

Crisis Communication Strategies in Indian Aviation: Navigating Turbulence Through Public Relations

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Abstract-The aviation industry, a vital component of global transportation infrastructure, is characterized by its dynamic nature and inherent complexities. As air travel becomes increasingly integral to modern life, the aviation sector in India reflects global trends with significant growth and distinct challenges. Amidst the aspirations for progress, the sector grapples with the potential disruption caused by unforeseen crises that can challenge public confidence and have lasting consequences. In the face of these challenges, efficacy of crisis communication strategies emerges as crucial in navigating turbulence successfully within the industry. Public perception is a precious yet fragile commodity, particularly when incidents threaten the industry's reputation. Public Relations becomes the guiding force, providing a strategic framework for managing communication during crises and proactively shaping narratives to prevent and mitigate potential issues.

This research paper explores the complexities of crisis communication within the aviation sector in India, underscoring the indispensable role of Public Relations strategies in navigating turbulent circumstances. The study aims to identify and analyse prevalent crisis scenarios faced by aviation entities, evaluating the efficiency of crisis communication strategies employed. The paper delves into the collaborative efforts between aviation companies and regulatory bodies, analyzing the relationship that shapes crisis communication within the sector. To understand crisis management in aviation sector, there are various crisis communication theories and models; however, the researchers formed the theoretical framework applying Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The application of SCCT within the aviation context allows for structured and context-specific crisis communication strategies, acknowledging the unique challenges faced by the industry. Along with this, Coombs' Image Restoration Theory provides insights into the strategic communication approaches that can be employed to rebuild confidence after incidents. Through the application of these theories, the study contributes practical recommendations for enhancing crisis

communication strategies in the aviation sector and proposes guidelines for regulatory entities. By creating these insights, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication dynamics specific to the Indian aviation context, offering a valuable resource for industry practitioners, scholars, and regulatory bodies navigating the complexities of crisis management in the aviation sector.

Keywords: Aviation, Crisis Communication, Social Media, Public Relations

INTRODUCTION

The aviation industry serves as a cornerstone of global transportation infrastructure, fostering connectivity and economic prosperity on an unprecedented scale. As air travel increasingly becomes an integral part of the modern life, the sector's aspirations for progress are put beside the unforeseen crises capable of eroding public confidence and leaving lasting repercussions (Regester et al., 2008). Against this backdrop, the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies emerges as a critical factor in successfully navigating turbulence within the aviation sector (Jimenez & Pamela, 2023). Public perception, a valuable yet fragile asset, becomes particularly vulnerable when incidents arise that threaten the industry's reputation (Lerbinger, O., 2011). Consequently, Public Relations (PR) emerges as a guiding force, providing a strategic framework (Cameron et al., 1997) for managing communication during crises and proactively shaping narratives to prevent and mitigate potential issues (Bundy et al., 2017).

In recent times, the aviation industry has found itself in various controversies that have highlighted the inherent challenges and complexities of ensuring safety and reliability in air travel. One such controversy revolves around the persistent issue of

long flight delays and cancellations in New Delhi (Sharma, 2024), primarily attributed to dense fog conditions prevalent during the winter months. These issues not only cause inconvenience to passengers but also raise concerns regarding the efficiency of airport operations and the adequacy of measures taken to mitigate the impact of adverse weather conditions on flight schedules.

Another alarming incident that sparked widespread concern and scrutiny involved the unexpected mid-air detachment of an emergency window from an airplane (Online ET, 2024). The incident, which occurred under seemingly normal flight conditions, underscored the critical importance of robust maintenance protocols and rigorous safety checks to prevent such potentially catastrophic events. Furthermore, it prompted urgent inquiries into the root causes of the malfunction and calls for enhanced safety standards to safeguard passengers and aircraft integrity.

Moreover, the aviation industry faced significant scrutiny and controversy surrounding safety concerns related to Boeing 737 aircraft (George, 2024). Allegations surfaced, raising doubts about the aircraft's overall safety and reliability. These claims prompted investigations into the procurement and maintenance practices of airlines operating Boeing 737 aircraft (Reuters, 2024).

