

The Malaysian mystery

The challenge of communicating
when there is little to say



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The Malaysian mystery

Andrew Cave investigates how companies should respond in a crisis when there is nothing that can be said

The crisis communications manuals are in the filing cabinet, with processes and systems developed to deal with communicating the unexpected. You've even taken part in crisis role play and scenario planning. But what do you do when the world's media asks a single question every minute of every day for weeks and months and you simply don't know the answer?

That's been the problem for Malaysia Airlines since Flight MH370 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing disappeared over the South China Sea between Malaysia and Vietnam on 8 March.

With 239 passengers and crew on board, this is an undoubted human tragedy. Yet, more than 30 days after the initial alert, little more is known about what happened.

In the absence of facts, the communications of Malaysia Airlines and the country's government have come under heavy scrutiny and have been easy to criticise.

Louise Burke, associate director of technology, consumer and digital communications agency Berkeley PR, believes the airline broke no fewer than five key rules of crisis communications planning and processes.

She says it did not appear to have a crisis communications team in place, comprising senior people from the airline as well as key public relations personnel.

The airline did not designate one single consistent voice to communicate to the public and other stakeholders and did not establish clear media policies forbidding anyone in the company except the authorised spokesperson from speaking to the media.

In addition, there was also no holding statement prepared when the crisis broke and key audiences for the company's messages were not identified.

These failings were compounded when Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak stated more than two weeks after the plane disappeared that 'Flight MH370 ended in the Southern Indian Ocean' far from its original flight path.

It quickly emerged that the families of passengers on board had been alerted of this finding via mass text message just minutes before. Media speculation ran wild and the families grew increasingly frustrated with a perceived lack of transparency on the part of the Malaysian authorities. This took the form of dramatic direct action when some Chinese families of missing passengers stormed a press conference to protest about how they were being treated.

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Robert Jensen, chief executive of Kenyon International Emergency Services, which provides specialist crisis communications and disaster management services to 250 commercial airlines, is damning of the Malaysia Airlines and government efforts.

He says: 'We've seen a very poor response. I don't believe there was proper planning, training or resources made available. You have to have a system that's ready to go and has been practised before the incident and I don't think that's what's happened. This incident was a difficult one but I don't believe that it couldn't have been managed.'

'I would have recommended that as part of a crisis management structure, the airline set up a family assistance centre and conducted briefings with families ahead of time. It's very hard to stand in front of families and say *We don't know* but I would have brought in technical briefers to say *Here are the facts that we do know.*'

Jensen believes the problems were about much more than just communications, stemming from poor preparedness and a lack of clear leadership. 'You need the chief executive to stand up and say *I'm going to go to the family assistance centre. I'm going to trust the families. I'm going to tell them what we know and I'm going to tell them when we don't know anything.*' he says. 'Then you start to build a relationship. It could be weeks, months or years before you find the aircraft so you need to sit with the families and build a profile of the person who was on board of the aircraft so that it can be used for identification and a profile of the family. You need to allow the families to contribute to the process.'

'You don't fake hope but you talk to families individually and offer best-practice assistance, which is \$25,000 on an international flight, to help the family because if a primary wage-earner was on that aircraft not

every company is going to continue to pay their wages while the aircraft is missing.

'Then you set up briefings for them and make sure they get information before the media and set up a special families' website where they know they can go to get correct and current information. It's more than public relations. It's communications backed up by resources.'

Donald Steel, a former BBC chief media spokesperson, who now runs communications consultancy Donald Steel Public Relations, agrees that the relatives of passengers have to be put far ahead of the media. 'The most important people are the relatives and friends of those whose have perished. It's not the media,' he says. 'The media are a second order issue but you still can't have a situation where they have very senior reporters and anchors out

there and they go on screen and say nothing. They have to say something.

'If you can't give facts because there aren't any, then what you must turn to what it is you're doing.'

Steel says Malaysia Airlines could have given detailed briefings on how it was caring for passengers' families and on the search and rescue effort being organised by Malaysia's civil authorities.

