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News Analysis

## Analysis: Malaysia Airlines' mishandled response to the MH370 crisis

The MH370 incident has given Malaysia Airlines' communication operation an unprecedented challenge, but poor handling and misinformation have created a credibility gap.

by Jonathan Tilley / March 21, 2014



Malaysia crisis: The Department for Civil Aviation DG, the transport minister and the airline CEO brief the media

The search for the missing flight now involves 26 countries but the plane is yet to be located, with a current Australia-led investigation into objects seen on satellite images that could be debris still ongoing.

Meanwhile, the family members of those on board, not to mention the world's media, continue to wait.

"The challenge you have with crisis communications is not to make it worse, because you can't make it better," says Robert Jensen, CEO of Kenyon International Emergency Services, which provides crisis communications support for a number of airline clients.

"It's a hard job but it has been done, and by smaller airlines. Malaysia Airlines is a national carrier so I would have expected better."

The airline's initial response to the disappearance on 8 March consisted of a first statement at 7.24am, around five hours after the loss of contact with the plane.

It activated a 'dark site', a dormant website designed to be the main channel of communication, and added information with further statements in the following hours, also issuing updates via social media.

That afternoon, a 'Go Team' of volunteers was sent to Beijing and another set up in Kuala Lumpur to help give support and information to families. The airline began regular daily updates to the government and press.

However, despite these actions, the airline's response has attracted widespread criticism from the media.

China's state press agency Xinhua slammed the Malaysian government for a lack of transparency, saying: "It is known to all that inaccurate, or at least incomplete, information led the initial search in the South China Sea nowhere and thus that precious time was wasted."

Information given in official statements was also often inaccurate, with most followed by statements giving corrections. "You can't do that because you lose credibility," explains Jensen.

This loss of credibility has led to frustration boiling over among the family members of those on board, with some having to be forcibly removed from a press conference by police earlier this week.

A Malaysia Airlines spokesman said the response has been handled in-house by a team trained in crisis communications and led by the CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya and others at board level, who give daily updates to the government and the press.

The Malaysian government is understood to be taking an overall lead on comms, and defence and transport minister Hishammuddin Hussein has acted as a spokesman.

The prime minister also issued a statement on 15 March.

However, Jensen argues that this should not distract from the leadership role the CEO should have taken.

Travel PR agency Rooster MD James Brooke agrees, pointing out that it was not the CEO but someone more junior who was put forward as spokesman initially.

"It should always be the CEO, and if he's not available, perhaps because he's in flight, then the number two," he says.

Brooke, whose agency Rooster handled Malaysia Airlines' UK consumer PR in 2008-09, points to the example of the British Midland crash at Kegworth in 1989, recalling that the CEO immediately briefing media in the car on the way to the scene contributed to a subsequent improvement in the airline's reputation.

Malaysia Airlines has not taken on an external agency to help with its handling of the crisis. However, it does have a handful of agencies around the world from which it could seek advice, such as Perowne Charles Communications in the UK, headed by former global communications director at Virgin Atlantic Paul Charles.

Brooke adds: "It is the nature of that airline that everything is controlled centrally at head office, as with a lot of carriers, but it has quite a senior comms man in the UK [with Charles]."

Brooke agrees that while the initial response was a clear failure, things have improved.

"It has got its act together now but it was slow at the start," he argues, saying the way information was being put out has become more finely tuned. "This is incredibly challenging from a comms perspective. There is so much rumour and speculation for them to keep a handle on."

The airline has sought to improve communications with the families, announcing on Wednesday it is now sending out 'SMS blasts' and had set up new email and phone lines for them to reach the airline.

But Jensen fails to see any improvement, arguing the airline is still failing to give the families the facts and educate them about the search.

"It's not about finding the plane, it's about several hundred people whose lives are on hold. They are the audience."

**A crisis can strike at any moment and can take any form. Join us at PRWeek's annual Crisis Communications conference in London to learn exactly how (and how not) to react - [click here to find out more](#).**

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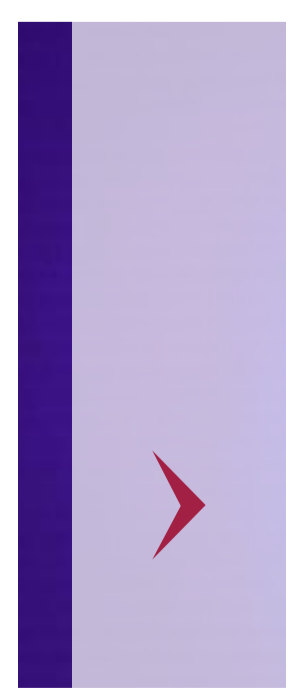
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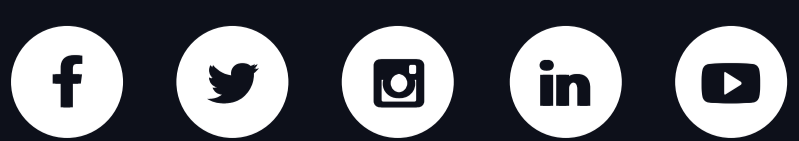
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