

Crisis Management and Communication Approach: A Case of Boeing 737 MAX

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Abstract

Crises are inevitable and it can be happened at any point of the organization process. Thus, it is worthwhile for the organization to identify the early plan of issue or potential risk occurring within organizations as it is not easy to win the reputation warfare. Thus, this paper aims to review the Boeing 737 Max case from the perspective of crisis communication and management approaches. The discussion of the case surrounded on the chronology of the case, crisis communication and management strategies carried out by Boeing 737 and lessons learned from it. This has called upon the management, especially the public relations or corporate communication department for aviation industry to look into it to form a strategic solution to safeguard the organization's reputation when the crisis strike.

Key words: Crisis communication, crisis management, corporate communication, public relations, aviation industry

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Introduction

Crisis has become evitable in the business world as many companies today are facing various series of events that tarnished the reputation. Crises may come in different forms and these situations often reappear due to lack of prior preparation. Thus, companies should include the crisis communication plan in their strategic policy implementation.

An examination of a past crisis is taken to further analyze the communication management procedure with the aim to enrich the knowledge of crisis communication and management. The subject has become a crucial aspect in the context of corporate communication and therefore, reference to past events or cases will be an additional value for the corporations when facing future crises. The recent Boeing 737 Max Aircraft crashes is taken as the case study and this article provides a detailed information of the company, clients and customers' activities, comprehensive timeline of crises, the communication management plan, and the crisis communication strategies implemented in handling the crisis. The main contribution of this article lies in the in-depth crisis management plan analysis of the two fatal air disasters and take key actions to implement in future crisis communication strategies.

Background of the Boeing company

The Boeing company is a pioneering name in the aviation industry, which was originated in July 1916 by William Edward Boeing. The company was established in Seattle, and initially operated as The Pacific Aero Product Co (Boeing, 2020). However, the name was later changed to Boeing to honor the name of the founder. The first aircraft of the company was launched in November 1916, and

it was a Model C two-place training seaplane. Being the world's largest aerospace company, Boeing is also the biggest manufacturing exporter of commercial jetliners, defense, space, and security systems.

Boeing's success sparked rapidly throughout the 1920's, as the company developed several aircraft models, both for air transportation and military purposes. However, its first commercial airplane, the B-1, was not used to carry passengers, as coast to coast journeys often took more than 24 hours to commence. The aircraft delivered mail instead and Boeing won several major delivery contracts from U.S. Post Office. Throughout the early 1920's, Boeing received major delivery contracts from the US Government. The company's continuous growth enabled the corporation to found Boeing Air Transport in 1927, which established the United Airlines in 1931 (Boeing, 2020).

In 1966, the company built the largest manufacturing facility in the industry, which was called the Everett Factory. The building itself was the largest manufacturing plant in the world, which took over 16 months to build by a group of several efficient engineers (Boeing, 2020). This factory manufactured the first wide-body aircraft, popularly known as Boeing 747. The aircraft has a passenger capacity of 490 passengers and held the largest air travel capacity record for 37 years. The Boeing 747 was also the most sold aircraft in the industry. As of 2020, Boeing has 161,133 employees, and a net income of \$636 million. The company's total assets are valued at 133.625 billion (Boeing, 2020).

Chronology of the Crisis

The Boeing 737-max was introduced as the next generation of commercial aircrafts in the aviation industry. The model was first introduced in 2011 and emerged into service in 2017. This revolutionary aircraft envisioned to drastically reduce the manufacturing cost and time. The aircraft would have longer range at a lower operating cost, and the complexity of operations were significantly reduced for the pilots (Slotnick, 2019). However, major concerns began to emerge after two fatal crashes involving the aircraft within 5 months, killing all 346 people on board.

