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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- SPEAK DIRECTLY TO THOSE AFFECTED
- AVOID SPECULATING
- REPUTATION SHOULD NOT BE THE SOLE DRIVER
- RIGHT SPOKESPERSON AT RIGHT TIME
- TAKE CARE WITH WORDS

WHAT HAPPENED?

On 10th July Flight FR1879, a Boeing 737-800 was travelling from Thessaloniki, Greece to Memmingen, Germany operated by Ryanair subsidiary Malta Air. During the flight the window was partially sucked out or damaged leaving a 61-year-old man injured. There were claims that passengers and the man's wife held on to him to prevent him being sucked out of the plane. The flight was returned to Thessaloniki where it made an emergency landing. A replacement aircraft was found.

Early reports claimed that debris possibly from an engine hit a window causing the cabin to decompress. The US National Transport Safety Board said they were leading the investigation and planned to provide a preliminary report within 28 days.

In the days that followed, the CEO of Ryanair commented on the situation and the man affected and his wife also shared their experience. Reports suggested that the man had appointed legal representation to pursue a compensation claim. There was also video footage of the incident circulating.

What can communication and business learn from the situations?

The incident resonated with people as most people have experienced airplane travel at some point. Ryanair responded relatively quickly to acknowledge that an incident had happened and that it had forced an emergency landing. In that first statement, it talked of 'a passenger window dislodged in flight' and that the passenger affected had 'requested and received medical assistance'. This appeared to downplay the severity of the incident and the impact it had. They focused on the fact that there was a normal landing and that the medical assistance had been requested.

The details of the incident never appeared on Ryanair's Media Centre and although the company had avoided speculating on the cause of the incident despite other reports, this changed a few days later. CEO Michael O'Leary suggested an object had damaged the engine during take-off and he gave details of the service history of the aircraft, that the engine had recently been overhauled and that preliminary findings showed no maintenance failures. The NTSB were critical of these comments saying that the investigating was ongoing.
In interviews, the man and his wife criticised the company for getting in touch via email and just offering to rebook the flight. However, Ryanair's Chief Financial Officer was quoted questioning whether that was accurate and saying that the staff had done a 'great job'.

What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Meet affected people face-to-face – don't rely on email and find a way to speak directly to those who have suffered the most due to an incident.
- Avoid manipulating the view of the situation – people should make their own minds up and downplaying incidents and the severity can easily backfire. The way the business views an incident can vary greatly from how people see it.
- Pre-empting the outcome of investigations and reviews of incidents is ill advised – leave those who are given the responsibility of reviewing the situation and what happened to do their job. The focus should be on providing a response when that review or investigation reports.
- Be careful your words do not contradict videos and eyewitness reports – phrases used to try and manage situations can appear at odds with what those involved are saying which weakens trust.
- Get the right spokesperson at the right time – using the Chief Financial Officer presents an impression that the focus of concern is the potential legal action that may be taken by the affected passenger.
- Own the incident and that it has happened – failing to talk about an incident or not to share comment on it, such as putting information on the website, can appear as an attempt to hide from the situation.
- Contradicting the views and comments of those directly affected is a dangerous situation – these steps can appear to be victim blaming, and the aim is to avoid this by ensuring there is an open line of communication directly with those involved.
- Defence of staff should happen in the right place – the rush to say staff did a great job is important for internal communication but public statements can be criticised as appearing defensive and rushing ahead of any review or investigation.

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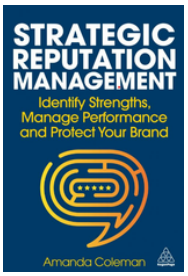

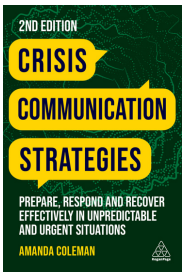

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