

Malaysia Airlines- Lost Flights and Missing Tactics

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Abstract

On March 8, 2014, Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 lost contact with air traffic control. Almost two years later, the flight has still not been located. Malaysia Airlines implemented many strategies and tactics when managing this crisis. However, the airline failed to handle this disaster in the best and most efficient way, forever damaging their reputation.

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Introduction

Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 was an international flight flying from Malaysia to Beijing, China that disappeared on March 8, 2014. An hour after the plane took off from Kuala Lumpur International Airport, communication with the pilot was lost. The last message received from the plane was the pilot saying, “Good night flight three seven zero.” This message was received when the plane was flying over the South China Sea. The plane never made it to Beijing. (“Missing Malaysia plane MH370,” 2015, p.1)

Officials then began attempting to track and locate the plane. Evidence from a military radar later revealed that the plane was intentionally diverted by someone on board, heading west instead of north. After several failed attempts to locate the remains of the plane, Malaysia’s transport minister Liow Tiong Lai said that he was confident the plane would be found in the Indian Ocean. However, flight MH370 has still not been located. (“Missing Malaysia plane MH370,” 2015, p.1)

Formative Research

This case demonstrates crisis management and corporate communication. Parties involved would be the airline, the passengers, their friends and family and the general public. Malaysia Airlines has a responsibility to take care of their passengers because they are entrusting them with their lives when they board one of their flights.

Malaysia Airlines responded with different media statements as time progressed, starting with the initial lost connection with the plane and continuing up to August 2015. Since the incident was a sudden crisis, Malaysia Airlines informed the public quickly, announcing that Flight MH370 lost contact with traffic control. They continued to update the public as soon as

new information was presented. However, some of the information was contradictory, not consistent with past statements and sometimes inaccurate. Malaysia Airlines created a website to post these media statements and updates, making it easier for the public to quickly access the new information in one central location. These statements were not always released by one single spokesperson, preventing the company from having one clear voice.

In the aftermath of the crisis, it was difficult to discover who was responsible for the missing flight. There was a definite lack of evidence determining what caused the loss of contact and where the plane was located.

Choosing who was going to pay for the damage was another challenge. Unbeknownst to many, Malaysian Airlines was struggling financially before the crisis. The Montreal Convention mandates that it is the airline's responsibility to provide compensation of \$175,000 to each passenger's immediate family. With 227 passengers on board the missing flight, Malaysia Airlines owed these families \$40 million dollars. However, Malaysian Airlines did not end up compensating these families correctly.

Other issues surrounding this crisis involve the Malaysian government. The Malaysian Air Force picked up an unidentified plane on their radar. This aircraft was, unbeknownst to them, flight MH70. Typically, the Air Force is supposed to contact an unknown flight, but in this case, they failed to do so. This caused the missing flight to become a matter of Malaysian national security, adding distress to the Malaysian public.

Finally, possibly the biggest crisis management error made on Malaysia Airlines' part, was the insensitive condolences sent to the families of the missing passengers. These messages were sent via text message.

Malaysia Airlines deeply regrets that we have to assume beyond any reasonable doubt that MH370 has been lost and that none of those on board survived. As you will hear in the next hour from Malaysia's Prime Minister, we must now accept all evidence suggests the plane went down in the Southern Indian Ocean. (Chang, 2014)

These in genuine and insensitive messages when reporting their family members did not survive is the worst thing Malaysia Airlines could have done in this situation.

Strategy

There were several strategic objectives that Malaysia Airlines carried out after the disappearance of flight MH370. The airline's main strategy was to maintain constant communication with both the public and the families affected by the disappearance of the flight. The situation was handled in-house by a crisis communication team, which was led by CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya. The airline created a website specifically for updates on the incident that could be accessed through their homepage. It was not until five hours after the flight lost communication with air traffic control that the first official statement was released.

Malaysia Airlines confirms that flight MH370 has lost contact with Subang Air Traffic Control at 2.40am, today (8 March 2014). Flight MH370, operated on the B777-200 aircraft, departed Kuala Lumpur at 12.41am on 8 March 2014. MH370 was expected to land in Beijing at 6.30am the same day. The flight was carrying a total number of 227 passengers (including 2 infants), 12 crew members. Malaysia Airlines is currently working with the authorities who have activated their Search and Rescue team to locate the aircraft. The airline will provide regular updates on the situation. Meanwhile, the families may contact 603-7884-1234 for further info. ("MH370 incident released at 7.24am", 2014, p.37)

The website released press releases to update the public on new findings. This was the main communication channel during the crisis. The website could be seen as the home base and central location for all updates regarding the crisis.

Social media was also utilized for communication. The two main platforms used were Facebook and Twitter. Malaysia Airlines used these platforms to post frequent updates and provide a link that would send viewers back to the central update website.

Communication is an essential part of strategy during a crisis. Malaysia Airlines' main goals were to communicate with the public, release frequent updates, work with authorities, investigate the situation and show sympathy to the families involved. However, the strategies Malaysia Airlines intended to use did not always align with the tactics they actually implemented.

Tactics

Malaysia Airlines employed several tactics to address this crisis. The first order of business was to remain in constant communication and keep updated on the aircraft search. Multiple search and rescue teams were working to find the aircraft. These updates from the search were then released to the public via press releases and statements to the media.

The airline is continuously working with the authorities in providing assistance. In fearing for the worst, a disaster recovery management specialist from Atlanta, USA will be assisting Malaysia Airlines in this crucial time. Malaysia Airlines reiterates that it will continue to be transparent in communicating with the general public in all matters affecting MH370. (“7th Media Statement,” 2014, p. 34)

Malaysian authorities and international aviation and satellite experts continued to try to piece together the whereabouts of the plane.

