis and may have serious effects on the victim's mental state.

Communication professionals who post work-related content on their personal channels, are particularly vulnerable in a crisis. But caution should be exercised by all employees, including senior executives, who associate themselves with a company in their online profiles. In extreme cases, employees could be "doxxed" – a form of cyber-bullying where someone's personal information including their home address, names and locations of family members, car licence plate number or other identifying data is exposed publicly.

## 2.3 Online communication tools and channels

Since the pandemic, video calls and online meetings have become a routine part of the working day for communication professionals, allowing them to operate more flexibly and facilitating collaboration among teams who may be dispersed across multiple geographies and time zones.

However, the ability to convene online meetings at short notice also means journalists are well aware that the CEO or other senior executives could easily be made available for an online interview or media briefing in the middle of a fast-breaking crisis, regardless of their physical location. Broadcasters – and viewers – have also learned to accept video which is not necessarily "broadcast quality", meaning that the logistical challenge of getting an executive to a TV studio to conduct an interview is no longer a primary consideration.

The pressure on communications teams to make the CEO or other senior executives visible in the early stages of a crisis has therefore intensified. As seen after the Southwest Airlines 1380 accident in 2018, the Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 MAX incident in January 2024, and the Singapore Airlines 321 turbulence incident in May 2024, one option is to record a video statement and post it online, giving broadcasters and other audiences the opportunity to see and hear the CEO. The timeliness of the statement should be the main determinant, almost regardless of the technical quality, although broadcasters will always prefer the best video and audio available.

Multiple platforms are available for online press briefings (or for engaging with other audiences such as employees), including Zoom, Teams, Skype, Webex Meetings and Google Workspace. Some have versions for large numbers of participants which could be useful for press briefings. These feature questions via chat, centralized 'mute' control, controlled publication of questions, automatic transcription, translation, etc. For the host, remote press briefings provide more control, and allow journalists from anywhere in the world to attend. But the disadvantage is that it's harder to "read the room" and gauge the reaction to what is being said. It is also potentially frustrating for the journalists. They must generally register questions in a queue, so there may be many repeats, they may be unable to build on responses already given, and their question may be irrelevant by the time they reach the top of the queue.

### Chat groups

Many communication professionals belong to multiple chat groups on messaging apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Line, Viber, Teams, WeChat, Telegram, etc. There are also many automated crisis management systems on the market such as Everbridge, Fact 24 or WebEOC, which allow for rapid notification and activation of crisis teams, online meetings, tracking of decisions and actions, etc.

There are two significant risks to using chat groups on platforms such as WhatsApp in a crisis. Firstly, a backup channel is advisable, as the technology may fail. System-wide outages do occur and would instantly disable any team relying on it as a primary communication channel. Secondly, in a fast-breaking crisis with constant updates and multiple users adding comments and information, it can be difficult to keep track of the scrolling conversation, particularly on a smartphone screen, or to find a particular piece of information that may have been posted a couple of hours earlier. Users may also miss alerts that indicate new information has been posted on the app. Some of these challenges are mitigated by using the respective desktop app versions.



## Using AI tools

Alongside the obvious reputational risks associated with the production of “deep fake” content, generative AI tools also present opportunities for communication practitioners. Most important is the ability to automate time-consuming tasks such as media monitoring or sentiment analysis, including of online conversations. The same applies to running spelling or grammar checks before a piece of content is finalized. AI can also greatly speed up the repurposing/optimization of content for various channels and assist in improving the quality of some assets (for example by removing background noise from audio recordings). It must be recognized, however, that media organizations are developing strict guidelines prohibiting the use of images/recordings that have been edited, including with AI.

A crisis is not the time to start experimenting with AI. It is important for communicators to work with their IT colleagues to understand the advantages, disadvantages, vulnerabilities, strengths and weaknesses of the technology to evaluate its potential use in a crisis. The findings of such a discussion should be reflected in a corporate policy on AI use.

AI can be used by communication professionals to generate and edit copy, but this needs to be done with caution. Particular care should be taken to ensure that sensitive information is not used to prompt responses from AI tools as it may then become part of the large-language model (LLM) and reappear in other AI-generated content. Issues to consider include data privacy and security; potential infringement of copyright or intellectual property rights; and social or cultural issues. Another factor is that most of the LLMs are based on western-produced data sources, meaning the content generated from them is implicitly western-centric (although this is expected to change over time, as new LLMs integrate data from non-western sources).

Another major issue with AI content is misinformation and “hallucination”. Because the algorithms rely on pattern recognition within the LLM dataset to determine the probability of what the next word or phrase should be, the results produced in response to a question or prompt may be completely inaccurate. To provide just one example, a passenger’s personal injury lawsuit against Avianca was dismissed in May 2023 because his lawyer used ChatGPT to create the brief; it contained multiple references to previous cases and court rulings that did not exist.

On a more positive note, AI can be used to quickly make sense of large amounts of data: for example, to identify emerging trends or risks for an organization based on analyzing media coverage, social media conversations, customer surveys, incident reports, or to analyze and transcribe conversations, etc. AI tools can also be used to “red team” (internally test) different scenarios for exercises or training purposes. But because AI cannot make judgments, understand context or subtext or apply emotional intelligence, human involvement and oversight in the application of AI tools remains essential.



## 3. Responding to aviation crises

Despite the changes documented above, some things remain unchanged. Specifically, the responsibility of airlines and other involved parties to respond appropriately to the needs of the people directly affected by an accident, or by other crisis situations.

### The role of the operating carrier

After an accident or major incident, the Operating Carrier has the primary (but not sole) responsibility for assisting the victims and their families and for communicating with the affected stakeholders. Other parties – for example, the Police, Coroner or investigating body will also be involved in disseminating information to families and survivors. But ultimately, the airline is central to every phase of the response – and effective communication is a through-line at each stage. The airline's legal responsibilities are codified by Family Assistance legislation in the US and in multiple other jurisdictions around the world. However, its moral responsibilities are equally compelling and subject to ever-rising pressures and expectations created by the involvement of family associations and plaintiff's attorneys. There are also additional pressures from the scrutiny of government leaders, political figures and the "always-on" media environment.