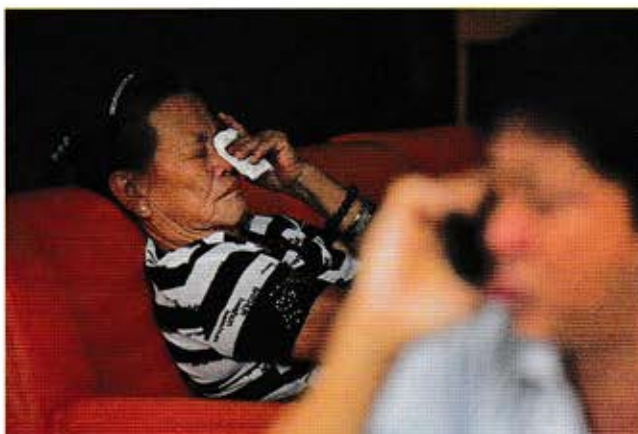
Without disclosing details of the investigation into what happened to Flight MH370 it could also have provided spokespeople to talk publicly about its organisational values, how it maintains aircraft and

how its systems and training work.

'Each day, you can say something different,' adds Steel. 'When the whole of your company's efforts are diverted to finding out what happened, it takes a lot of self-possession to get that kind of plan in place but you must do it.'

Many other considerations need to be taken into account. Most major airlines operate 'go teams', who have undergone rigorous training and aim to leave their base airport for the scene of a disaster within four hours of hearing about an accident.

In the case of the disappearance of Flight MH370, there was no known disaster scene to go to but Jensen says Malaysia Airlines could have set up video links from the search area to the family assistance centre, moved some of the families to Perth to be nearer the operation and cared for them with family liaison officers there.



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Some of the confusion over what happened might also be due to initial suspicions of terrorist involvement and official advice to say nothing. As for that well-publicised storming of the press conference, some jurisdictions, such as the US, forbid passengers' families from being in the same buildings as the media, to prevent that kind of televised outburst.

'That was a moment that we have to learn from,' believes Steel. 'We have to make sure that families in this kind of situation are given so much care and individual attention that they don't somehow feel the requirement to run into a press conference and interrupt it in the way that they did.'

'The world's best airlines do rehearse these kinds of moments but if a group of family members bursts into a press conference, it's very difficult to stop them.'

With caring for relatives of the missing by necessity the priority, he says airlines have a duty to do all they can to prevent rumours and false news.

'You don't want speculation,' says Steel. 'It causes anguish and it's absolutely pointless. At one point in this story, there was speculation that the aircraft had slipped out of the atmosphere into outer space. What does all that do to the families?'

'Then came a lot of speculation saying that the plane was in one place or another. It was farcical breathless reporting that something had been spotted in the sea when anyone who knows anything about this knows there's a lot of rubbish floating in the sea and the chances of it being a piece of the aircraft are very low indeed.'

Commentators have some sympathy for Malaysia Airlines' communicators, however. 'It's much too easy to sit at your desk and criticise other companies,' adds Steel. 'We don't know all the facts. We don't know what's gone on behind the scenes. We don't know what restraints there were on the airline.'

Chris McLaughlin, vice-president of external affairs at mobile satellite communications group Inmarsat, which played a pivotal role in directing the search for Flight MH370 to the south Pacific,

adds: 'Malaysia Airlines was overwhelmed initially and why wouldn't it be? There was no information until we came forward with a suggested approach. There did not seem to be any wreckage or any trace of the plane so I don't think we can criticise Malaysia Airlines for looking like they were floundering initially because they had nothing that they could go with.'

David Scane, account manager at crisis preparation and community politics consultancy Curtin & Co, believes there are some positives from how the crisis has

been communicated. 'Where Malaysia Airlines has handled the crisis well is that it has made itself very available and the chief executive and senior management have been holding press conferences on an almost daily basis,' he says. 'They had a dark website ready to go and have been very responsive on social media. We have to cut them a bit of slack in that it was never perceived that you could lose an aircraft that could go completely off the radar with no trace of it for more than 30 days. This is completely unprecedented.'

Indeed, while Air France Flight 447, carrying 228 people from Rio de Janeiro to Paris disappeared in 2009, pieces of its tail were located in the Atlantic Ocean within a week, though it took another 23 months

before the black boxes containing flight data were located by robot submarines.