Their next tactic was to ensure that the families of those involved were being cared for. Two teams of volunteers were sent to both Beijing and Kuala Lumpur to provide support and information to the families. These families received hotel accommodations and free flights to their needed destinations during the crisis. A two-way communication portal was created to keep these families updated and allow them to express questions, comments and concerns. This portal was set up via text message, email and a specific phone line for families to use.

We remain absolutely committed to sharing confirmed information with family members and the wider public in a fully open and transparent manner. However given the nature of the situation, the importance of validating new information before it is released into the public domain is paramount. Our thoughts and prayers remain with the families of the 227 passengers and our 12 Malaysia Airlines colleagues and friends on board flight MH370. They will remain at the centre of every action we take as a company, as they have been since MH370 first disappeared. (“19th Media Statement,” 2014, p. 28)

Another tactic was to try to remain transparent. This was implemented through their attempted cooperation with the media. During a crisis, it is important to remain transparent, trying to relay all information known to the public. Information was released through press releases on their website, social media, official statements to the media and communication with the families involved.

All known information was constantly released to the public, but there were multiple problems with these communication tactics. There was never one clear spokesperson set for Malaysia Airlines. When there is more than one spokesperson, it can be confusing to the public and damaging the company’s credibility. The public was receiving different statements from different people in the company, which caused a lot of chaos and confusion. Zoe Mintz of The International Business Times describes how these inconsistencies influenced the public backlash.

Official mouthpieces for both the Malaysian government and the airline laid out often-incomplete and internally inconsistent accounts, enraging relatives of passengers and undermining confidence in their future pronouncements. They stumbled in their dealings with a demanding international media, appearing awkward, confused and less than forthright. (Mintz, 2014)

The airline received extreme backlash for inconsistency and not appearing transparent. The victims' families felt as if the airline was not being sincere in handling the situation. Families were often notified on updates at strange times, and not accomplishing anything in their updates. Rumors began to fly that both Malaysia Airlines and the government were not releasing known information.

We were well aware of the ongoing media speculation during this period, and its effect on the families of those on board. Their anguish and distress increases with each passing day, with each fresh rumour, and with each false or misleading media report. Our absolute priority at all times has been to support the authorities leading the multinational search for MH370, so that we can finally provide the answers which the families and the wider community are waiting for. ("18th Media Statement," p. 28, Malaysia Airlines)

The families were also outraged at the insensitivity of the messages in the two-way communication portal. The official condolences to the victims' families were sent via text message. This made Malaysia Airlines look extremely insincere and in genuine. The company's intended goals were to constantly remain sincere and provide informative updates, but neither of these was executed to the best of their ability, causing severe distress for the families.

Neither Malaysia Airlines nor the government was ready to handle a crisis of this caliber. While a crisis of this is never something a company would expect, the whole world was watching as both parties poorly handled this situation. They needed to appear more transparent,

more sincere and work on relaying clear, accurate information. Their tactics were not consistent with their intended strategies.

Evaluation and Continuation

Unfortunately, almost two years later, flight MH370 is still missing. The company's updates have slowed, but have not stopped. A crisis like this is rare because information known by the company is sparse. Flight MH370 is such a mystery to the entire world that it opens the floor to conspiracy theories regarding both the plane's disappearance and the Malaysian government's involvement. These theories are what can have the potential to damage Malaysia Airlines' reputation even further.

The latest update created for flight MH370's whereabouts was released on Aug. 6, 2015. This update explains that a flaperon from Flight MH370 was found on Reunion Island on July 29, 2015. The update continues to apologize to the families and friends of the victims and explains that in the future, Malaysia Airlines' priority will be clearly updating the families of the passengers and the public. This update remains positive, stating that they have not given up, and still one day hope to resolve the mystery of flight MH370. (Malaysia Airlines, 2015)

Case Analysis and Conclusion

Overall, Malaysia Airlines could have handled their crisis communication a lot better. However, this situation is rare in the sense that this type of crisis does not happen every day and a lot of information is left unknown. It is understandable that Malaysia Airlines may not be the most prepared to handle a situation like this.

First, they should have been more transparent and accurate about flight MH370's whereabouts from the beginning. Regardless of what they did and did not know, they needed to reassure the public and the families of the passengers and crew that they were genuinely sorry and that they were doing everything they could to find the plane and rescue those people. They

needed to choose one spokesperson and exercise one clear voice rather than having multiple people speak on the subject, which is confusing to the public.

Second, they did not provide the victims' families with proper care or support. Malaysia Airlines texted the family members 16 days after the flight's disappearance stating that they regret that they have to assume that none of the passengers survived. This type of communication is lackluster and in genuine, setting Malaysia Airlines to seem so careless from the beginning. While they did end up sending care to the families in both Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, their efforts were too little and too late. Malaysia Airlines should have been fully focused on the families from the first day of the crisis, making personal contact with them and offering support in any way that they could.

Another issue Malaysia Airlines faced regarding the families was a legal one. The Montreal Convention states that each passenger's immediate family should be allotted \$175,000 by the airline. Malaysia Airlines did not pay this fee due to financial trouble, which further hinders their credibility.

Over all, Malaysia Airlines had the right strategies intended but failed when implementing their actual tactics. By using one clear voice, remaining transparent and better and sooner attending to the families of the passengers aboard flight MH370, Malaysia Airlines could have recovered from this crisis and turned their company reputation around.

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