### Expectations of families

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

But even in jurisdictions where there is no Family Assistance legislation in place, the expectations of the families (and of their legal representatives) will be conditioned by what happened in previous accidents. Virtually every commercial flight will, in any case, carry passengers and/or crew of multiple nationalities or involve families who reside in jurisdictions where family support is legally codified.

### Expectations and involvement of politicians and government agencies

The high-profile nature of aviation accidents means government and political leaders often feel compelled to be "seen" taking control of the response. This has occurred repeatedly after previous accidents, regardless of the location. The agency charged with investigating accidents for the state of occurrence (or the state of registration, in the case of an accident in international waters) will normally be the main source of information about the progress of the investigation itself. This in accordance with [ICAO's Annex 13](#). But the airline's ability to shape the unfolding narrative about its own response may be constrained or overshadowed by the involvement of other branches of government, including government ministers (and potentially the head of state), local prosecutors, or other elected officials.

This is particularly challenging for state-owned (or state-controlled) airlines where the chairman, members of the Board or CEO may be government appointees. But it is important for any airline to understand the regulatory and political environment in every market to which it operates. It should identify the potential challenges in terms of relevant legislation; the approach to accident investigation; and the likely involvement of different government agencies, particularly in controlling the flow of information to the families and the news media.

### Reliance on third-party service providers

Most airlines rely on third-party Ground Handling Agents (GHAs) to support their airport operations, particularly in overseas ports. Many airlines have no staff representation at the "front line", or may at best have a stand-alone airport manager, supported by a GHA. This leaves the airline in the position of outsourcing its on-airport



response to crises or disruptions to a ground handler. They will have contractual obligations to provide support, but the degree to which they will be effective depends on familiarization and training. Moreover, they will have limited resources with which to handle the crisis and maintain service to their other clients. While in reality, the airport “community” tends to mobilize to support survivors or families for any carrier that suffers a major event at a location where it has limited resources, this cannot be relied on in terms of crisis planning. The issues of cost recovery and/or potential legal liability for actions taken on behalf of the operating carrier are also a significant consideration for ground handlers, the airline, and the insurers.

GHA staff responding to the event may also be surrounded by “meeters and greeters” brandishing smartphones to record or live-stream any comments, creating potential reputational risk for the airline on whose behalf they are responding. The airline could well discover a front-line “spokesperson” is quoted in news reports, even though he or she is not an employee and has no mandate to speak on the airline’s behalf.

The ability of the airline to share information and make the CEO or other executives visible quickly via online platforms offers some corrective measures. But in their crisis planning, communications teams should carefully consider how to mitigate the risk that a GHA may, however inadvertently, become the only available spokesperson at the scene of an accident, especially in the early stages.

## The involvement and influence of plaintiff’s attorneys

While it may be illegal in certain jurisdictions for lawyers to approach the families of accident victims in the immediate aftermath, some law firms try to position themselves as alternative sources of information by setting 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.

Some supposedly independent “experts” rushing to share their opinions in the media after an accident are actually presenting themselves as a potential source of assistance to victims’ families. If families sign up for legal representation, which is their right, plaintiff’s attorneys have been known to take 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 far higher damages after aviation losses, and the threat of being involved in a case before the US courts may also be used as leverage to increase the amount of any pre-trial settlement.

The airline cannot prevent families from seeking legal representation, but it should monitor the activities of the plaintiff’s attorneys and where necessary and possible, correct any misinformation they might 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. Family attorneys, once engaged, may also demand that the airline ceases all direct contact with their clients and only communicate via their legal representative(s). While the families have a right to insist on this, it obviously complicates the airline’s commitment to providing appropriate emotional and practical support.

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. The relationship with family members is likely to be long and complex: lasting for years or even decades. It is important that the airline is able to convince these families that it is acting in good faith and genuinely trying to do the right thing.



## The interests and involvement of the insurers

Most aviation communication professionals have probably never met – indeed, may not even be able to name – their company’s insurance broker. They should. While this relationship is typically “owned” by the risk manager, or by the finance or legal department, the insurance broker can be an invaluable source of information and perspective for the airline’s management and for the communications team.

Brokers place the airline’s risk with underwriters and are responsible for writing the insurance policy, which stipulates the amount and nature of the coverage. After a loss, the broker can advise the Crisis Management Team on which costs associated with the response (for example, the nature and extent of Family Assistance support) are covered under the policy. The broker, and the legal team acting for the underwriters, will probably have been involved in the responses to multiple previous accidents and incidents, so their knowledge and experience can be invaluable to an airline (including the communication team) who may never have experienced a loss. Some brokers are also willing to share their expertise in pre-incident training for insured clients, thereby helping to mitigate the risk of a badly handled response.

It should also be noted that some brokers offer their insured clients a Risk Management Bursary which can be used to invest in programs that potentially alleviate the insurers’ downstream risk. These bursaries may amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars and are typically controlled by the airline’s risk manager. While they are usually spent on safety-related initiatives, the broker may be amenable to the client investing some of the money in emergency response programs, including crisis exercises and training. Communications leaders should be aware that these funds may be available and how to access them.



## 4. The “always on” response model

### 4.1 Breaking News breaks online

The publication of IATA’s first Best Practice Guidelines was prompted by a “watershed” event involving a Qantas Airways Airbus A380 which experienced an uncontained engine failure and fire on a flight from Singapore to Sydney in November 2010. This was the first time that news of a serious aviation incident began circulating on social media channels while the aircraft was still airborne. The social media speculation culminated in a report on the Reuters newswire that a Qantas A380 had crashed, which appeared some 20 minutes before the aircraft landed safely at Singapore’s Changi Airport. This incident marked a paradigm shift in the media environment and crisis communication planning.