The devastating tragedy started with the company's contest to compete with its competitor, Airbus. Boeing and Airbus are the two biggest airplane manufacturers in the world. In 2010, Airbus announced the update on the engine on their most popular model A320. This model has a single-aisle and services many domestic flights. The Airbus introduced a new geared turbo-fan engine to its A320 NEO model, which made the plane 15% more fuel efficient and with the new evolution the airline saved a lot of money (Mouawad, 2010). The official launch of A320 NEO was on December 2010, and within two years there were more than 2000 orders (Prokopović, 2016).

Boeing had similar visions to upgrade the engine on their single aisle plane, as it paved a way to generate more revenue with a fuel-efficient option. But there were consequences in the beginning, as the two airplanes had its differences in the form of aircraft design. On 2011, Boeing commercial Airplanes figured a way to replace the similar type of fuel-efficient engine as Airbus 320 NEO model, to Boeing's 737. Boeing called this model the 737 MAX. A statement from Boeing indicates that pilots would only need minimal additional training for the new model and can operate the plane with existing knowledge (Leeham News, 2019). When the fourth generation of the Boeing 737 line entered service in 2017, the company started its initial deliveries in May 2017. Within the first year, Boeing was able to deliver 130 aircrafts to 28 customers (Titan Grey, 2020). Between 2017 to 2019, more than 5000 Boeing 737 max aircrafts were ordered by different airlines (Herkert, Borenstein, & Miller 2020).

On October 29, 2018, the first incident was witnessed when Lion Air 610 crashed into the Java Sea thirteen minutes after its take-off, leaving no survivors. It was later revealed, the plane used for that flight had previous issues regarding incorrect speed and altitude readings on a previous trip and Boeing was accused on keeping that information. Boeing released a detailed statement about the automated flight control system after a week. This new system is designed to operate based on sensor readings and it was later suspected the sensor failure which caused the crash (Kirsch, 2020). However, in the US, Federal Aviation Administration was in favor of Boeing and with the initial investigation indicating the safety of the aircraft, Boeing continued their services anyway. By March 2019, a total of 386 aircrafts were delivered and airlines around the world continued flying and making orders of 737 Max.

On March 10, 2019, a similar incident occurred, as another Boeing 737 max operated by the Ethiopian Airlines crashed, killing all its 157 passengers and crew members. The Ethiopian Airlines flight 302 took off from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and slammed into the ground just outside the capital

city, 6 minutes after take-off. On the same day, Ethiopian Airlines grounded all its 737 Max aircrafts followed by Canyman Airways suspending their 737 max aircrafts as well. The global incident was widely reported on various media and public raised significant concerns regarding the safety and design features of the 737 Max (Slotnick, 2019). Stakeholders blamed the company for their lack of responsibility and repeating the same mistake. Multiple investigations took place and came to an understanding that the primary cause for both the crashes was the deployment of the new system called Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). Boeing had to deal with intense public and government scrutiny as numerous accusations were made regarding the implementation of the MCAS and pilots being fully unaware of the new system.

According to a report published by the New York Times, Indonesian, and Chinese Airlines were two of the biggest users of the Boeing 737 Max and because of the two fatal incidents both the airlines banned Boeing 737 Max model, causing to lose important long-term customers. However, some of the loyal customers like American and Southwest airlines continued to operate the 737 Max (Herkert *et al*, 2020). According to Bowen (2016), if a company established and maintained an authentic relationship based on trust ad ethical communication with their stakeholders, it is unlikely to lose those stakeholders.

Within two months of the incident, Boeing announced a software upgrade for the 737 Max aircrafts. However, the MCAS software used in the Boeing 737 Max was labeled untrustworthy by several pilots (Slotnick, 2019). As a reason, Boeing was rather forced to halt all production of its 737 max aircrafts. Following chart shows a brief overview of the chronology of the entire Boeing 737 Max crisis.