These controversies serve as sobering reminders of the multifaceted challenges confronting the aviation industry and underscore the critical need for unwavering commitment to safety, transparency, and accountability. Addressing such controversies demands collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including regulatory authorities, airlines, manufacturers, and maintenance providers, to uphold the highest standards of safety and ensure the trust and confidence of passengers worldwide.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework forming base for this study on crisis communication in the aviation sector integrates Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Coombs' Image Restoration Theory. SCCT offers a structured approach to understanding crisis communication strategies by considering the interplay between crisis types (David E. Clementson & Michael J. Beatty, 2021), attributions of responsibility, and organizational responses (Xinyan

Zhao, et al., 2020). By applying SCCT within the aviation context, the research acknowledges the unique challenges inherent in managing crises within this industry, such as high stakes, regulatory scrutiny, and public safety concerns. SCCT provides a framework for developing context-specific crisis communication strategies customised to the characteristics of each crisis scenario (Park, JA., Kim, HJ., 2024), thereby enhancing the effectiveness of organizational responses in mitigating reputational damage and restoring public trust (Black, 2021). SCCT identifies how key facets of the crisis influences attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders (Coombs,2007). It provides a framework for understanding how crisis communication can be used for protecting reputational assets during a crisis (Mudgal & Rana, 2022).

Complementing SCCT, Coombs' Image Restoration Theory offers valuable insights into the strategic communication approaches that can be employed to rebuild confidence and reputation following incidents (Nazione, S., Perrault, E.K., 2019). This theory recognizes that crises often result in reputational damage and the erosion of public trust, necessitating proactive efforts to repair organizational image and restore stakeholder confidence (Sohn Y.J. & Lariscy R.W., 2014). By leveraging Coombs' Image Restoration Theory, the research study seeks to identify and analyze the communicative strategies employed by aviation organizations to address negative perceptions, mitigate reputational harm, and rebuild trust in the aftermath of crises. Through an examination of image repair tactics such as denial, bolstering, and corrective action, the research aims to elucidate effective approaches for managing post-crisis communication and enhancing organizational resilience in the aviation sector.

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon SCCT and Coombs' Image Restoration Theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication dynamics within the aviation industry. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the research seeks to develop context-specific insights into crisis management strategies, identify effective communication approaches for rebuilding organizational image, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in crisis communication theory and practice within the aviation sector.

To explore the complexities of crisis communication within the aviation sector and the role of Public Relations strategies.

To identify and analyse prevalent crisis scenarios faced by aviation entities, evaluating the efficiency of crisis communication strategies employed.

To identify the collaborative efforts between aviation companies and regulatory bodies, analyzing the relationship that shapes crisis communication within the sector.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A range of crisis scenarios, including the COVID-19 pandemic and aircraft accidents, have been studied in the aviation industry. Kim (2023) found that the effectiveness of airline communication strategies during the pandemic was influenced by message framing and personal traits. Warsihantari (2018) and Gerken (2016) both highlighted the importance of crisis communication strategies in managing aircraft accidents, with AirAsia and Malaysia Airlines employing different approaches. Ou (2020) further emphasized the need for strategic crisis response, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on corporate image fortification and organizational resilience. These studies collectively underscore the critical role of crisis communication strategies in the aviation industry, particularly in the face of significant disruptions.

The aviation sector's crisis communication and the role of PR strategies are complex and multifaceted, as evidenced by a range of studies. Massey (2005) highlights the strategic communication efforts of U.S. airlines post-9/11, while Kim (2023) and Ou (2020) both explore the message strategies of airline companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Kim focusing on the framing of these strategies and Ou on the evolution of message frames. Roulan (2020) further underscores the importance of PR in managing strategic relationships and image restoration during crises, drawing on Benoit's image restoration strategies. These studies collectively underscore the critical role of PR in shaping and executing crisis communication strategies within the aviation sector.

Research Design and Methods

This research employs a case study-based research method to investigate crisis communication within the aviation industry, with a focus on specific incidents and the strategies employed by organizations to manage these crises effectively. Case study research method is chosen as it allows an in-depth exploration of real-world phenomena within their natural contexts, providing rich and detailed insights into complex situations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the objectives, researchers identified recent crisis scenarios and conducted case study-based evaluation to understand the indispensable crises communication strategies and the role of Public Relations in managing the difficult situations.

Case Study I: Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 Emergency Landing

On a routine flight from Portland, Oregon, to Ontario, California, Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 encountered a harrowing incident when a portion of the aircraft blew out mid-air. The flight departed Portland International Airport at 4:52 p.m. (Pacific Standard Time, according to FlightAware) on January 5, 2024; only to encounter unforeseen trouble shortly after take-off. In response to the emergency, the flight crew executed a decisive decision to return to Portland, where the aircraft safely landed at approximately 5:30 p.m.

Crisis Communication Strategy

Alaska Airlines, renowned for its commitment to safety and customer service, swiftly initiated its crisis communication strategy to address the incident and reassure passengers and stakeholders:

1. **Transparency and Timeliness:** Alaska Airlines prioritized transparency by promptly acknowledging the incident and providing timely updates to the public through official channels, including social media, press releases, and direct communication with affected passengers. Clear and accurate information was disseminated to alleviate concerns and maintain trust.
2. **Empathy and Support:** Recognizing the potential distress experienced by passengers and their families, Alaska Airlines demonstrated empathy and compassion in its communication efforts. The airline offered support and assistance to affected

individuals, including rebooking options, accommodations, and necessary arrangements for continued travel.

