

Jodie Howard

Crisis Communication and Media Relations

Dr. Nance McCown

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Case Study: An Analysis of Malaysia Airlines MH370 missing flight

Organization History

Malaysia Airlines, founded in October of 1937, started off as Malayan Airways Limited. Soon after Malaysia became a country in 1963 the airline changed its name to Malaysian Airlines, a company that according to its mission statement, “found our wings in the golden age of travel. Since then, our lives may have changed but the commitment to excellence remains that the heart of who we are” (Corporate Info). In 2013, Malaysia Airlines joined the Oneworld Alliance Network, an organization of 30 world leading airlines working together to assure the best customer service (Oneworld). In the past 10 years, Malaysia Airlines has held a strong record of excellence in service.

Defining the Crisis

On March 8, 2014 Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 left Kuala Lumpur for Beijing at 12:41 a.m. (MH370). A few hours into the flight, at around 2:40 a.m. the Subang Air Traffic control lost contact with the plane (MH370). On board were 227 passengers and a cabin crew of 12 (MH370). According to the Malaysia Airlines press release the airline did not notify family before alerting media at around 7:30 the next morning (MH370). This was a catastrophic beginning to a major crisis.

A Boeing 777 airplane going missing en route over land without a report of crash landing or a “mayday” signal is an unusual and unpredictable occurrence (Coombs). Coombs

also defines a crisis as incident that interrupts normal workflow (Coombs). Instead of focusing on customer service and selling airline tickets now that the crisis has occurred, the company has put its efforts into consoling family members of those lost on flight MH370.

The company has also put efforts into collaboration with the governments involved in the search for the plane which includes eight different countries: Australia, China, Malaysia, New Zealand, the UK, the US, Japan, and South Korea (Cost of Search). Forming strong relations and communication systems with these governments will ensure fast, effective search parties to look for the missing airplane.

Another major player in this crisis includes global media which inevitably continues to cover all the hard news, theories, conspiracy theories and features concerning this crisis. Global media has played a role in spreading this crisis and informing all publics about the situation.

Determining the Publics

The MH370 crisis not only affects the active publics including the airline employees, government officials and family members of those onboard but also latent and aware publics around the world that continue to watch this crisis unfold (Coombs). These publics include:

Family Members- Family members and close friends of those onboard MH370 make up the most important public Malaysia Airlines needs to consider while planning its crisis communication strategies. "Our primary focus right now is that we do take care of the families in terms of their emotional needs and also their financial needs," Ahmad Jauhari Yahya, the CEO of Malaysia Airlines stated. "It is important that we provide answers for them. It is important that the world has answers, as well" (Hookway).

Internal Publics- Having all members of an organization know and understand the crisis and the process the organization will take to minimize damage involves informing its internal

publics about the crisis itself (Coombs). Malaysia Airlines, in order to have strong communication within the organization must inform its employees and the Dominant Coalition of the same facts about the missing plane. With the internal publics on the same page, effective crisis communication can be carried out.

Governments- Since this crisis involves passengers representing 26 different countries Malaysia Airlines needs to have transparent communication with these governments, including them in the search for the plane and investigation about its disappearance (Branigan). Other countries have also stepped up to help search for flight MH370 making this a global effort. Having strong communication will ensure this particular public that Malaysia Airlines cares about the loss of the passengers on the flight and will show gratitude for these countries giving their time and resources to help.

Media- Global media has covered this crisis in its headlines since the plane was first discovered missing on March 8. Most of the world gets its news about the search for MH370 through local, national or international news. To ensure correct and accurate information is being shared with the world Malaysia Airlines must cater to the media's needs.

The Masses- Those not directly affected by the crisis but whose opinion sways the organizations future make up the last public Malaysia Airlines needs to consider. The masses include the active, aware and latent publics around the world who either actively seek out information about the missing MH370 flight or through media influences find themselves learning about the situation without directly seeking to do so.