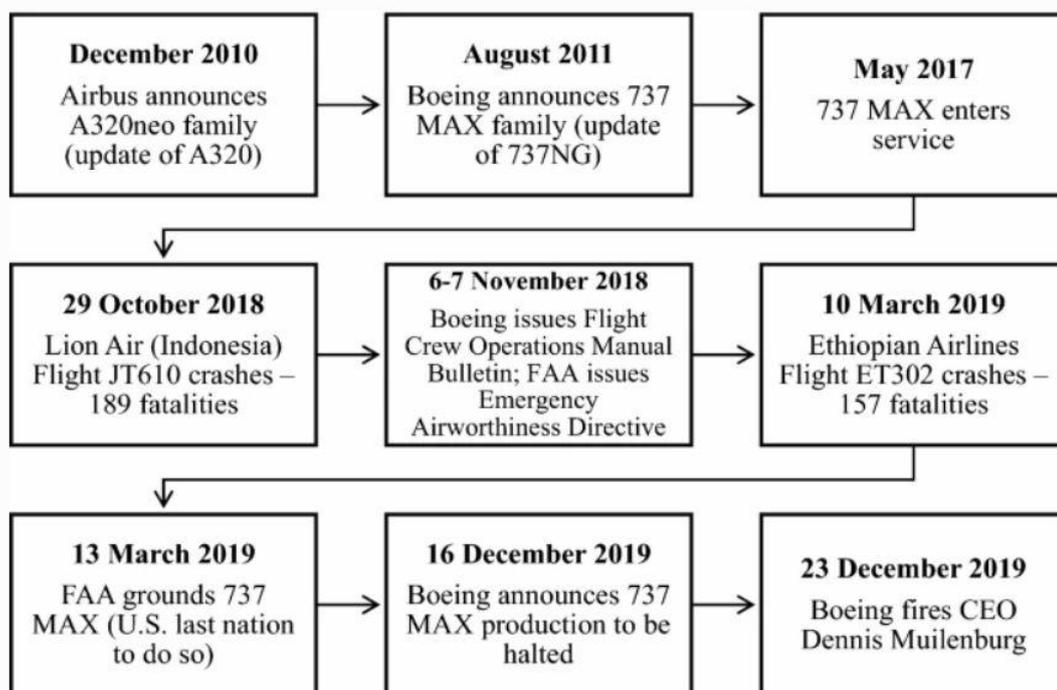


Figure 1: Timeline of the Boeing 737 Max Crisis (Herkert, et al, 2020)

Managing the Crisis

Although, Boeing was in a huge chaos, the company implemented few successful strategies and methods in dealing with the crisis. The company faced backlashes which are beyond restoring, and Boeing is still in the very beginning of the journey to regain back their lost image and reputation.

Boeing's Response to the Crisis

The outcome of a crisis mainly is based on how well a company is prepared, proactive and responsive towards the crisis (Coombs, 2010). Boeing faced serious damages in terms of legal, administration and its public relations due to the two crashes. It was evident that Boeing did not have a proper crisis management plan initially, or a special team trained for such cases. Right after the first incident, the Lion Air crash, Boeing published an official statement expressing their condolences and sympathy for families of the victims, also outlining the company's willingness to cooperate with the investigations. In November 2018, Boeing also issued another statement based on safety warnings and advising 737 Max operators urging the immediate deactivation of MCAS system. The statement released by Boeing raised ethical concerns regarding the non-disclosure of the new system in operating manuals (Herkert *et al*, 2020). Five months later after the Ethiopian Airlines crash, Boeing extended its communication and public engagement by assuring administrative and technical support to the investigative authorities (Czarnecki, 2019). The disastrous two crashes were covered in numerous media and President of USA, Donald Trump tweeted from his official account regarding the Boeing crashes. In his tweet he mentioned "...if I were Boeing, I would FIX the Boeing 737 MAX, add some additional great features, & REBRAND the plane with a new name..." and this caught more attention among social media users and stakeholders (Sucher, 2019).