3. **Accessibility and Engagement:** Alaska Airlines ensured accessibility and engagement by actively monitoring and responding to inquiries, concerns, and feedback from passengers, media outlets, and the general public across various communication platforms. Open lines of communication fostered a sense of transparency and accountability during the crisis.
4. **Coordination with Authorities:** The airline collaborated closely with aviation authorities, including the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), to investigate the incident thoroughly and implement any necessary safety measures or corrective actions. Transparent communication with regulatory bodies underscored Alaska Airlines' commitment to safety and compliance.
5. **Recovery and Follow-Up:** Following the emergency landing, Alaska Airlines focused on recovery efforts and follow-up communication to ensure the well-being of passengers and address any lingering concerns. The airline remained proactive in providing updates on the investigation's progress and implementing measures to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Alaska Airlines' crisis communication strategy exemplified a proactive and customer-centric approach aimed at preserving trust, ensuring safety, and mitigating the impact of the emergency landing incident. Through transparent communication, empathy, and collaboration with stakeholders, the airline effectively managed the crisis, reaffirming its commitment to passenger safety and operational excellence.

Case Study II: Flight delays and cancellations at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport

Amidst widespread criticism over flight delays and cancellations at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport due to dense fog conditions, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) took proactive measures to address the situation. The aviation regulator issued standard operating procedures (SOPs) for airlines aimed at mitigating passenger

inconvenience and ensuring transparency in communication regarding flight delays.

Crisis Communication Strategy:

1. **Timely Communication:** The DGCA's directive emphasized the importance of providing precise real-time updates on flight delays caused by fog. Airlines were instructed to disseminate this information through multiple channels, including their websites, SMS, WhatsApp, and email. By ensuring timely and accurate communication, the aviation regulator aimed to keep passengers informed and reduce uncertainty during adverse weather conditions.
2. **Transparency and Accountability:** The issuance of SOPs demonstrated the DGCA's commitment to transparency and accountability in managing flight disruptions. By outlining clear guidelines for airlines, the regulator sought to hold them accountable for effectively communicating with passengers and implementing measures to minimize inconvenience.
3. **Training and Preparedness:** Recognizing the crucial role of airline staff in communicating with passengers, the DGCA emphasized the importance of conducting effective training programs. By ensuring that airline personnel are equipped to handle communication during flight delays, the regulator aimed to improve the overall passenger experience and mitigate frustration.
4. **Mitigation Measures:** The DGCA's directive also highlighted the need for proactive measures to mitigate the impact of flight delays, including the possibility of canceling flights in advance to prevent congestion at the airport. By implementing such measures, the regulator aimed to minimize passenger inconvenience and ensure smoother operations during adverse weather conditions.
5. **Government Assurance:** Civil aviation minister Jyotiraditya Scindia provided assurance to passengers by acknowledging the challenges posed by the fog-related disruptions. By emphasizing the government's commitment to passenger safety and highlighting the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders in addressing the situation, the minister aimed to instill confidence and reassure affected passengers.

The crisis communication strategy employed by the DGCA and civil aviation authorities aimed to address the challenges posed by fog-related flight delays at Delhi Airport. By emphasizing transparency, accountability, and preparedness, the regulator sought to improve the overall passenger experience and ensure safety during adverse weather conditions.

Case Study III: Boeing's Safety Issues and Crisis Communication

Boeing, a leading airplane manufacturing giant, has recently faced a series of safety issues concerning its fleet of commercial airplanes, triggering widespread media attention and growing concerns from regulatory authorities and passengers alike. The situation escalated further following a critical segment on John Oliver's Last Week Tonight, shedding light on Boeing's insufficient safety protocols and raising questions about the company's practices. In addition to this, the incident with Alaska Airlines also raised concerns about safety.

Crisis Overview:

Several alarming incidents involving Boeing planes have garnered significant public attention. These include a Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner nosediving during a flight from Sydney to Auckland, resulting in injuries to fifty passengers. Additionally, a Boeing 777-200 experienced a tire falling off shortly after take-off in San Francisco, while another Boeing plane had to make an emergency landing in Houston after running off the runway into a grassy area. These incidents, along with others, have fuelled concerns over the safety of Boeing aircraft.