Since then, there have been further incidents which illustrate the constantly evolving challenges that social media and technology bring to how aviation accidents are reported. In April 2018, a passenger on board a Southwest Airlines Boeing 737 which suffered an uncontained engine failure and explosive decompression, became the first person to “live stream” video of a developing emergency from onboard an aircraft in “real-time”, thanks to the availability of on-board Wi-Fi. Southwest’s public response to the accident was led primarily on its own online channels.

This phenomenon reached its ultimate conclusion in January 2023, when a passenger on board a domestic turboprop flight from Kathmandu to Pokhara in Nepal live-streamed footage of the descent to his Facebook account moments before the aircraft crashed, providing the first real-time video of an aircraft accident from inside the cabin. In this case, there was no on-board Wi-Fi, but the passenger had activated his mobile data connection.

Several major airlines have adapted to this “real-time” environment by remodelling their communication strategy around two key elements: 24/7 social listening and a closer working relationship between the operations and communication departments. Several carriers, for example, have moved members of the communications team into the operations control centre alongside the duty manager, constantly monitoring social media alerts around the clock.

Clearly, not every airline has the resources to do this. The operations department itself may also resist the presence of “outsiders” in the inner sanctum. But “always on” crisis communication relies on the organization’s ability to see, assess, and respond to any situation or reputation threat as it develops, not after the event. Indeed, in many cases the first alerts of a crisis now come from social media monitoring.

## 4.2 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 develop an inventory of 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 usually 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 individual approval for every post is not practical (for example, for large airlines running social media feeds in multiple languages), clear instructions for signing off on scheduled posts are required, along with training for operators running customer service interactions online.
- If Corporate Communications does not have editorial control over the organization's social media presence, it should have "over-ride" authority in a crisis, so content can be replaced or amended quickly. There are numerous examples of airlines (and other organizations) continuing to show images of smiling faces or other promotional content on their website even after people have lost their lives in an accident. This is invariably due to a lack of internal coordination or oversight. The communications and marketing teams should therefore work closely to review all available channels and touchpoints including mass-mail marketing platforms, paid advertising, etc (including billboard or poster advertisements that are already on display).
- After an aviation accident with fatalities, many companies 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 (or if it is highly likely that there will be fatalities) and be synchronized across all touchpoints. The most common is to convert the airline logo and landing page to monochrome. A hashtag (#tag) may also be used to allow 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 in a terminal in 2017.
- The decision on when to transition back to normal promotional branding is sensitive and should be synchronized 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 in 2015, the first new fare promotion was only published after three weeks, 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. This is particularly important for airlines that have moved most of their customer service functions online. The messaging used by agents responding to customer inquiries (for example, about ongoing disruption to other flights) should be consistent in tone and content with the airline's other online channels. The same applies to agents working in the airline's call center.
- The "call holding" music played while callers wait to be connected with an agent should also be reviewed, in case it is inappropriate for the circumstances (for example, happy holiday music).
- 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 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 their own online platforms. Similarly, channels such as X/Twitter and Facebook are blocked in China, which has its own social media ecosystem.

## 4.3 Developing the crisis communications plan

The day after an accident is not the time to develop a crisis communication plan. While every situation is different and may bring up circumstances and issues that 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 the elements discussed in the preceding sections: the external environment, the complicating factors (including internal “roadblocks”) that may derail the response, and how you would organize and deploy your own internal resources and capabilities. A plan will help structure the team’s thinking amid the initial chaos of a response, but it still requires the application of professional judgment and experience to determine the appropriate actions.

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 designations of authorized spokespeople
- Outline of the communication organization, and its interface with the corporate Crisis Management Team (CMT) (the head of communication should always sit on the CMT)
- Protocols for ensuring all available communication channels are properly coordinated and that information and messaging are 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 communication, including the first online posts, which can be issued immediately after key information is confirmed. Templates should be developed for various possible scenarios, including accidents; serious incidents; diversions; hijacking/security incidents; service disruptions (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

## 4.4 Crisis Communications Team: key positions

The Crisis Communications Team (CCT) is responsible for developing and implementing the company’s communication strategy, and for ensuring that it can communicate rapidly and effectively with key internal and external stakeholders across multiple channels.

In a crisis, the company’s own communications team may need to be supplemented by external resources, for example from a Public Relations agency or colleagues from other parts of the organization. Bear in mind it may need to operate multiple shifts for a prolonged period, particularly in the early stages of the response. Individuals cannot remain effective if they are expected to work amid the pressures of a crisis for an extended period, without adequate rest.

At a minimum, the team should be capable of executing the functional responsibilities outlined below. 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, together with a list of candidates and designated alternates for each function.

Note: Members of the communications team may be advised to change their email signoffs to include a link to the website where current information has been posted. At the time of publication, X (formerly Twitter) remains a suitable platform for short-form update bulletins, but also to link to more complete statements (or other content such as videos) posted on the website or other platforms such as YouTube. Social channels are rapidly evolving and regular evaluation of their capabilities is advisable.

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

The Communications Representative on the CMT is responsible for providing strategic communication 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, to ensure that information and messaging are consistent. This position is normally filled by the Head of Communications.

### **2. Crisis Communications Team (CCT) Lead**

The Crisis Communications Team Lead is responsible for ensuring that the communication strategy and actions are implemented by the CCT and for acting as the main point of contact between the CCT and the Communications Representative on the CMT. The CCT Lead will assign roles to other members of the communications team and ensure they have adequate resources and support. This position is usually filled by the deputy or alternate to the Head of Communications.

### **3. Intelligence Co-ordinator**

The primary responsibilities of the Intelligence Coordinator are to compile, analyze and report relevant coverage and online conversations. (Note: the social listening/sentiment analysis function may be performed by one or more external agencies if there are insufficient internal resources). This role may also include responsibility for monitoring conversations by employees on internal channels (or through informal feedback) and alerting the CMT to any significant concerns expressed by employees.

