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# TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- MOVE QUICKLY
- MAKE TECHNICAL INFORMATION SIMPLE
- DEFINE YOUR OWN SITUATION
- UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT
- PREPARE FOR REPUTATIONAL DAMAGE

## WHAT HAPPENED?

During September the National Air Traffic Service (NATS) in the UK suffered two incidents that sparked a reputational crisis. On 8th September, an air traffic problem led to more than 2,000 flights being delayed, cancelled or redirected. The incident ran for six hours but the problems were felt for two days. It was traced to a software defect in a flight data processing system. There was significant coverage and the media highlighted the significant problem that occurred around the same time in 2023.

Just a few days later, there was a second issue that affected Prestwick airport and led to 227 flights being cancelled at airports including Glasgow, Manchester and Belfast. The two incidents were not said to be linked which led to further questions about the operation and that of the role of the Chief Executive Martin Rolfe.

The incident in Prestwick lasted for around an hour and although it didn't have the widespread impact of the earlier incident, it did lead to continued pressure on the leadership and the operation of this vital service.

## What can communication and business learn from the situations?

NATS provided statements to the media quickly after both incidents were identified but already there was widespread discussion of the impact from passengers on social media. After the Prestwick incident the CEO Martin Rolfe apologised quickly after both incidents and in statements said that it was important for them to focus on safety. However, he did not appear on camera, and the information was left to be circulated through media statements and a report into the first incident.

In responding to the first incident, he added that they were 'devastated' when things went wrong.

This was important to note but the focus could have been placed more on the passengers missing weddings, holidays and business trips among many other things. Despite two incidents occurring in September and having a significant impact on thousands of people, on the website there was nothing about the incidents except a preliminary report into the 8th September incident.

Airlines were quick to criticise, with CEO of Ryanair calling for NATS CEO Rolfe to leave while the CEO of WizzAir was interviewed questioning the resilience of NATS. The airline bosses kept their focus on passengers with Ryanair estimating 25,000 people were affected by what happened. Unsurprisingly, there was also a focus on the £1.5m salary of the NATS CEO.

### What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Responding quickly is vital – as passengers realised there was as serious problem they took to social media which left the organisation trying to catch up.
- Explain technical situations simply – it is important to simplify but not to dumb down.
- Focus on the people affected by the impact of the situation – apologies are good but they do need to recognise the people disadvantaged by what has happened rather than on the organisation.
- Stakeholders need to be able to discuss concerns – they will likely be vocal about how your situation is affecting them but through building strong relationships it can avoid becoming a public dispute.
- Tackling misinformation and disinformation should be a part of all plans – given the lack of detailed information, linked to investigations that would take place, it allowed rumour and speculation to circulate.
- Reputational crises can follow operational crisis so prepare for them – this does not mean trying to manipulate the situation, it means focusing on being honest and open and highlighting the work to respond to what has happened.
- Recovery takes time and is essential to maintaining confidence – the business may want to move forward quickly but it is important to focus on rebuilding trust where it is needed.
- Don't let others define your situation – keeping a low profile or trying to say nothing allows other people to jump in and explain what is happening. Use your communication to be clear about the situation you are facing and what you are doing.

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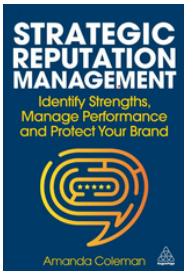


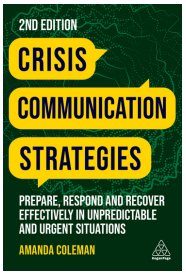


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