Current members of Malaysia Airlines or those who have flown several times with the airline would be considered active publics. The way that Malaysia Airlines handles this crisis

will determine whether this particular segment uses its services in the future. The aware publics or those who have heard of Malaysia Airlines include those who live in the countries within the region where flight MH370 disappeared. This segment consists of people who have heard of the airline but have never directly interacted with the company. The last segment or the latent publics never knew this airline existed until the disappearance of the plane and through different media channels has come to learn about the airlines. This particular public might have no interest in the crisis but has learned about it through exposure to media.

Choosing the Spokesperson

Choosing the correct spokesperson to represent the views and ideas of an organization during a crisis will reflect on how the organization's reputation changes during and after the process (Verhoeven). The credibility of the spokesperson represents the credibility of the organization and research has shown that choosing the correct spokesperson ensures the publics acceptance of how the crisis is being handled (Verhoeven).

Throughout the search for Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, the organization has had multiple spokespersons: Malaysia's Transport Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, the Prime Minister of Malaysia as well as the CEO of Malaysia Airlines, Amhad Jauhari Yahya.

Stages of Crisis Lifecycles

The Malaysia Airlines crisis has passed through several of the seven stages in a crisis lifecycle (Coombs, 10).

Signal Detection- Before a crisis occurs warning signs will alert public relations professionals about a possible issue (Coombs, 10). A plane disappearing seems bizarre and almost unthinkable that in this in this particular case warning signs seemed impossible to spot. However, losing contact with the plane a few hours into the flight would be considered a

warning sign that an issue was arising and that a crisis might occur. The time between losing contact with flight MH370 and reporting the flight missing was a crucial time to come up with a prevention plan.

Prevention- No matter how hard Malaysia Airlines tried, it could not prevent a plane from disappearing. Taking preventative action to “manage issues, to reduce risks and to build or maintain reputations” ensures the organization’s acknowledgement of a future crisis (Coombs, 61). Since officials have ruled out mechanical failure for the time being, steps to prevent mechanical failure seem to have taken place (MH370). Even with warning signs, preventing a plane from disappearing would be difficult.

Preparation- Malaysia Airlines had six hours between the time that flight MH370 lost contact with air traffic controllers and when it alerted the media about the missing flight, giving the organization several hours to formulate a crisis communication plan (Corporate Info). During the planning, the airlines need to consider questions like: the disclosure of information to family members of passengers, communication channels with foreign governments, and media and general public access etc.

The main way to prepare for this crisis would include how to minimize damage. The crisis was inevitable. The plane went missing. Malaysia Airlines needs to focus on communicating ethically with transparency when disclosing of information especially to the family members of the passengers and crew.

Recognition- Malaysia Airlines did not seem to have a problem recognizing the crisis. The airlines quickly set up a page on its website to use as the main channel of communication with the general public and since then has moved to using social media and press conferences to

spread information to those seeking it (Tilley). Choosing to use different platforms to inform publics about the situation with missing flight has boosted credibility of the airlines.

Containment- Currently trying to contain the crisis, Malaysia Airlines main goal right now is to find the missing flight. They have narrowed the search area to somewhere in the Indian Ocean, the opposite direction from which the plane originally traveled. Realizing the plane changed course and since over 30 days have passed Malaysia Airlines assume the plane crashed into the Indian Ocean (Malaysia).

Due to the many theories pertaining to the disappearance of the plane and where it is now, Malaysia Airlines must implement transparency, openness and positivity (Hildebrandt). Focusing most importantly on finding the plane and not throw around blame will help the containment process along.

Traditional Media Coverage

Negatives- Malaysia Airlines received a lot of negative feedback in the media about how it has handled its crisis communication. Nan Jinyan, sister-in-law to a passenger on board, gave her opinion to Associated Press writer Louise Watt,

“Some of the information released by the Malaysian government and airline turns out to be true, some turns out to be false, I believe they are still deciding which information to release and which isn't convenient to release right now.”

(Komisarjevsky).