### **4. Content Co-ordinator**

The Content Coordinator is responsible for drafting all written materials or other content (audio, video, graphic) used in response to the crisis, including statements delivered by company spokespeople. This includes ensuring that any content has been approved by the CMT before it is released externally or internally, on any channel.

### **5. Distribution Co-ordinator**

This position is responsible for ensuring that any content approved by the CMT is distributed on the appropriate internal or external channel/s. If necessary, the content might be modified to a different format or "tone of voice", depending on the channel and the intended audience. This includes content directed at employees, which would be distributed over internal channels.

### **6. Media Relations Co-ordinator**

The Media Relations Co-ordinator is responsible for responding to incoming media requests via any channel, which may include email, a media "hotline" number, direct messages on social channels, messaging apps etc. Also, for alerting the CCT Lead to any new issues or areas of interest for reporters. This individual should also ensure that priority media contacts are kept informed of the airline's statements and are provided with opportunities to interview senior spokespeople when appropriate. This function is largely administrative and may be outsourced to an agency.



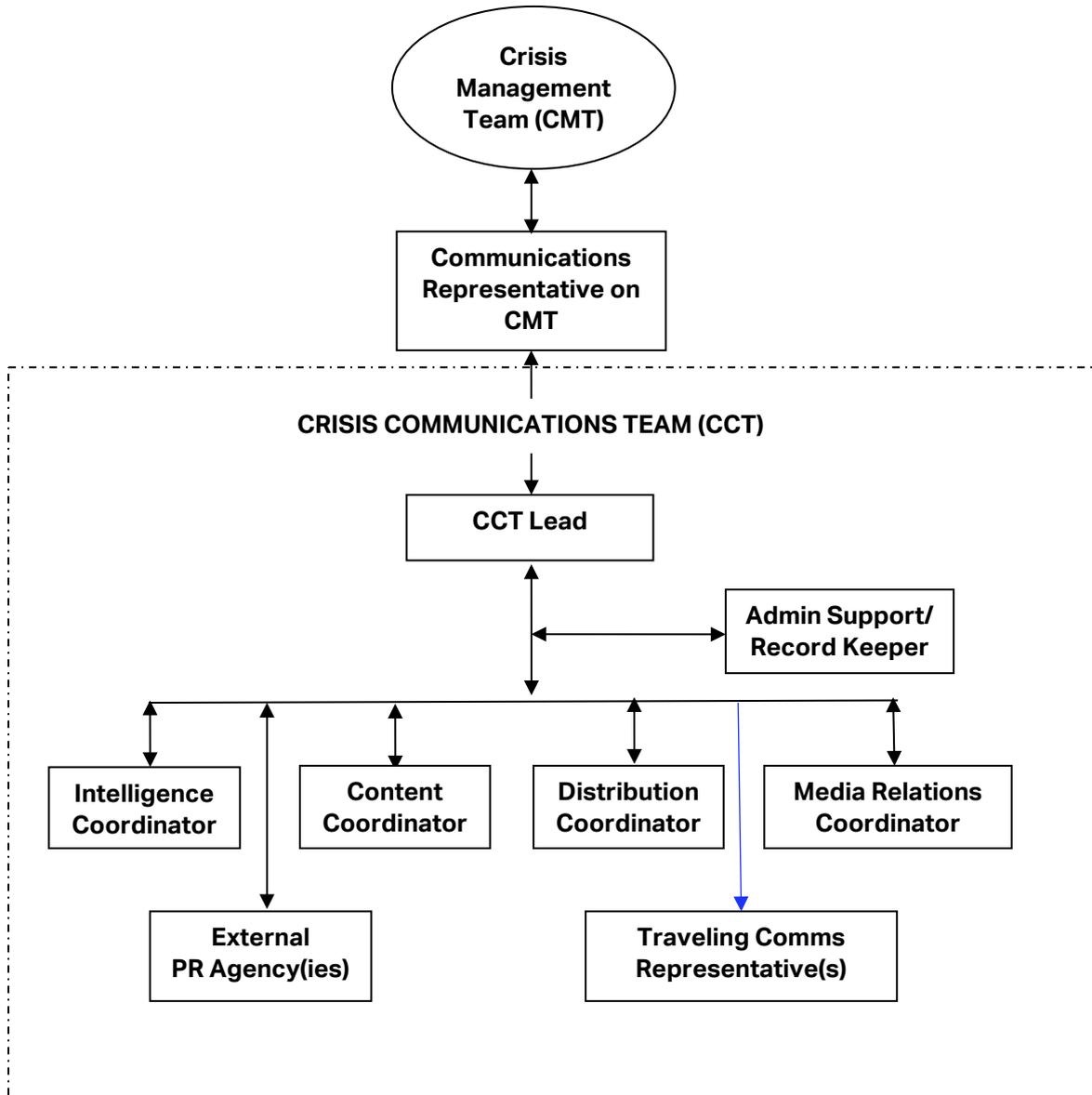
## **7. Traveling Communication Representative(s)**

One or more members of the CCT may be required to travel to the incident scene with the Go-team or to other locations where a communication representative is required. This may include Family Assistance Centre(s) or other relevant locations such as the arrival or departure airports, if the airline faces significant media pressure at those location(s). The traveling representative(s) is/are responsible for coordinating all communication activities locally. This includes arranging local media interactions or briefings and ensuring that the CCT Lead is kept informed of developments at the scene.

If the resources are available, other members of the communications team may “rotate” to affected location(s) and provide some backup and relief. Airlines may consider augmenting their resources for this function with external help from agencies or partner airlines with which they have mutual assistance agreements.

There is often intense media pressure around the Family Assistance Centre(s) (FAC), with journalists attempting to interview family members or even to attend confidential briefings. Family members should not be prevented from talking to the media if they wish – but equally, they should be protected from unwanted media intrusion. Senior executives briefing family members in the FAC may also require communication support to ensure they are ready to face intense questioning and also that information and messaging used with families is consistent with other public statements.

