

Flight AF 447

Analysis of Air France's crisis communications



06 jun 2009 Helicóptero da Marinha aproximando-se de destroços

Foto : Força Aérea Brasileira

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Following the crash of flight AF 447 Rio-Paris, Air France had to face the worst possible type of incident an airline could experience: the loss of a plane with all of its crew and passengers.

In this type of situation, communication are the cornerstone of the crisis management strategy. On the one hand, it must highlight the company's ability to manage an exceptional situation and also help preserve the quality of its relationships with target audiences worldwide. The slightest dissonance in this communication could destabilize the whole business and make it more vulnerable than ever.

This is the position Air France seems to be in despite the fact that the company does have a very good reputation and has already had to cope with tragic accidents (Mont Saint-Odile in 1992, Concorde in 2000). On these previous occasions, the company managed to get through these difficult periods by keeping strict control over its communications. With the AF447 crash, things are very different.

With due deference to the task in hand, we have tried to determine the factors inside the company, as well as the mechanics of public opinion, that made the first stage of this crisis so destabilizing for Air France.

It is no longer entirely true that the key to successful crisis management lies in the first few hours ...

Air France undoubtedly benefits from a very accomplished crisis management organisation. Due to the nature of its activities, the company has an entire dormant organisation capable of springing into action within seconds depending on the level of the alert. The company showed this as soon as the catastrophe was announced.

Mid morning on June 1st, when the Air France technical operations centre realised that flight AF 447 would never reach its destination, the company triggered its action plan to manage the first priorities: to look after relatives and issue initial information.

The families and friends of passengers were gathered away from the crowds in terminal T2 at CDG. This enabled to provide them with the specialist psychological support they required and protect them from the glares of the cameras already on site and keen to capture images of the distress caused by the tragedy. Footage was broadcast over and over on major news stations worldwide. At the same time, another support unit was convened to provide assistance to flight personnel and a free-phone number issued for anyone affected by the crash.

This was a colossal undertaking that the company had to accomplish within a very short time. It would have been impossible to do without advance preparation and a specialist crisis management organisation. Informing families or next of kin is a long and complex task especially when the airline often only has the passenger's mobile phone number. However, it is essential to move fast to meet the needs of families and respond to the demands of the authorities, media and employees, all while observing specific legal requirements.

It is the typical crisis situation where the company is under siege. It experiences a huge number of demands from all quarters, at the very moment when it needs to research, sift and analyse its own information to understand what has happened. The company must move quickly but will be discredited immediately if it delivers false information.

The company organised its first public statement on June 1st at 1pm with a press conference at Roissy with CEO, Mr Pierre-Henri Gourgeon. Given the scope of the crisis, he was the only credible spokesperson and there was no alternative to a press conference.

This was an incredibly difficult exercise for a CEO who had only just joined the Group (January 2009). Despite the emotion and trauma, the vast amount of information and innumerable theories - undoubtedly discussed with the crisis cell - he had to take the stage and adopt the right tone that showed empathy and a sense of responsibility.

This initial statement highlights Air France's control of crisis communications at this stage. By expressing the company's pain, by sticking to established facts, by stating that he would do everything he could to reveal the true causes of the crash, the CEO did everything he should have done in this type of situation.

The following day, one of the first press releases issued by the company concerned the 4000 employees who had spontaneously volunteered their services to help Air France manage this exceptional situation. It was a form of positive communication, to show that the entire company was pulling together. It's a reminder of the "storm of the century" in 1999,

when public opinion hailed EDF's ability to mobilise all its resources, even retired employees, to re-establish electricity supplies in the worst affected areas. What stronger show of solidarity can you give than retired employees rallying to give a helping hand?

During this first phase, Air France's management of the crisis is right on target in terms of its image: being responsible and staying close to hand.