Although some information might be sensitive to share globally on the news, when it comes to communication with family members, transparency and honesty is essential. According to the PRSSA website honesty and truth should reflect when communicating with the public and should advance the interests of both the organization and the Public (Public Relations).

Essentially, Malaysia Airlines must use the two-way symmetrical communication model when communicating with family members creating a dialogue between the organization and the family members.

Positive- Tradition media has rated Malaysia Airlines' crisis communication poorly. However a few positives the organization has done pertains to its efforts to begin building reputation and making the information on its website easily accessible. On the Malaysia Airlines website and social media pages the company has posted videos of employees and the CEO with messages for its publics (Malaysia Airlines). The company strives to build strong relationships with its publics again after the disappearance of MH370. The transport minister of Malaysia, Hishammuddin Hussein states on Apr. 18, 2014 (media statement):

“This morning, my committee had another meeting with the next of kins in Malaysia to try and find a solution for the family members to move forward. As the chair of the next of kin committee, I understand the anguish and pain the families are going through and I give my personal assurance that our committee is keeping the families' best interest close to our hearts.”(Media statement)

Even through its efforts to communicate transparently, Malaysia Airlines has already built poor credibility for itself during the initial stages of the crisis making it hard to revert the publics attention to its efforts to build stronger relationships especially concerning family members.

Neutral- Right now, reading news headlines, the most important thing to media is finding the missing airplane. Once the plane is found media will take the time to analyze more in depth how Malaysia Airlines handled its crisis communication but for now the media's main

focus is covering the search for the flight. Media has not covered family member stories as much. These stories should be private unless the family members want to speak up and tell their stories.

Social Media Coverage

Social Media has been an outlet for many people to take out their frustrations, concerns and support for Malaysia Airlines and the MH370 search. On March 25, Malaysia Airlines posted a graphic to Facebook and Twitter expressing their deepest condolences on Mar. 25. (see Appendix A). With 176 shares, 462 likes, and 219 comments on Facebook as well as 2,168 retweets and 755 favorites on Twitter, this graphic went viral on social media.

The comments ranged from hatred and anger to condolences to family members. Some people ranted against Malaysia Airlines while others didn't blame the organization for the missing flight. Unfortunately, the airline has never responded back to the comments on social media. To ensure strong, transparent communication, Malaysia Airlines should have several people monitoring and replying to comments on social media because it is the best medium to communicate with active and aware publics around the world (Coombs, 23). Social media can create communication between the organization and its publics (CITE).

The airlines posted videos from several different employees including the CEO and an employee that helped give care to family members. Using these videos to build rapport with the followers on its social media pages and replying to comments on social media ensures two-way communication between Malaysia Airlines and its publics.

Malaysia Airlines hasn't dialogued with its publics via social media which will hurt the organizations image and credibility in the long run. It makes it look fishy when publics ask questions and the organization doesn't reply. This needs to change.

Crisis management/Media Relations

Many public relations experts have commented that Malaysia Airways has done a poor job with its crisis management skills, mostly with its relations with family members and friends of those on board the flight. Several families mentioned to the media that they didn't hear about the missing flight from the airline staff until Monday; two days after the organization had reported the flight missing (Hildebrandt).

Another major criticism of Malaysia Airline's poor communication occurred at the Beijing Capital International Airport where family members waiting at arrivals watched the arrival board blink "delayed" for hours (Hildebrandt). The "delayed" sign did not change even after Malaysia Airlines alerted the media (Hildebrandt).

Robert Jensen, president of Kenyon International Emergency Services, critiqued the airlines saying that one of the first things they should have done was take the flight off the arrival board and move family members and friends in the airport to a comfortable and private area away from media personnel who had quickly invaded the airport (Hildebrandt). Kenyon International Emergency Services is a global company that helps airlines deal with disasters and crises (About Kenyon).