## 4.5 Crisis Communications Team: suggested organization chart





## 4.6 Preparing a “Dark Site”

A “dark site” template should be prepared in advance to replace the home page on the website almost immediately (within minutes) after notification of an accident and confirmation of the first critical details. 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 keywords 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

## 4.7 Training spokespeople

Dealing with the media in a crisis, particularly with the added emotional stress of responding to a fatal accident, is not “business as usual”. Senior executives who may be required to act as spokespeople must understand how to defend the organization under pressure from aggressive reporters. While front-line operational or commercial managers in the network may be pressed to speak to reporters at the scene of the event, tools such as MS Teams or Zoom now allow airlines to make the CEO or other senior executive(s) available for interviews or briefings remotely from the Head Office, at least until the Go-Team arrives on-site.

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 already know how to deal with journalists. Training should ideally be provided by specialists with experience in responding to multiple crises, delivered either in person or via online programs (which may be more cost-effective for widely dispersed teams such as airport managers).

Crisis communication or media 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 “real-time” communication landscape.
- How the news media work, and what they will look for.
- Key media skills
  - 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”.
  - Holding an online or “hybrid” press briefing.

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 that the reporters are most likely to ask.



## 4.8 Choosing the right spokesperson

In principle, the CEO should be the primary spokesperson after an accident if there is loss of life or serious injuries. Their involvement demonstrates 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 government leaders and agencies, investors and partners. Depending on circumstances, the CEO may also travel to the accident scene and take the lead in briefing families, although many airlines designate and train other senior executives to take on this role in the Family Assistance Center.

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

## 4.9 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, key players may no longer be with the organization, or the organization itself may have changed. 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 whether it is now outdated due to 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 tabletop or a full-scale input-response exercise run by a “control team”. Accidents do not happen with plenty of warning or 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 that occurs at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

Communication exercises that 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 debrief 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, home/hub airport operator) in your exercise.



## 5. Managing information after an accident

### 5.1 Communication flow and timeline

Because of the speed at which news of a missing aircraft or accident can spread on social media, airlines and other parties directly involved do not have the luxury of time to confirm information and wait for internal clearances before issuing some form of public acknowledgment.

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 communication, actions or events (such as memorials) will always depend on the circumstances and the expectations of those involved or affected, but they are predictable and require careful planning.

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 or became aware of the situation). Note: if the accident/event did not cause fatalities, some of what follows would be inappropriate or unnecessary:

- T+15 mins:** Release the first online post acknowledging initial reports. Update regularly with short posts as new information is confirmed. The same information may also be posted to the website, which ensures it would be visible in countries where some online channels are not available (e.g., China). If video of the event is already being shown "live" on TV or streaming on social media, acknowledge immediately if the identity of the aircraft is confirmed beyond any doubt. If the reports are unclear/unverified, use conditional language (i.e., "We are aware of reports...and are working to confirm information as quickly as possible").
- T+ 60 mins:** Issue a longer summary of information confirmed to date, via multiple channels and posted on the website. Ensure this information is also shared with employees via all available internal channels (intranet, Yammer, etc). Release new summaries hourly, or as key developments are confirmed, while maintaining a regular flow of short updates.
- T + 120 mins:** If it is known or highly likely that there have been fatalities, change the 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 appearances by senior executives. In the past, this has meant an early appearance by the most senior executive at the "site" followed by the CEO or most senior person available at headquarters. Given the capabilities of modern smartphones, there have been several recent examples of the first response being a video statement from the CEO, recorded or streamed from a phone.
- T + 6-24 hrs:** Further statements, press briefings, or other media engagement 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, home base for the largest group of passengers, or the coordination point for search & recovery operations. Note: Online meeting platforms allow press briefings by the CEO or other key executives to be held in person, virtually, or as a hybrid event with attendees in the room and online.
- News releases updating progress on family assistance activities
- Responses to emerging issues (if appropriate and within the 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 communication to investors & financial markets
- Talking points and updates for front-line staff. External releases distributed internally
- CEO communication to key customers/partners

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

- Recovery/identification/repatriation of victims
- CEO visit to the accident site
- Other high-profile visits to the site in which the airline may be involved (e.g., Head(s) of State, senior political figures)
- 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

## 5.2 Co-ordination with other stakeholders

### Family assistance

The people with the greatest personal interest in 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 center 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.

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. The airline may also use other channels to communicate privately with families, including a password-protected website. This is particularly useful for family members unable to or unwilling to attend the Family



Assistance Center (FAC) briefings, or for longer-term information sharing with families after they have returned from the FAC – for example, for the identification and return of personal effects.

## Legal counsel

There can be an inherent tension in the relationship between the communications team and the organization's legal counsel at any time, 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 avoiding the perception that the company is being unduly cautious and "legalistic" in its responses. The legal advisors should also recognize the pressure on the communications team to respond, sensitively and in real-time, to a barrage of questions and potentially false or misleading social media content.

There is no easy way to square this circle, but both parties ultimately share responsibility for mitigating both reputational and legal risks. The best approach is for the legal and communications 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 organization and its insurance broker, or what risks are covered by insurance. To operate legally, every airline must carry a minimum level of insurance to cover the risks associated with an accident with respect to 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 communications 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 Next of Kin (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. Communication 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 incidents (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 6 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 (NTSB), for example, regularly conducts seminars for industry communication professionals, particularly for airlines and airports that might be involved in an NTSB-led investigation.



## 5.3 Long-term communication challenges

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.

Media interest in the story may die down for long periods but will spike again periodically, often around anniversaries or the release of the air accident investigation reports. But there may also be other developments – the discovery of more wreckage or evidence, 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.

Many airlines actively embrace the memory of the tragedy and commit to supporting ongoing memorial activities in perpetuity, out of respect for the passengers and to honor the 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 the Lufthansa Group, which developed an extensive family and community engagement program in the aftermath of the Germanwings tragedy. This 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 that would require a sensitive and planned communication response therefore include:

- First 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 who were lost



## 6. 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!

### 6.1 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 acknowledgment 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 the early 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 (e.g. #flight number).

