

Malaysia Airlines MH370: How to make a crisis worse

Company needs to apologize for mistakes, give only the facts and liaise with governments

By Amber Hildebrandt, [CBC News](#) Posted: Mar 12, 2014 8:11 PM ET Last Updated: Mar 13, 2014 5:27 PM ET

Crisis management experts say Malaysia Airlines is botching the handling of its missing MH370 flight, fuelling rampant speculation and ultimately making the situation worse for grieving family members.

Since Flight MH370 disappeared after leaving Kuala Lumpur in the early hours of Saturday morning, some relatives of the passengers have reportedly thrown water bottles at airline officials, protested in front of the Malaysian embassy in Beijing and signed petitions demanding answers.

"If you look at Malaysia, there's no crisis management," said Robert Jensen, president of Kenyon International Emergency Services, a global company that helps airlines deal with such disasters.

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In the latest confusion, the head of Malaysia's air force said the military received signals on Saturday after ground controllers lost touch with the aircraft, suggesting the plane headed off its northeast course and instead flew to the west. The air force chief later denied making that statement.

But meanwhile, officials asked India to join the search for the plane west of Malaysia near the Andaman Sea.

That's just one example of varying reports that have increased confusion and even hurt the reputation of the state-owned airline.

"The response to a crisis can become a crisis of its own or make the crisis even worse," said Mark Sherwin, president of Toronto-based crisis communications company CorpWorld. "You sort of exacerbate the initial crisis."

Few concrete details have emerged about the missing flight. Many bits of information that come out are soon after retracted or proven incorrect.

Attention diverted

The airline has issued numerous media releases since it lost contact with the plane, but that's done little to stem the growing frustration.

In one of the most recent statements, the 15th made to date, Malaysia Airlines noted that it has sent a team of 112 caregivers to help family members in Beijing to help them "make this difficult time relatively bearable." It states that it's holding regular briefings for relatives, taking questions and providing them with translators.

Many of the releases focus on dispelling myths and rumours circulating in the absence of information.

On Tuesday, the airline dealt with the latest allegation: two South African women alleged they'd spent a 2011 flight in the cockpit with the co-pilot of the missing flight, Fariq Abdul Hamid, who smoked the entire time.

Malaysia Airlines expressed shock and then said, "We are in the midst of a crisis and we do not want our attention to be diverted."

But attention keeps being diverted.

Earlier that day, the airline was forced to correct other false information regarding five passengers believed to have checked in for the flight but missed it. They corrected the record, saying four passengers never showed up at the airport.

"They've lost the most important strength they had and they're going to need, which is credibility, because there's no co-ordination," said Jensen.

Shield the families

Jensen's firm helps airlines handle disasters by deploying experts to handle search-and-recovery of bodies, activate call centres with specially trained staff using databases to collect information from families and help communicate with the media.

'We're giving them a shield, if they want it, from unwanted attention.' *Robert Jensen*

The Kenyon International Emergency Services president says the company's failures began early on.

As relatives gathered at the Beijing Capital International Airport, Flight MH370 flashed in red for hours as "delayed" — even after news broke about the plane's possible demise.

Waiting family members became distraught as photographers and TV camerapersons descended on the arrivals area.

The first thing Malaysia Airlines should have done, says Jensen, is contact the airport and ask it to immediately do the following: take the flight off the arrivals board, set up a reception area for family and bring relatives into that protected area before news broke to protect them from the media onslaught.

"We're not protecting families. We're giving them a space. We're giving them a shield, if they want it, from unwanted attention," said Jensen.

Family members in Beijing — where the majority of the MH370 passengers were from — were moved to a nearby hotel, where dozens of Malaysia Airline caregivers and Chinese officials continue to help them out.

But for many, that action came too late. Some relatives of passengers on the missing flight say it was Monday before airline staff spoke to family members and Tuesday for Chinese authorities. And even then, relatives say the information has been scant — or inaccurate.

"If you can't tell us anything, what are you doing here?" one person shouted, according to media reports. "Tell us the truth!" others yelled.

Chinese officials added to the chorus of frustration, with a foreign ministry spokesperson saying, "It is very hard for us to decide whether a given piece of information is accurate."

Sherwin says it would be far better if the airline admitted what it knows and doesn't know about the mysterious plane disappearance.

"It is very difficult for some people to say I don't know. We don't know. And that is often the honest answer," said Sherwin.

To counter rampant speculation that's bound to occur, crisis management experts say that companies need to be careful to only state known and confirmed facts.

Releasing details such as the plane's maintenance record, how planes are tracked and in what cases transponders might not work could also help alleviate conjecture.

'In limbo together'

The priority in the chaos should always be the family of the loved ones on the plane, says Jensen. Brief them before the media, be transparent, caution them about the speculation that will inevitably arise and tell them what to expect in the coming days.

It's also helpful to have all families in the same area, not only to grieve together but for co-ordination.

"They're all in limbo, but they're all in limbo together," said Jensen. "And anyone else probably won't understand how they're feeling so offering them an opportunity to quickly be in the same place is usually helpful."

Beyond that, companies need to liaise with every agency and country involved in the disaster. In the case of the Malaysia Airlines flight, 239 citizens from 14 countries were on board the Boeing 777.

With that many interested parties, numerous and varied messages leak out to the public.

But Jensen says that's manageable. The operating airline should be assigning liaisons to each agency and country involved in the crisis, asking what they know and sharing information the airline has.

The company can't control what others say, he notes, but it can inform them about confirmed facts. And there's the potential to harness the global interest, such as by tapping into other countries resources.

As for whether the airline's handling of the crisis can be salvaged, it may be too early to tell.

Sherwin suggests the company could apologize for the mistakes and the frustration it has caused. People understand that errors happen.

But he notes there may be "no fix until they can bring some closure to this."

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