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Crisis communication in the age of social media

Singapore Management University

CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Organisations must include the communications department as part of the strategic response to a crisis, and the CEO must display leadership

In crisis communications management, the concept of the "Golden Hour" has become redundant. Before the development of social media, "Best Practice" for an organisation, such as an airline, which was involved in a potentially damaging incident was to issue a first "holding statement" with preliminary information within an hour of the first notification of the event. With the advent of social media, the time horizon has shrunk to no more than 15 minutes.

"If social media and citizen journalists are aware of what's happening, they expect the organisation to have the information about it immediately," explains **John Bailey**, Managing Director of public relations firm Ketchum Singapore. "It's not always fair but they expect it."

He adds, "In that sense it's a threat, but on the other hand it's an opportunity because you can use your social media channels to get information out quickly to a very diverse audience."

Include the communications department in the crisis response team

Bailey, who created the [first guidelines on handling crisis communications in the age of social media](#) for the International Air Transport Association (IATA) in 2012, emphasised in that document the need to recognise social media's importance in modern crisis management. That requires an organisation's communications department to be an integral part of the crisis response and management team; unfortunately, that is not always the case.

"The crisis management team will normally comprise the heads or very senior people within each department of the company – human resources, legal, operations, finance etc.," Bailey tells *Perspectives@SMU*. "But in some companies, the communications function sits low down on the pecking order, it's not part of the direct reports to the CEO, and therefore when a crisis team is gathered, they're not part of the strategic decision-making group. They're then just used as a tactical means to distribute information."

He adds, "The reason that becomes an issue is because the communications perspective is very different from any other department. Number one: corporate communications, if properly structured and tasked, is normally the only department in the organisation that is specifically tasked with monitoring the external environment 24-7. They have a sense of what's going on in

the external environment and can feed that perspective back into the decision-making process in responding to a crisis."

If the communications department is allowed to do its job, and it does so to a high standard, the response would look very much like how AirAsia has handled the QZ8501 crash. According to Bailey, AirAsia has "absolutely done it by the book. It's been very professional and well-coordinated, very consistent in terms of messaging, and the positioning of the CEO."

Leading by example

AirAsia CEO Tony Fernandes has garnered glowing reviews for his handling of the QZ8501 disaster. From being visible on social media the instant AirAsia acknowledged the loss of contact with QZ8501 to the constant updates over the following days, Fernandes displayed the one thing that everyone expected of him: leadership.

"It's expected by customers, business partners, employees, and investors that the organisation will show leadership," Bailey says. "The person that exemplifies that leadership is the CEO whether he likes it or not. A savvy CEO who has a trusted and capable communications advisor will be able to handle this much better than one who doesn't."

"People will accept that accidents happen. What they won't accept is someone who doesn't seem to care."

It is clear from the way AirAsia and Fernandes have handled the initial social media frenzy that the communications team was an integral part of the response team and not just a tactical function. Bailey, who had worked with Air Asia previously but was not involved with the QZ8501 crisis, also urges airlines to remember their role in air disasters: helping the families of those lost in the crash.

"It's not just about what you say, it's also about what you do," says Bailey. "Communications is just part of the response. What you are communicating is what the response consists of. It's talking about the concrete actions you've taken to follow through on the implied promise to look after people."

Fernandes did just that on January 2 when the body of an AirAsia flight attendant was identified as that of Khairunisa Haidar Fauzi. The AirAsia CEO tweeted the day before:

"If our beautiful and wonderful crew is identified we will go from Surabaya to palembang with her parents. Heartbreaking soul destroying."

On January 2, he tweeted, referring to his staff by her nickname "Nisa":

"I'm arriving in Surabaya to take Nisa home to Palembang. I cannot describe how I feel. There are no words."

Sorry is the hardest word

Besides walking the talk, Fernandes also expressed empathy with words such as "heartbreaking" and "I cannot describe how I feel". While that helped communicate the important message that AirAsia was run by caring human beings, Fernandes also posted on December 30, 2014 a tweet that contained a word that is viewed as taboo by some in the airline industry: sorry.

"My heart is filled with sadness for all the families involved in QZ 8501. On behalf of AirAsia my condolences to all. Words cannot express how sorry I am."

"There's a long-running debate about 'sorry'," Bailey explains, touching on how using the word 'sorry' could be construed as an admission of guilt and, more importantly, liability. "When I launched the IATA consultancy in 1998, we had a conference in Phoenix, Arizona that was attended by over 100 airlines. I invited an aviation lawyer to discuss this exact point. He started his presentation with a single word: Sorry.

"He said, 'I want to tell you all that there is no legal danger in using the word 'sorry'…as long as you are very clear what you are sorry for. Don't get hung up about the word itself, it's about expressing empathy or acknowledging the other person's distress.'"

Bailey adds that the issue of liability is always a factor in air disasters, and therefore airlines need to make sure they are "not apologising for what you did but for the loss of life and the distress which everyone feels as human beings".

"People will accept that accidents happen," Bailey concludes. "What they won't accept is someone who doesn't seem to care. Showing that you care, however you express it, is very important."

John Bailey was the speaker at the SMU Centre for Marketing Excellence event "Crisis Communication in the age of social media"that was held on January 14, 2015.