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, and 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 X/Twitter can be used to alert users to new information, with a link to more detailed communication posted on the airline's website or Facebook page. An infographic containing key information such as telephone numbers can be inserted into a short-form post (and can be repeated in all subsequent posts).

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



- Expressions of regret and concern for the well-being of passengers and crew members and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones.
- Factual information about the flight (e.g. flight number; aircraft type; origin; destination; number of passengers and crew; departure time; where and when the incident occurred; codeshare partner(s) involved).
- Specific actions the airline has taken since it was notified of the event (e.g. activating crisis management center/s; activating a passenger information center; deployment of special assistance teams; establishment of family assistance center(s); care and support provided for survivors and/or families; memorial ceremonies).
- Factual information about the aircraft (aircraft and engine types; dates of manufacture and acquisition; flight hours, number of flights; how many are 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 has 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 onboard systems or airport equipment.
- Accident characteristics (such as the way the aircraft broke apart), and what this might indicate.
- Finding key pieces of evidence, e.g. 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 error or wrongdoing by pilots or other employees.
- 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.

## 6.2 Franchise services: operating carrier

The airline operating a flight may not be the one identified by the branding on the fuselage or which sold the ticket to the passengers. This needs careful consideration in a crisis response.

As a general rule, the most important principle is transparency about the relationship and coordination between the operating carrier and the airline whose name and/or brand was used to promote the flight (the “network carrier”). As a starting point for consideration, published statements should be issued under the letterhead and in the name of the operating carrier (holder of the AOC), and any spokespeople quoted in statements or appearing at press briefings or interviews should be employed by the operating carrier.

There may be exceptions. 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 communication after an accident, particularly if the circumstances raise wider issues for the Group itself. The question of who “takes the lead” from a communication perspective should therefore be a judgment call, taking into account the



circumstances, the business model, the potential national/cultural sensitivities involved, or the perceived link between the Operating Carrier brand and the parent group. A previously agreed policy may need to be changed because of the nature of the event: for example, the Deutsche Lufthansa Group CEO took a leading role after the Germanwings crash in 2015, even though Group policy stipulated that the Operating Carrier would normally take the lead.

In addition to the “best practice” guidelines for the Operating Carrier described in section 6.1 above, a franchise or “feeder” airline should therefore also include some or all of the following in its public statements or in comments to the news media:

- The nature of its relationship with the “Network” carrier on whose behalf the flight was operated.
- The support which the “Network” carrier is providing to survivors and/or to family members of those on board.
- The support which the “Network” carrier is providing to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activation of its call center to handle enquiries about passengers; assistance in establishing family assistance center(s)).

## 6.3 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. In some instances, as noted above, it may be beneficial for the Network Carrier to take the lead in the response.

While the Operating Carrier is taking the lead, 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 (ticketholders).
- Actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims.
- Assistance provided to the Operating Carrier (e.g. logistics; activating telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center).

All other questions should be deferred to the Operating Carrier, or to the investigating body.

In any case, 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 that contradict or are inconsistent with statements made by the Operating Carrier.

## 6.4 Codeshare partner(s)

The proliferation of codeshare, joint venture, and alliance partnerships means it is not uncommon for two or more airlines to be involved in the same incident – either as the Operating Carrier or as a Codeshare Partner 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 (ticketholders) and/or crew members may have been on board.
- Actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims.
- Assistance provided to the Operating Carrier (e.g. logistics; activating a telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center(s)).

All other questions should be deferred to the Operating Carrier, or to the investigating body.

The Codeshare Partner should not:

- Deny or downplay the existence of the codeshare partnership.
- Speak on behalf of the operating carrier.
- Issue statements or make any comments that contradict or are inconsistent with statements made by the Operating Carrier.

## 6.5 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 that 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 communications team, to ensure they have access to the latest information and won't be caught off-guard by a statement issued by the manufacturer. Also 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 reach conclusions about the likely outcome of the investigation.

In statements to the news media, the aircraft and engine manufacturers should focus on:

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

The manufacturers should not:

- Comment or speculate on the progress or likely outcome of the investigation.



- Selectively "leak" information which is intended to exonerate the aircraft or engine type or imply that other parties or factors were responsible.
- Comment on or publicly dispute statements made by the investigating body.
- Attempt to discredit or undermine the investigating body, or its findings.

## 6.6 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. Almost everyone in or around the airport will probably have a smartphone and will therefore be likely and able to quickly post photos or streaming video of any incident, particularly if the airport itself offers free Wi-Fi service.

Depending on the circumstances, the airport itself may be temporarily closed or suffer serious disruption after an accident, so it will need to communicate quickly with passengers, 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 (e.g. the Operating Carrier). Where appropriate, joint briefings may be arranged which could involve the airport authority, emergency services, Operating Carrier and/or the investigating body.

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

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

All other questions should be directed to the operating carrier, the emergency services or the investigating body. The Airport Operator should not:

- Speak on behalf of other involved parties – for example, the Operating Carrier.
- Release information about the identities of people killed or injured.
- Speculate about the potential cause of the accident/incident.
- Comment on the accident investigation.

## 6.7 Air Navigation Service Provider

There have been numerous examples of accidents that 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 that 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.

## 6.8 Ground handling agents

The role of Ground Handling Agents (GHAs) in a crisis is a matter of contractual agreement with the airline concerned and is fraught with issues of legal liability and insurance coverage. In many cases, Service-Level Agreements with GHAs do not include specific responsibility for crisis support, 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 its home base.

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

- Activating a local communication 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) and are aware of the risk of making statements to people who may be filming them with mobile phones.

## 6.9 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 of 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 (e.g. daily press briefings, news releases, statements posted on the 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.