On April 2019, after the second incident, Boeing publicly acknowledged the issues with MCAS system on an official statement. On the same note, Boeing also extended their apologies to the families of the victims and public for failing them once again. The two crashes caused Boeing to lose their title of world's biggest airplane-maker to their competitor; Airbus and faced a loss of 11.5% in the stock market (Herkert *et al*, 2020). Boeing's safety record and reputation were severely damaged even more because of the slow response in addressing its own failings at overseeing the safety measures. Although, the company was dealing with many negative eyes, Boeing was actively collaborating with Ethiopia Accident Investigation Bureau and the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board by providing technical assistance on the process of investigating the two crashes.

According to a report on Campbell (2019), Boeing did not fully take the blame of the two crashes and CEO that time, David Mullenburg focused more on to get recertification from Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). As one of the effective actions taken by the top management of Boeing, the company brought few changes in their leadership team including the replacement of CEO. Replacement of corporate leader is noted as a significant action in the four-step model for corporate recovery as well. The four-step model has proven to be successful and can be derived from other crisis examination cases such as Volkswagen, Papa John's, and Carnival cruise oil spill (Welch, 2020). In January 2020, Boeing announced the new leadership with the replacement of its CEO to David Calhoun. He is a well-reputed and renowned for his record in crisis management and communication (McGregor, 2020). Calhoun's immediate actions reflected the work to repair the reputational damage and relationships with regulators and stakeholders. Taking the issues to the highest priority Calhoun also embarked on an apology tour extending a series of "greet and mend opportunities". The first stop of this tour was made to the White house and this action by the CEO heightened the involvement of the company on handling the crisis (Kitroeff & Gelles, 2020).

Following to the change in leadership, Calhoun worked on restructuring the corporate culture as well redeveloping the strategies. Boeing was famous for its high quality and safety before the two drastic crashes. Their central focus on safety measures and engineering were the main reason customers around the world trusted Boeing above any other manufacturer. With abundant success over the years, the company's focus gradually transferred from quality and safety to financial return. With Calhoun taking over the leadership, the focus was reverted back to safety as the number one priority. The new set of values introduced after the crisis inspired the employees and uplifted their enthusiasm in to bringing back the lost image. The company's newly implemented strategy mainly focuses on eight priorities, 1. global scale and depth; 2. Market leadership; 3. Best team, talent and leaders; 4. Top corporate citizen; 5. Top-quartile performance and returns; 6. Productivity and services excellence; 7. accelerated innovation and 8. Design and manufacturing (Naimzade, 2018).

The final step in the recovery process highlights the rebranding of the service. This is one of the areas where the company has to face the biggest obstacle. An approximate of 350 of 737 Max aircraft were still grounded around the world. The U.S. government urging to rebrand the company as

well as the new leadership included rebranding as one of their strategic amendment for the future plans. The main goal for rebranding the well-known brand is to minimize negative publicity and to eliminate the catastrophic image associated with Boeing crashes (Ben, 2019). Unfortunately, this process is also halted as the global pandemic hit the whole world shutting down businesses. (Davenport & Gregg, 2020).

Analysis of the Crisis Management

According to Chakrabarty and Bass (2015), after the twin fatal crashes of Boeing 737 MAX, Boeing's attempt to address the crisis was reactive rather than proactive. Although, the company implemented few strategies that had great impact, Boeing had to face severe industrial setbacks. According to Coombs (2010), corporate openness is measured based on the availability to the media, honesty, and willingness to release information. Boeing failed in all, as in the initial stage Boeing was not fully transparent and hesitated to take any responsibility. The company could have adopted a proactive approach by grounding its own planes instead of leaving it to the customers and regulators to ground the 737 Max aircraft (Matthews, 2019). The decision to ground the 737 Max aircrafts came from different governments initially, rather than the decision coming directly from Boeing. One of the key aspects of efficient crisis management is taking responsibility and communicating changes, which Boeing failed to do so. Majority of the decisions and communications were conveyed by the airlines and aviation authorities, while Boeing's statements came after. This approach depicted the company as rather unstable and weak in terms of communication (Palmer, 2020).

