

Carly Shoemake

Kapustin Scholarship Essay

*Social Media in Crisis Communication*

As the demand for air travel has grown over the last several decades, the aviation industry is forced to become more dynamic in order to keep up. The industry is compensating for this need in the form of more aircraft, companies and also more refined regulations, however one area that the industry has neglected to address has been that of communication, specifically before, during and after a crisis. While communicating with the public has always been a task for investigators or even the industry in general, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have now become more prominent in the everyday use of society. Social media is now a main source of news for much of the public so when a crisis arises, it is no surprise that many choose to post, share, re-tweet and re-gram their and others experiences. The challenge for air safety investigators arises when the airline or participating party does not have an effective social media communication strategy included in their emergency response plan to combat the speed at which information spreads.

In order to understand how to respond to a crisis through social media accounts, it is first important to understand how quickly information spreads virtually now. On July 6, 2013 at 11:28 PDT, Asiana Airlines flight 214 was flying the approach into San Francisco International Airport from Seoul, South Korea. The flight was carrying 291 passengers, 12 flight attendants, and 4 flight crew members. The aircraft struck the seawall and collapsed, killing 3 and seriously injuring 49 resulting in the first fatal crash in the United States in more than 4 years. Within 30 seconds of the accident, an on-looker in the terminal snapped a photo of the crash and posted it on Twitter. She was quoted over 4,000 times in the media over the next 24 hours. Her post didn't

just travel through Twitter feeds either. That post was seen on Facebook but also made its way to Path and Sina Weibo as well as countless other sites. A passenger actually live-tweeted the event as it occurred. His posts were seen retweeted over 32,000 times. Shashank Nigam, an analyst and writer from SimpliFlying, agrees that “the lesson learnt is that social media needs to be an integral part of any crisis management plan for an airline or an airport today. There is no longer the luxury to respond in two hours, or even twenty minutes,” (Nigam, *Simpliflying*). After a crash, social media picks the story up before the airline even knows what is going on making responding to a crash a difficult dance acknowledging the event, clearing up rumors, and updating with facts as they are found.

With so many social media outlets and so little time, the overwhelming nature of crisis communication can make it very tricky to get it right. Its important to recognize that there is a wrong way to communicate to the public after a crisis. Malaysia Airlines flight 370 departed Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on Saturday, March 8, 2014 and was headed to Beijing, China. Contact was lost with the Boeing 777 at 2:40 AM somewhere over the Indian Ocean and was never regained. To this day, what became of the airliner and the 239 people on board are still a mystery. News of the event became international news literally over night and by the time the sun rose over the Asian Pacific region, it was already too late for the airline to break their silence. For over four hours, the airline was silent and failed to make an initial statement regarding the loss of contact. When the post finally did come, it fell on deaf ears as it was described as cryptic and confusing. Must speculation over the incident also occurred over that time that was taken for fact and skewed the airline’s chance to speak the truth. For those following the investigation, more questions have been yielded than have been answered. The public response was that of disappointment heeding distasteful comments, including ones

begging the airline to answer questions like “if the flight is about 6 hours.. Why is the search taking longer to find that plane? [sic]” (Facebook). The lack of response led to public skepticism of the airline’s integrity and overall safety however the crash of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 provided a perfect opportunity for the airline to try again.

Malaysia Airlines flight 17 was due from Amsterdam, Netherlands to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on July 17, 2014, just a short 4 months after their company airliner vanished, when the flight dropped out of the sky killing all 295 people on board. This time, the airline came back with a much stronger social media presence admitting their loss of contact and, later in the day, establishing a hashtag so that followers could refer to one place to receive the most up to date information. Evidence of the airline’s faster response can be found all over news sites that covered the incident, unlike that of their sister flight MH370.

While Malaysia Airlines did finally catch on, its safe to say that no one did it better than Southwest. Southwest Airlines flight 345 collapsed after their nose gear failed upon landing at LaGuardia Airport in New York on July 23, 2013. The plane skidded more than seven football fields before coming to a stop on the edge of the runway injuring 10 passengers. While the virtual conversation began seconds after the crash, less than 30 minutes after the incident, Southwest already issued an official hashtag in a post recognizing the crash. The timeliness of the established hashtag, or the presence of one at all, is critical to controlling the information spread about the event.

While every crisis is different and responses should be catered to the event, waiting for an event to happen is already too late to have a social media crisis communication strategy established in a company’s emergency response plan. Seconds after any crisis, the conversation has already started on social media so staying ahead of the spread of information matters most in

those first moments. “You want to have backups and secondaries, and frankly you want to have people who can give other people relief,” explains Morgan Johnston, manager of corporate communication and social media strategist at JetBlue Airways. “A crisis isn’t going to only occur during normal business hours. You need to plan for an emergency response that can last for days, weeks or even months.” In order for a team to respond promptly, a plan of what a team is supposed to do or even who the team is needs to be established before an event and updated frequently as to grow with the needs and habits of society. Social media crisis communication should involve the response team owning the conversation.

With so many different social media platforms, owning the conversation can sometimes be difficult. Johnson of JetBlue suggests that crisis communicators need to focus on how to “limit the amount of places that people think they need to look” to find information and providing audiences valid information while staying empathetic. A great way limit the amount of places people go to receive information is by establishing a hashtag early on and encouraging people to check for updates. This customized tag provides one quick link for the audience to click on to follow the conversation online and find the most recent and factual information only regarding this event. The hashtag also allows the party to lead the conversation by posting updates and answering questions directly instead of people assuming or falsifying information, or in other words allowing for the spread of rumors. Even through different social media platforms, establishing a centralized location for information can help crisis communicators the luxury of only posting to a few different places where followers can come to you to find answers.

Being linked together is as much a blessing as it is a curse but the key for air safety investigators is to begin responding to an accident before it happens. Establish an emergency response plan that includes social media releases and identifies teams to create and manage sites.

With much of the world connected through social media, don't let social media drown out the truth or compromise the integrity of the company. Social media is and will continue to constantly change as will the aviation industry. Crisis communication can be very tricky, but the most important thing is to join the conversation.

## Works Cited

- Bradley, Diana. "Malaysia Airlines Uses Social Media for First Public Comments on Plane Crash in Ukraine." *Malaysia Airlines Uses Social Media for First Public Comments on Plane Crash in Ukraine*. Haymarket Media Group Ltd, 17 July 2014. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.
- Cohn, Ryan. "How Social Media Is Elevating Airline Crisis Communication." *LinkedIn*. N.p., 13 Mar. 2014. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.
- Malaysia Airlines. "Malaysia Airlines." *Facebook*. N.p., 8 Mar. 2014. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.
- National Transportation Safety Board. "Board Meeting : Crash of Asiana Flight 214 Accident Report Summary." *National Transportation Safety Board*. N.p., 24 June 2014. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.
- Nigam, Shashank. "Asiana Airlines Crash Crisis Management 2.0 Case Study and Analysis." *SimpliFlying The Leading Airline Marketing Consultancy RSS*. N.p., 09 July 2013. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.