## 7. Responding to a cyber attack

### 7.1 The evolving cyber threat

Cybercrime is estimated to be a US\$1.5 trillion annual business and growing. Not surprisingly, SITA's Air Transport IT Trends Surveys regularly find that cybersecurity investments are the top priority for most of the airlines and airports surveyed. The European Commission also regards cyber security as the number one challenge for the air transport industry. This reflects the growing number of cyber-attacks – particularly ransomware attacks - on airlines, airports, and other industry players. Also, 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 introducing new digital applications to upgrade their service offerings throughout the “customer journey”, from initial booking to arrival at their destination.

Eurocontrol publishes an annual Aviation Cyber Event Map, which showed more than 60 cyber-attacks on airlines, airports, business jet operators, and other aviation entities around the world in the year to December 2023. According to Eurocontrol, the most commonly seen attacks over the last three years have been Ransomware (22%); Data Breach (18.6%); Phishing (15.3%), and Distributed Denial of Service (7.3%). Because the industry's complex ecosystem consists of numerous service providers, cyber-attacks on any part of the supply chain can trigger a cascading effect, impacting various aspects of aviation operations.

Major carriers have fallen victim to cyber breaches, resulting in the theft of sensitive information, including payroll and applicant data. The potential consequences extend beyond the embarrassment and reputational damage that accrues from being unable to protect customers' personal information. Significant penalties have been imposed on airlines and other companies for breaches of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) laws in Europe and in other jurisdictions.

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. To date, there has never been a successful attempt to hack critical aircraft systems in flight, but the industry is constantly working to combat the evolving threat from criminal groups and potentially from state actors.

### 7.2 Communications challenges

The major challenges for communications 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 in relatable terms 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.
- Lack of clarity on the policy for paying ransoms in the event of a ransomware attack (and the implications for paying or not paying).
- The relationship between the company targeted and its service providers – particularly IT service providers (the hackers' way into the network may have been through a compromised third-party supplier).
- Understanding the organization's own policies for data retention and vendor management
- Understanding GDPR (and potential penalties for breaches) in your home country – and in other jurisdictions in which the company operates.
- 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.



Companies need to consider how this will be done, bearing in mind different requirements in different jurisdictions (where the affected customers/individuals may reside).

- 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. In such cases, it may also be necessary to avoid using email or company phones to discuss the situation internally, to avoid alerting those responsible, or because it is not known what systems may have been compromised.

## 7.3 Recommendations

Preparing to respond to a cyber-attack should be approached in the same way as other potential disruptions or reputation risks. Communication professionals should be familiar with their organization’s cybersecurity response plan, which would include:

- The most likely scenarios or risk factors. It is critical to understand who controls the company’s data (i.e., what service providers you rely on); whose data you are responsible for processing and protecting; and the vulnerabilities associated with these functions.
- The terminology 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.
- The external parties (police, regulatory authorities) that may be involved if a cyber-attack is confirmed.
- An overview of the regulatory requirements for disclosure (to regulators and customers) in the event of a data breach which compromises customer data.

Having a “communications contact” within the IT department capable of translating technical language/concepts into easily understandable concepts/language is an invaluable resource in the event of a cyber-attack.

The communications team should also:

- Develop a backup plan for how they 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 that do not interact with the company server.
- Regularly meet with the IT department to be familiar with their key personnel and most recent cyber threat trends.
- Ensure the communication 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.

[The Aviation ISAC](#) is an important resource in supporting aviation cybersecurity efforts. It is an international membership community of airframers, airlines, airports, satellite manufacturers, aviation services, and their supply chains. Member companies collaborate in real-time to prevent, detect, respond to, and remediate cyber risk through threat intelligence sharing and best practices. Communicators should be familiar with their organization’s cybersecurity relationships and resources.



## 8. 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 a 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.

Organizations and brands are increasingly 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
- LGBTQ+ rights
- Marriage equality
- Gender diversity
- Pay equality
- #MeToo (sexual harassment)
- Animal rights
- Human trafficking
- Immigration/deportation
- Climate change
- Gun control
- Employees' right to wear clothing or symbols associated with religious observance
- Outbreak of major conflict

If a significant number of people disagree or are offended by the company's position on any of these issues, the online conversation may quickly erupt into a reputational "firestorm". As noted by MIT Professor Sinan Aral (section 2.2), online content which provokes emotional responses such as anger, fear, hatred or disgust, are far more likely to go "viral" on social media.

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 communities 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 behavior 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 organization’s stated values or position on a specific issue and their actions and behaviors - or those of their employees. Forrester found in 2015 that 82% of employees surveyed were familiar with their organization’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 that 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, human trafficking, gender diversity), IATA has articulated positions on behalf of the member airlines. These position statements can also be used by individual carriers.



## 9. Sample social media posts and crisis statements

### 9.1 First post – aircraft accident

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

### 9.2 Second post – aircraft accident

#{flight number>alert. (Airline) regrets to confirm flight xxx (origin) to (destination) has been involved in an accident at (location). Response teams mobilized. More information to follow.

### 9.3 Third post – aircraft accident

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

### 9.4 First statement – 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, we are providing assistance to the search and rescue operations in progress. It is believed that there were (number) passengers and (number) crew on board the flight, but we are currently confirming these 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). (If appropriate): Airline has also activated a special website where families can register concern for loved ones. The site can be found at (domain address).

Updated information will also be posted on the XXX website and online at (name channel, such as X, Threads, etc) 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).



## 9.5 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. We are providing assistance to the search and rescue operations in progress, and we will release additional information as soon as it becomes available.

(Airline) Chief Executive XXX said: "Everyone at (airline) is deeply saddened by this tragic accident and our thoughts and prayers are with those on board, and with their families and friends."

It is believed that there were (number) passengers and (number) crew on board the flight, but we are currently confirming these 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). (If appropriate): Airline has also activated a special website where families can register concern for loved ones. The site can be found at (domain address).

Updated information will also be posted on the XXX website and online at (name channel, such as X, Threads, etc) 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).