However, past responses to aviation and other disasters show how responsive and engaging communications can make a major difference.

When British Midland Flight 92 crashed onto the embankment of the M1 motorway near Kegworth, Leicestershire, killing 47 passengers and crew in 1989, the airline's chief executive Sir Michael Bishop held interviews on his way to the crash scene without

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knowing the details of the incident and expressed regret and pledged to leave 'no stone unturned in establishing the cause' in a response seen as genuine and heartfelt.

Similarly, Sir Richard Branson was praised when he arrived hours after a fatal Virgin Trains crash in Cumbria in 2007 to visit the scene, praise the driver and thank local residents and emergency services for their help.

And when US Airways Flight 1549 successfully ditched in Hudson River with no loss of life in 2009, the airline's immediate response was to give each of the 150 passengers \$5,000 in emergency cash because their belongings, including keys and money, were lying on the river bed and might take crash investigators months to recover.

'Malaysia Flight 370 is now another case study in crisis management, but it is not a game-changer,' says Andrew Griffin, chief executive of reputation management agency Register Larkin. 'The fact that it is so unique makes it a typical crisis. Crisis preparedness isn't about predicting everything that can go wrong and working out what you would do if it does.'

'If something is a crisis, it is by its nature highly unusual, presenting commercial, reputational, financial, strategic and even existential risks to an organisation. Any company that wants to be 'crisis ready' must prepare its people for extreme and unknown circumstances where they will need to make career, organisation and even corporate history-defining decisions with little information, and with everyone watching.'

Steel agrees: 'We can't change what's happened. An aircraft has crashed. People have died. We can't arrive and make it all better but we are there for the living. I think the big lesson from Malaysia is that our crisis plans will in future include what we will do if there is no information to give.' ©



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FROM THE FRONT LINE

'I pinned the word 'truth' on my wall and worked to that'

Chris McLaughlin, vice-president of external affairs at mobile satellite communications group Inmarsat, was at a satellite industry conference in Washington DC on the Saturday that Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 went missing.

While Inmarsat operates a global maritime distress service, there is no similar product for the air industry, because aeroplanes are not required to carry tracking devices, except for when they are flying over the North Atlantic.

However, Inmarsat is a member of the Air Accident Investigation Board's technical committee and provided what little data it had, fully expecting the plane to be found the following day.

When it wasn't, the company was asked if its satellites could help. After looking at the available data, it calculated that Flight MH370 had appeared to have carried on flying for a number of hours after vanishing.

'That was a revelation but also a problem,' says McLaughlin. 'Nobody could tell where the plane was but it had kept flying. Therefore, had it landed? By the end of that week, we had mapped a north-south possible corridor around which the plane could have gone.'

'That was then adopted by the investigation in Malaysia as the likely route from north to south, but at that stage it was not known which direction the plane had flown in.'

Inmarsat, which has 11 people in its London-based marketing and digital team but only McLaughlin and one colleague in media relations, became increasingly involved in media briefings, to a point where it was engaging for 19 hours a day with a rolling 24-7 news agenda.

'We were simply back to back,' says McLaughlin. At any one time we had five TV crews queuing to do interviews. We had huge engagement globally.'

The story then developed when Inmarsat mapped Flight MH370 against the paths of other aircraft in the area and concluded that it could only have taken a southern route within its corridor.

That led to the Malaysian prime minister announcing that the flight ended in the Southern Indian Ocean.

'It's been a very intense process,' says McLaughlin. 'We had to manage a multi-media storm. We're not getting paid for this. It's cost us about \$500,000. But we've had advertising value equivalent coverage amounting to \$180 million globally. Some 45,000 articles were generated in the first ten days and we engaged with briefing tier one media in 33 countries.'

'We have crisis plans for launching satellites and the loss of rockets and satellites in space but we did not have a plan in place for a third party loss of an aircraft that uniquely could be located by what we do. It's never happened before. We had to create our own response in real time in the face of a global media storm and the strategy and approach was developed by me as we went along.'

'We concentrated on being as open as we could and providing information. I said *We're going to be respectful of the loss of people, thoughtful in the way we approach everything and helpful throughout*. I pinned the word *truth* on my wall and worked to that.'