"My overall view is that it's one of the worst cases of crisis management communications I've ever seen," states Mr. McClellan, a public relations consultant (Missing). McClellan refers to a specific example of using the wrong form of communication to notify family members about critical information (Missing). The airlines notified family members and friends via text about confirmation that MH370 had crashed in the Indian Ocean (Missing). This type of sensitive message requires a form of communication that is quick, respectful and most importantly personable. A text message does not meet this criteria.

Xinhua, China's State Press Agency slammed the Malaysian government because of its lack of transparency and spreading misinformation which caused a loss of credibility (Tilley).

On the other hand, the airline has tried to provide as much assistance as it can. The airline has shut down all its advertising promotions and has decided to focus on the search and the family's needs (Hookway). Malaysia Airlines sent volunteers to set up support and information centers for families in Beijing and Kuala Lumpur (Tilley).

Recommendations: What should have been done differently?

Malaysia Airlines should be careful with the information that they disclose having assurance that it is accurate and transparent. One thing that angered family members in particular was during the beginning of the search when the Airlines told the media that the plane was lost in the South China Sea when really the plane had turned around and crossed over Malaysia and ended up in the Indian Ocean (Malaysia). The airlines should not have disclosed this information if they weren't sure it was correct, which it was not. The police had to remove family members from the media room when this information was discovered false because they were so angry (Tilley).

Malaysia Airlines should have picked one spokesperson and stuck to that person. Having Malaysia's minister of transport be the main spokesperson might have cost Malaysia Airlines some credibility. It seems as though the government of Malaysia is bailing the airlines out of the situation. I personally believe that the CEO of Malaysia Airlines should have been the main spokesperson and having others including the minister of transport and Malaysia Prime Minister, speaking on different occasions would ensure the Publics that both the airlines and the government are doing all they can to find the plane.

I would also recommend that the company have different crisis plans for when the plane is found. They should consider all the possibilities and even look through all the theories posed about what could have happened to the plane and plan accordingly. What is their crisis communication plan if the plane is found in the Indian Ocean and all the bodies are found? What is their plan if the black box is found and they find out why the plane was turned around? How will they relay any of this information and how much should they disclose to the public?

They also need to consider what they will do if they can't find the plane in the next few months, what is their plan of action? How long do they keep searching? If they had to stop searching what is their plan of action to tell family members? How far are they willing to go to get answers for their publics? During this waiting period is the time to think through all these questions. Right now the airlines are handling its crisis communication in house (Tilley).

They should consider having some consulting help to think through these questions and finding solutions to all these possible outcomes. This crisis is far from over. Every move the Airline makes will be scrutinized until they find the plane, until they begin business as normal, until they start flying again, and for many years after that.

Grading the Crisis Management

I would personally grade the organization with a C for their performance in this crisis. This is the first time that Malaysia Airlines has had to deal with a crisis like this which is so difficult for anyone to try to manage. However, PR professionals need to be ready for any crisis and therefore even as crazy as it is there should have been a plan about this crisis, as farfetched as it might seem at the moment. The team didn't seem to have a plan until after they had made a few mistakes with their disclosure of information that was incorrect. Now they seem to be a lot more cautious but they should have started with that initially.

Moving Forward: How will Malaysia Airlines Recover

Where will Malaysia Airlines go from here? Mr. Ahmad, the company CEO mentioned that the company will talk to the government and its stakeholders to decide whether they will return to business and begin marketing and repairing its image (Hookway). At this point it might not be plausible that the Airlines will bounce back from this catastrophe. Because of the circumstances of the plane going missing and now as it is still being searched for in the Indian Ocean it would be really hard to predict how the organization will move forward. It is essential at this point to try to be as helpful and open towards the families affected in this tragedy.

Hopefully other Airlines are learning that anything can happen and when that crisis occurs you have to be well prepared. MH370 has reminded the world of a lot of things: that life is short, that things happen that we can't control and maybe less importantly that a crisis no matter how bizarre can and will happen. As a PR professional we have to be ready for it.

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Appendix A and B