Knowing or not knowing how to stop an emerging controversy

Although the early phases of the crisis seem to have been perfectly well managed, the company's position quickly comes under fire on issues that are at the heart of its reputation – safety and reliability. We have now reached the logical next step in a crisis scenario.

Most crises go through 3 phases: emotion, controversy and reason.

The challenge facing the company is how to contain the controversy before the small snowball becomes a major avalanche destroying everything in its path. In theory, a company has several alternatives when a controversy develops.

The first is to cut suspicions short by offering proof to back up their statements. For example, Air France quickly cut short rumours of a wave of resignations from cabin crews (hostesses and stewards) following the AF447 crash, suggested by an article published in 'Le Parisien' on July 1st 2009. The company responded quickly and provided proof that this was untrue. The rumour ended there.

The second possible strategy is to blame something or someone (supplier, public authorities, rogue employee, etc). To a certain degree, this is the strategy adopted by Société Générale in January 2008 with its trader Jérôme Kerviel. This crisis is not our fault, we are the victims of fraud. It's quite a risky technique, but it did allow Société Générale to slightly soften the blow of the crisis.

Finally, the third alternative is to immediately acknowledge the incident without trying to understate events and show that everything possible is being done to handle it. This involves adopting a much more open communications position to explain what is being done during the crisis. This was the strategy adopted in October 2005 by Michel-Edouard Leclerc, when thirty of his clients, including ten children suffered from severe food poisoning in South West France. The problem was caused by Leclerc's own-brand hamburgers. M.E Leclerc responded quickly and tackled the crisis head on without trying to blame his supplier, Soviba. On his blog, 'De quoi je me M.E.L,' (a play on words that also means mind your own business) he explained all the measures taken on

a near daily basis to keep consumers informed. By the end of the day on which Leclerc decided to withdraw the product, the supermarket had already contacted 90% of customers.

Often difficult for management to accept, this third option can be a company's salvation. While public opinion is prepared to accept that a company can make a mistake, it will never tolerate a company that doesn't know how to cope with it or attempts to conceal the truth.

When a company hesitates between strategies, it adds fuel to the controversy and its communications become inconsistent. But, a crisis situation will swiftly punish inconsistency. The slightest dissonance is very dangerous when everyone's attention is focused on you. This is exactly what happened at Air France.

Dissonance

The controversy arose over the circumstances of the crash. This is clearly the pivotal point. It is in the interests of the airlines and regulatory authorities to safeguard and control information concerning the enquiry. Enquiries must be carried out calmly in order to avoid following the wrong track and sparking wild rumours that could destabilize the company, the manufacturer and the authorities. This is something that Air France had always managed to do in the past. It is also true that past accidents (Mont Saint-Odile, Concorde) took place on French soil making it easier to control information concerning the enquiry.

In the case of the AF447 crash, questions were quickly raised about the Pitot tubes. And the crisis managed to sweep through this crack. Fuelled by information from former and current pilots, the media and numerous specialist sites revealed that several incidents in 2008 involving Pitot tubes, produced the same ACARS messages that preceded the AF 447 crash.

The media broadcast demands from certain pilots unions wanting to know why Air France had done nothing back in 2008 when Pitot tube problems first emerged. This issue received all the more coverage since Air France suffered by comparison with Air Caraïbes, which decided to upgrade all its Pitot tubes with immediate effect following an in-flight incident in 2008. Air France did not. The company followed the recommendations of Airbus, which in view of the problems told Air France that upgrading the Pitot tubes wouldn't make the slightest difference.

This decision to not replace the tubes, or to replace them too late – even if justifiable on a technical and regulatory level – is at total odds with the company's image as a very safe and reliable company. The company has not managed to bridge the gap between these perceptions. For example, one can sense the Air France CEO's uneasiness and difficulty in explaining the decision on the national evening news (France 2 8pm news) on June 11th 2009.