## 9.6 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 these 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 (name online channel, eg X, Threads, etc) at @(airlinename) #(flightnumber)

## 9.7 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 these 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 (name channel, e.g. Twitter/X, Threads, etc) at @(airlinename) #(flightnumber)



## Appendix: case studies

### 1. TUI's internal communication during COVID

TUI is the world's largest leisure travel and tourism group. Headquartered in Germany, it employs some 65,000 people in 180 locations and operates a portfolio of more than 1,200 travel agencies, some 400 hotels, 16 cruise ships, and a fleet of 134 aircraft across five airlines registered in different European jurisdictions.

Along with every other part of the travel and tourism industry, TUI faced an existential threat when COVID abruptly closed down global travel indefinitely in March 2020. Ironically, TUI had recorded a strong start to the financial year, breaking its January booking records for the 2020 European summer, following four consecutive years of double-digit revenue growth. But from the moment governments around the world began closing borders, forward bookings immediately stopped and revenues dried up, while customers who canceled their travel plans demanded refunds. Even worse, the abrupt hotel closures and cancellation of flights and cruises meant TUI had to repatriate more than 200,000 guests on overseas vacations, including guests and employees on 15 cruise ships that were ordered back to port. TUI had to arrange more than 350 repatriation flights for stranded guests and employees, who were then unable to continue working.

TUI's senior leadership recognized that effective internal communications would be vital to maintain staff morale in the midst of the unprecedented crisis and convince them that however dangerous the immediate situation might be, the company had a strategy to emerge strongly from the crisis as soon as borders began to re-open. A crisis communications team was established, in which a task force focused on informing, motivating, and giving guidance to employees as the company was forced to dramatically cut costs to stay afloat. Above all, the team sought to give colleagues reason for optimism and even to "create smiles". Given the fact that TUI – along with the rest of the global travel industry – was navigating uncharted territory, one essential element was to remain nimble and to respond quickly to new developments. It also meant prior crisis response experience was largely redundant because nobody had responded to a situation of this size and complexity before.

With no budget available for external agencies or fancy creative executions, all the content produced by the internal team was "home-made" and disseminated using existing tools such as MS Teams – previously an under-used resource. A constant flow of information, content, and opportunities to engage with colleagues and with senior management was established. TUI's CEO submitted to regular (internally) televised live question and answer sessions with colleagues around the world; staff were encouraged to join "eCoffees" meetings to socialise with leaders and other colleagues remotely; "TUI Talk" videos gave insights into how the company progresses in its efforts to prepare for post-COVID times, and home-made "Voices of the Pandemic" videos featured personal reflections from colleagues across the globe. With all content delivered digitally and to people working remotely because of the hygiene restrictions, the TUI intranet – called "smile" – immediately became the "living room" of the company and the No. 1 source for news, insights, and the hub for any kind of virtual events.

Key lessons learned from this testing experience included the fact that video and audio content have become the most influential media for both internal and external communication in a crisis. Constant engagement is essential, with authenticity and honesty, even when the news is bad. A global enterprise like TUI had to adopt a global mindset and avoid working in functional or national/cultural/linguistic silos – a goal that was supported by the common challenges colleagues were facing. Most important of all, while there was no "sugar-coating", the underlying tone was always to keep an "eye on the horizon" and "look through the crisis". Eventually the crisis will pass, so focus on how the business intends to survive and to get the house in order for the time when normality returns. Today, TUI is profitable again and has set sail to grow in its markets, gain new customers, and deliver new products.



## 2. Southwest Airlines: extreme weather disruption

During the Christmas holiday in December 2022, an unusually strong extratropical cyclone (Winter Storm Elliot) created crippling winter storm conditions, including blizzards, high winds, snowfall, and record-cold temperatures across the majority of the United States and parts of Canada. The storm and its related cold wave killed at least 100 people and caused extensive vehicle pileups and road closures across the country. More than 18,000 flights were canceled in the U.S. between December 22 and 28, while hundreds more were canceled in Canada.

The nation's largest low-cost carrier, Southwest Airlines, was the worst affected, canceling almost 17,000 flights, over several days, as the airline worked to fully recover their operation. This affected more than two million customers and created a "ripple" effect across the entire operation, with aircraft and crews out of position and a massive volume of customer enquiries demanding rebooking or refunds.

The airline apologized to affected customers and created landing pages on its website and other online channels to provide the latest information. It also focused on thanking employees for their efforts to stabilize the operation and restore normal schedules. As Southwest became the "poster child" for the upending of vacation travel schedules, the communications team responded to more than 1,700 media enquiries, and observed the highest daily volume of social media conversations in 2022.

As normality returned, Southwest faced the challenge of rebuilding trust and confidence among its loyal customers employees and other stakeholders. The airline launched a microsite that explained its Action Plan to prevent future operational disruptions on this scale. This included improving airport infrastructure for extreme cold-weather operations; accelerating investment in operational technologies that would provide greater capacity and redundancy; and enhancing cross-team collaboration to streamline decision-making.

The launch of the Action Plan was reported by most leading media outlets and was followed up by a stream of related content on Southwest channels which highlighted key investments and video stories showing examples of winter weather preparations at susceptible airports such as Denver. The airline also continued to promote "good news stories" across a range of topics throughout the year, intended to "rebuild the goodwill bank" and remind customers about the unique Southwest culture and brand. Southwest systematically monitors its reputation and gradually saw reputation scores trending back to where they were before the disruption.

The key test of course would be how the airline performed over the course of the following winter, which fortunately saw nothing on the scale of Storm Elliot, but featured the usual severe weather conditions at certain airports. As a result of its operational planning for winter 2023, Southwest canceled less than 1% of flights over the 19-day peak holiday period in December 2023 through the entire first week of January 2024 and recorded its best-ever on-time performance for a New Year's Day since 2004 on 1st January 2024.

The key takeaways for the Southwest communications team from this experience were:

- Communicate quickly
- Own mistakes
- Be transparent
- Show care and empathy
- Establish credibility and confidence
- Evolve messaging