Secondly, there are evidences the poor communication of Boeing in the crisis handling process. The chronology of the crisis and the communication implied, showed a lot of uncertainty and restrictions from Boeing (Wang & Fitzpatrick, 2020). According to Coombs (2007), the first step to managing a crisis is an immediate response. Acting quick and decisively is one of the crucial factors in the initial crisis response guidelines. Especially when a crisis costs lives, a company should do more than press releases and posting statements. In this case, Boeing must put people first as well as priorities should be given to risk communications and coordinating with their key stakeholders and response agencies. However, Boeing had complications with the previous leadership as Mullenburg's actions showed rushing over to get their recertification rather than managing the actual crisis. During a house hearing, former CEO explained the failure on an effective communication with their stakeholders are noted as one of the key mistakes the company made during the post crisis management process (Sindreu, 2019). Hence, it is evident that the company did not have a proper crisis communication strategy pre-established.

Third, lack of authority is also broadly witnessed from Boeing during the crisis management. After the investigation of the flight data recorder of the Lion Air flight, it was concluded that the MCAS software had caused the aircraft to tilt down several times, which caused the accident (Ganev, 2019). However, even with the clear and direct evidence of the malfunctioning of MCAS, Boeing did not take authority of the investigation. Several reports have criticized Boeing for not taking the lead in the response as the manufacturer, as most of the response related to the investigation and the findings were led by the airlines and the civil aviation authorities. From a strategic point of view, Boeing's action could be labeled as defensive behavior. Such behavior is negatively associated with post-recall brand image. For instance, the Toyota case in 2009 showed that authority and accountability go a long way in redeeming a brand's credibility and reputation in the market after a crisis. Toyota immediately recalled certain vehicles after its crisis relating to fatal incidents and customer complaints in 2009. The company immediately sought to ensure that its spokespeople dominated the news cycle around the event, while its PR teams blogged and utilized various social media channels (Ganev, 2019). This sort of behavior exemplifies a company's concerns for its consumers and helps it regain its reputation in the market.

Another concerning issue with Boeing's crisis management approach is their lack of transparency. Boeing failed to communicate important information regarding embedded automated software within their aircraft to the key stakeholders, such as the pilots. Boeing did not revealed the function of the automated MCAS software and its configuration, until there were significant accusations from the pilots and evidence from the flight data recorder of the crashed aircrafts. Such approach to potential hide crucial information impacts the company's reputation in the industry, as well as its trustworthiness (Palmer, 2020). Maintaining transparency is one of the most crucial characteristics of

an efficient crisis management practice, which was absent from Boeing's approach of managing the 737 Max crisis (Wang & Fitzpatrick, 2020).

Such contradictory communications showed that there were lack of integrity and gaps in risk management system within the organization. According to a report on Titan Grey (2019), described on the unclear reporting mechanism in the company. MCAS issues were detected by the development team and due to the weak communication channels and lack of overseeing the development process by senior management, the crucial information was not communicated in the most effective way. As reported by the New York Times, Boeing had no authoritative personnel or specific unit with proper oversight to take concerns from subordinates, especially from engineers. Instead the engineers were instructed to address their concern to the business sector unit managers. No mention of any specific crisis management teams was found on any of the company's statements, press releases, and briefs to manage the crisis (Sucher, 2019). Their involvement in dealing with the crisis was limited to "Technical Assistance", which showed that the lack of a distinct department or team for managing crisis within the company.

Following to this, the company also had a failed system of employee communications monitoring. The reports and case studies have no mention of Boeing having a function to monitor employee communications. An effective communication system is an important factor in risk management. Boeing would have reduced the risks of the malfunctions noted from the ground staff if there was a proper system to manage internal reporting. In an era in which internal communications are a major driver of risk, it is highly imperative to place a system which does not have any restrictions in any kind of communication. Especially, a huge company like Boeing, which is bound to face critical crisis scenarios due to the nature of the aviation industry, should not afford to make such mistakes. Even though, internal communication may seem a minor part in building a strong crisis communication strategy, this aspect should be included as an initial step to practice in every company.