Crisis Communication Strategy:

1. **Transparency and Accountability:** Boeing has emphasized transparency in its communication efforts, acknowledging the incidents and providing updates to the public and stakeholders. The company has acknowledged the seriousness of the situation and expressed a commitment to investigating the root causes of the incidents to prevent recurrence.
2. **Regulatory Compliance:** Boeing has cooperated with regulatory authorities, including the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), in conducting investigations and addressing safety concerns. By collaborating with regulatory agencies, Boeing

aims to demonstrate its commitment to compliance and safety standards.

3. **Customer Relations:** Boeing has prioritized communication with affected passengers and stakeholders, offering support and assistance to address concerns arising from the safety incidents. The company has engaged with passengers, addressing inquiries and providing reassurance about safety measures and protocols.
4. **Proactive Measures:** Boeing has implemented proactive measures to address safety concerns and enhance confidence in its aircraft. This includes reassessing safety protocols, conducting thorough inspections, and implementing corrective actions to mitigate risks and ensure the safety of passengers and crew.
5. **Media Management:** Boeing has actively managed media inquiries and coverage of the safety incidents, providing accurate information and clarifications to mitigate misinformation and maintain transparency. The company has utilized various communication channels to reach stakeholders and the public, including press releases, social media updates, and direct communication with media outlets.

Boeing's crisis communication strategy has focused on transparency, accountability, and proactive measures to address safety concerns and maintain confidence in its aircraft. By engaging with stakeholders, cooperating with regulatory authorities, and implementing corrective actions, Boeing aims to navigate the crisis effectively and restore trust in its brand and products.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing the crisis communication strategies employed in the three case studies – the emergency landing of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, the issuance of SOPs by the DGCA in response to flight delays at Delhi Airport, and Boeing's handling of safety issues – several common themes emerge.

1. **Transparency and accountability** stand out as fundamental principles underlying effective crisis communication. In each case, stakeholders, including passengers, regulatory authorities, and the public, were provided with timely and accurate information regarding the incidents. Openness about the challenges faced and the actions taken to address them fosters

trust and demonstrates a commitment to addressing concerns head-on.

2. Proactive measures and preparedness are key components of successful crisis communication strategies. Both Alaska Airlines and the DGCA anticipated potential issues and took pre-emptive steps to mitigate risks and minimize disruptions. By implementing SOPs, conducting training programs, and collaborating with regulatory agencies, these organizations demonstrated a proactive approach to crisis management.

3. Engagement and empathy played vital roles in navigating the crises effectively. Airlines and regulatory bodies engaged directly with passengers, addressing inquiries, providing support, and offering reassurance during challenging circumstances. By prioritizing customer relations and demonstrating empathy towards those affected, these organizations strengthened connections with stakeholders and enhanced their overall crisis response efforts.

The case studies illustrate the importance of transparency, preparedness, and empathy in crisis communication within the aviation industry. By embracing these principles and implementing robust communication strategies, organizations can effectively manage crises, maintain trust, and safeguard their reputation amidst adversity.

Based on the analysis of the case studies, several areas where the communication strategies of airlines were lacking or could be improved can be identified. These recommendations aim to address these shortcomings and enhance crisis communication effectiveness within the aviation sector:

1. Timely updates

Delays or inconsistencies in communication can lead to confusion and erode trust. Implementing robust systems for monitoring and disseminating information can help ensure swift and consistent communication during emergencies. This was the case with flight delays and cancellations due to dense fog in New Delhi.

2. Proactive preparedness:

Airlines need to proactively anticipate and prepare for potential crises, including adverse weather conditions, technical malfunctions, and regulatory interventions. This involves developing comprehensive crisis management plans, conducting regular training for staff, and establishing clear protocols for communication and decision-making. This will help

minimize the impact of crises and effectively manage public perception.

3. Media Management and Image Restoration:

Airlines must adopt proactive media management strategies to control the narrative and mitigate negative publicity during crises. This involves providing accurate and consistent information to the media, addressing misinformation promptly, and leveraging media channels to convey reassuring messages to the public. In case of Alaska Airlines these strategies would have been helpful in reassuring and spreading the right message.

4. Regulatory Compliance and Collaboration:

Compliance with regulatory requirements is essential for maintaining public safety and trust in the aviation industry. Airlines should collaborate closely with regulatory authorities, such as the DGCA/ FAA, to ensure adherence to safety standards and regulatory protocols. By demonstrating a commitment to compliance and cooperation, airlines can enhance their credibility and reassure passengers of their commitment to safety.

By addressing these recommendations, airlines can strengthen their crisis communication strategies, build resilience, and effectively navigate turbulent situations within the aviation sector. Embracing transparency, preparedness, stakeholder engagement, media management, and regulatory compliance will be instrumental in maintaining public trust and preserving the reputation of airlines.

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