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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- PREPARE, PREPARE, PREPARE
- LEARN AND CHANGE
- WE ARE ALL ON CAMERA
- EXPLAIN WHAT AND WHY
- BUILD TRUST AND CONFIDENCE

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WHAT HAPPENED?

During April 2024 there were a number of airline related issues that emerged and were reported in the media and on social media. One of the most notable was a Delta Airline Boeing 767 flight from New York to Los Angeles that lost an emergency slide shortly after take-off. The 33-year-old plane had to return back to JFK International and the Federal Aviation Administration is investigating the incident at the end of April. The slide was later found near the home of a lawyer whose firm was suing Boeing following the Alaska Airlines door blowout in January, according to the New York Post.

Other events included a Lufthansa flight from Chennai, India to Frankfurt that was diverted to Kuwait with no clear reason why. An Air France flight from Osaka to Paris that had to land in Armenia after smoke and fumes were spotted in the cabin. A flight from Newcastle to Cape Verde had to land at Manchester Airport as a precaution after a bird strike. A day earlier a Polish Airlines flight from Budapest to Seoul had to make an emergency landing in Kazakhstan due to disruptive behaviour.

At the start of April a Jet2 flight from Leeds Bradford Airport to Fuerteventura diverted to East Midlands Airport with no clear explanation what the reason was. All these incidents were very easily identified through Internet searching.

What was the communication response and what could it have been?

The incidents had very different communication responses from the airlines involved. It is important to recognise that all of them can easily be identified through the Internet searches and in the case of the emergency slide dropping from the plan there was extensive media coverage. There was no statement about the incident on the Delta Airlines News hub, but media reported that the company said public safety was paramount and the crews executed their emergency procedures. But social media included images of the damage to the flight, and it put further pressure on Boeing who would not comment on the incident.

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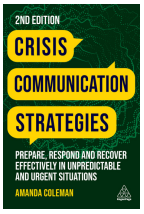
In the case of the TUI flight that landed at Manchester Airport there was a detailed statement including an apology from the company and gave a commitment to get the holidaymakers affected to their destinations. It can be compared with the very factual statement given by Jet2 which said the flight had been diverted due to a 'minor fault indication', that it was done 'safely' and customers were transferred. But the media highlighted that there was no further information on the fault.

The amount of information provided by airlines does not appear to be linked to the severity of the situation and as with Jet2 some significant details are omitted. However, the online communities that are tracking flights will very quickly identify where there are diversions to the flight path and share it very publicly. Airline pilots still remain at the top of the Trust Veracity Index, and this may need to be something that airline operators are working to achieve.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Prepare and keep preparing – it is vital to be able to move quickly as information is released almost immediately and without a response allows rumour and speculation to circulate.
- We are all being watched – it is not just airlines that are being tracked. All businesses need to be aware, and to make staff aware, that interactions are being watched and charted. This may be through doorbell camera footage, CCTV or flight tracking.
- Explain what and why – don't leave gaps where speculation can thrive. Provide enough detail that will allow people to understand why the action was taken and what made it necessary.
- Don't avoid issues – hiding for problems may be a short-term fix but will bring longer term problems. This issue may not get noticed but the next may be worse because action has not been taken.
- Learn from each issue and from the issues of others – making changes is vital whether it is to the business operation or to how communication is carried out. Ensure action is taken after any issue but also that the problems of others are considered to help build resilience.
- Trust and confidence are vital – if you expect people to believe what you have said and be confident in the action taken you need to be building the business' reputation before a problem emerges.

For advice on issues management get a copy of Everyday Communication Strategies



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