Long-term Impact of the Crisis

The analysis of Boeing's 737 Max crisis management approach indicated the challenges and consequences for not having a pre-planned crisis management framework. Such inefficient handling of the crisis resulted several major clients banning the 737 Max model leading to a huge drop in the company's value in stock market. Furthermore, there were several lawsuits filed against the company from the families of the victims (Welch, 2020). However, the long-term impact of the crisis could bring even greater risks for the company.

During this difficult time as the world deals with the global pandemic, Boeing will have to face extensive challenges economically. The significant drop in stock price and market valuation impacted on the company's long-term financial sustainability. The decision to halt the production of Boeing 737 Max aircrafts means that it will lose billions of dollars' worth of assets (Sucher, 2019). The Boeing 737 was in development since 2011, which showed that a large amount of resources and assets were poured into the project for the last 9 years. The loss of integrity and credibility in the market will further add to financial risk. There is a substantial risk that Boeing might lose several key clients in the industry. In 2020, Boeing has announced that it will resume its production of 737 Max jetliners. According to reports of the New York Times, major airlines such as Saudi Airlines, Malaysian Airlines, and Lion Air will seek to terminate all its 737 Max deals with Boeing (Hemmerdinger, 2020).

Key takeaways from the Boeing crisis

Boeing's management of the 737 Max crisis illustrates the significance of implementing a well-prepared crisis management plan. Crisis is unpredictable and can cause damages which cannot be resolved. Boeing's initial response and its actions along the way were extremely contradictory. Strong decision makings during the crisis were unstable. The most important lesson learned from this case is to the importance of repairing the communication gap among employees. Boeing had failed to provide a clear and independent line of communication and this could be the root cause of the crisis.

Boeing's initial message after the two crashes was that its 737 Max aircrafts were safe for air operations. However, Boeing's prior advice to the U.S. FAA to ground its fleet of Boeing 737 Max and to halt its production were totally opposite to its initial claims. In public's perception, such approach showed that the company's internal decision-making framework is weak and uncertain (Welch, 2020).

In any crisis scenario, a company should stand accountable throughout and stand by the decisions taken by the management.

Another key lesson learned from this case is the importance of transparency. Excluding critical information from stakeholders is not only unethical, but it also effects the credibility of the company, which was the case in Boeing. The company's decision to hide the issue of its automated MCAS software in the initial stage is one of the biggest mistake Boeing did (Herkert *et al*, 2020). It is a vital factor to maintain transparency in all communications especially during a crisis. Past empirical researches had proved, immediate action without any signs of uncertainty or hesitation is perceived as a responsible behavior in crisis management (Herkert *et al*, 2020). Boeing could have reduced the negative impacts of the situation by executing voluntary recall through the communication of corporate responsibility, and focus its action on consumer well-being. Several researches in the past has shown that voluntary recalls are positive approaches in handling a crisis, which is correlated to an organization's post-crisis brand reputation (Palmer, 2020).

The key take-away from this case study is to designate a certain well-trained team for crisis communication management. The need to prepare policies, procedures, and technical capabilities with every possible outcome and response actions are highly effective during crisis. Especially, companies which have a technical work culture and employees with different fields. The cooperative behavior is a key requirement to execute company's ethics and values. Furthermore, a key lesson that can be derived from the case of Boeing is that stakeholders and public may give a second chance, but the probability of giving a third chance will have real challenges. Hence, in business world, repeating a mistake will have the most unfortunate consequences associated.

Conclusion

Crisis is an inevitable part of a corporation's life cycle, which can emerge unpredicted. As a reason, it is imperative that major companies such as Boeing establish a crisis management framework to deal with potential crises and risks associated with its business. Analysis of the cases showed the company's failure to communicate both internally as well as externally, at the same time failing to address critical aspects such as accountability, authority, and transparency. The incident served as a critical reminder for the aviation industry regarding the importance of an efficient crisis management framework, and the need of projecting potential risks and approaches to deal with such scenarios prior to developing and launching a product in the market.

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