The arguments the company put forward to justify its decision not to replace the Pitot tubes immediately are lost in the face of pilot comments and the perception that they have a flexible approach to the principle of precaution. In fact, while the real situation is always much more complex on the inside than can be seen from the outside, it is the principle of precaution that drives public opinion today. It has become a standard view as a result of the vigorous promotion of the idea of risk prevention and public health policy by companies and the authorities for many years.

In the case of the Pitot tubes, whatever the real situation may be, it is difficult for the public to conceive that this sacred "principle of precaution" was not applied as soon as the first signs were detected. And, despite the company's explanations, what could be more credible to the public than the position taken by pilots on the issue of plane safety? Naturally, the public tend to have more faith in the people who fly the planes than in the CEO of Air France.

From the rolling news era to continuous debates on a variety of platforms

What can we learn from this controversy phase in terms of crisis management and communications? In the mid 80s, companies had to learn how to manage the emergence of rolling news channels like France Info, CNN, etc. It was a major revolution for companies to discover in times of crisis that their firm made news headlines every 15 minutes on radio and television stations. Now they also have to learn to accept that they will hear about an incident at their company at the same time as the public, and what is more, they will share with TV viewers the horror of the first pictures of the catastrophe. These are terrible situations, but companies now know how to manage them.

Today however, we have moved on from the rolling news era to the era of continuous debate on a variety of platforms. Companies have always been involved in debates, but the emergence of Web 2.0 has accelerated and amplified the debate. Every expert, journalist or ordinary member of the public can raise issues and express opinions, which then circulate widely and raise questions about the theory offered

by the company or authorities. In a way, it's a kind of open debate for everyone and with everyone.

As to the Pitot tubes, Air France was bombarded with information and counter analyses from specialist sites such as www.eurocockpit.fr. Some media such as www.lefigaro.fr organised special forums on the issue. Everyone is free to comment or develop their own theories on the crash etc... In the face of this influx of counter information and numerous internal Air France documents published in the newspapers and on the Net, the company must adopt a consistent and confident approach otherwise it will fail to support its arguments or convince. This has not always been the case.

Internal communications, internal communications, internal communications

In a crisis situation, decision-makers often focused on external pressures. Above all, crisis cells fear media pressure and the need to speak to camera – all of which are quite legitimate concerns. But, it's important not to forget internal pressures and to treat them with as much or even greater care than external pressures.

When top management are under the spotlight, they must prove to partners and employees that they are in control of the situation. Either they succeed and the crisis becomes an opportunity and management are consolidated in their position (except when the finger is pointed at them), or they stammer their way through the crisis and are instantly blamed. This paves the way for the scenario of extreme destabilization.

But during a crisis, and just like the media, employees' faith in management depends above all on the quality of the relationship between them. The better the relationship, the more management can hope to have employee support during the crisis and vice versa.

This may be what is happening at Air France. The pressure of the different pilot unions, via their communications, is above all about safety but it also reflects a power struggle and test of strength within the company. Crises have the knack of bringing hostilities to the surface however old (dating back to a merger or acquisition). And it is perhaps this too that is being revealed in the communications on the crisis that Air France is experiencing.

The company's internal communications team faces a huge challenge. In less than 10 years, Air France has experienced two horrific crashes (Concorde, AF 447). This has had a profound effect on the company, in particular through its employees who have lost friends and colleagues.

But in addition to the trauma, these employees are also presented with a total change of perception. Within the space of a few years, they've gone from being proud to work for one of the most reliable and efficient companies in the world, to having doubts about a company whose slightest technical incident is now examined in detail and reported in the media.

After the end of the iconic Concorde, which was the focus of pride for every employee; and the departure of former CEO Jean-Cyril Spinetta in January 2009 which, like every departure of this kind marks the end of an era; and the questions about the Pitot tubes and therefore indirectly about the company's safety policy; what common factor can employees hang on to and rally round even as new issues arise from the air transport crisis?

This is one of the major challenges that the company will have to tackle in terms of communications, and internal communications in particular.

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