What lessons can communicators learn from Malaysia Airlines flight MH370?

Helen Dunne reviews a lively breakfast discussion

CHRIS MCLAUGHLIN, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, INMARSAT

When this aircraft went missing, our customer SITA, one of two suppliers of connectivity to aircraft, rang up and said Can we have the data off the plane that you’ve got? And we said Yeah, of course. And that was the end of our involvement. We sent the information, and it comprised really the first hour and a half. It was very sad the plane was missing, but not our job. Sunday morning and the plane was still missing. Everyone had expected it to be found in the sea just off the coast of Vietnam somewhere. On Sunday afternoon, one of our engineers, who had been involved five years earlier with the Air France loss, felt that we should look at the network further to see if there was anything else that we could offer because nobody had any idea. He found that the aircraft was still sending out signals seven and a half hours after it had vanished. We kept delving, and by Monday morning it was absolutely clear that the aircraft had been powered up for a number of hours after it had gone missing. And there were implications for this.

Inmarsat is not the sort of culture where you just fire that off. We don’t do that. But by Wednesday, it was absolutely clear that all the numbers had proven out. That afternoon we shared with SITA that this plane had been in the air for seven and a half hours. And we waited. Nothing happened on Wednesday. And then it began, and the first leaks kicked off. And the media frenzy began. The Twitter frenzy began. And the first criticisms of Inmarsat began Why if they knew what they know, did they not tell us in the first place? Were they complicit with the CIA and others to deny that this plane had been hijacked? This pure speculation, as crisis management experts will advise, is something that you cannot engage with.

The process with our engineers went further. We’d given the path as either to the north or to the south based on a simple model. All that we were able to tell the Malaysians was that the plane was flying for seven and a half hours,
and it was moving away. The Malaysians were then able to tell their partners. You can imagine the geo-political challenges. You’ve got China interacting with anybody from Australia to the island states. You’ve got Vietnam. And you’ve got the Malaysian government and the Malaysian opposition party already jumping in. This was turning into a bit of a bear pit.

Within another 11 days of looking all the numbers, we’d done something very clever. Our engineers had asked a further question What would a path plot look like on a successful flight? We did a simple plot of a Malaysia Airlines 777 flying to Perth and a Malaysia Airlines 777 flying to Amsterdam against the plots. We found there was no fit to the north. So our view was that it didn’t go north, and that was the announcement made, after much checking. The exact words were agreed with the UK’s COBRA committee, the Prime Minister’s Office and the Department of Transport and the Malaysians. All of that became embroiled with We have trade relations with Malaysia, we don’t want the Malaysians to be embarrassed. Neither did we. We had trade relations with Malaysia. We had trade relations with everybody, especially with the Chinese, who were turning up on our doorstep saying Tell us where our people are. And all we could say was We don’t know. All we could say was The aircraft’s not been tracked. All we could say was We’re doing our best.

We went from peaceful little Inmarsat with 30 or 40 enquiries a week to over 1,800 a day. On one particular day, I did 19 hours non-stop back-to-back television and radio interviews. We got into a feeding cycle in which we decided that all we could tell was the truth and all we could be was a trusted voice. We opted never to speculate, never to be drawn into whether the Malaysians were competent or not, never to be drawn into whether the pilot had done it or not. And never to extend into areas in which we didn’t necessarily have information. We stayed boring and straight.

It was put to me by somebody on COBRA You’re not communicating as Inmarsat, you’re communicating as the UK. Yes, that’s right to an extent but from the outset our view was that we would not be silenced to the point of damaging our corporate reputation. We will say what we know and what we’re doing and we will say it clearly - no more than that - because, at the end of the day when all these people have moved on, where is Inmarsat going to be?

There are some dreadful chief executives who should never be allowed in front of a camera or microphone, and cannot be taught. Your job (as crisis communicators) is to distinguish those and work out who can speak with authority.

We decided that only Chris speaks. Nobody else speaks. Nobody goes on Twitter. Nobody goes on LinkedIn. Nobody blogs. Nobody speculates. We provided daily updates to all staff, including media coverage, so they could see and feel part of the process. If they received any questions from the media, we told them to send them to (the communications team) and that we would reply. We always cc’d the person who had sent the question in, so they could see that it had been dealt with. And actually what happened was a massive lift for Inmarsat employees. They all feel that they are now on the map, that Inmarsat did a good thing and they are proud of what we do.

ROD CLAYTON, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND CO-LEAD, GLOBAL ISSUES AND CRISIS, WEBER SHANDWICK When people do crisis planning, I think they sometimes get the objectives wrong. The objectives should not be to try to identify everything that could possibly happen because the reality is you can’t do that. You plan because you want to ensure that you have a sense of the range of possibilities. You plan because you then want to simulate crises to make sure that you have functionality in your team. But the key thing is to always imagine the unimaginable and assume that you could be confronted by something that you could not possibly have predicted. It seems to me, in this case, that there had not been the thought that something unimaginable could happen.

Ultimately, we all want to be judged, not on what happened, but on how we dealt with it. The problem in this case is, of course, there is nothing you can do in terms of what happened. There’s nothing you can do differently. There have been instances in the airline industry where there have been changes. For example, the Swissair flight that went down off Long Island (in 1998), the issue there was to do with power surges related to the on-board entertainment, which led to a lot of technical changes. But if it is, say, pilot suicide or terrorism, there aren’t systemic things that you can do differently. This is when leadership is very important. When TWA lost a plane (12 minutes after take off from JFK), its chief executive was in London and got on a plane to New York without saying anything. That leadership vacuum for several hours was devastating for the airline. (It collapsed five years later in 2001.)

It is important to think about the jurisdictions in which incidents happen. In the US, they still empanel grand juries and they have jury trials for everything unless both sides agree. I’ve dealt with cases where the companies – and I’m talking about Fortune 100 or 200 companies - are looking at damages potentially so huge that they will not be able to post bond to appeal if the jury comes up with a really huge number. That’s the reality for them, and you can understand why they have lawyers all over them.
Lawyers do not have a problem with the word ‘regret’; they have a problem with the word ‘sorry’. In the Malaysia Airlines situation, where the lawyers would not have a problem and where the leaders should be focused, is with sympathy. The fact is they lost people too. They lost family, not necessarily blood relatives. They lost their employees. And they also had a duty of care for the passengers. But it is sometimes difficult for leaders to convey emotion because they are so used to being dispassionate and professional.

Gavin Megaw, Director, Hanover

When you can’t get out there and talk, you do need third-party advocates doing it for you. There was certainly a gap in terms of people who could talk about the airline’s standards, everything from its brand all the way through to its practices on a general basis.

I’m always a great believer that when things go badly wrong with good companies, there’s more to it, there’s a background story. When BP was badly hit (in the aftermath of Deepwater Horizon), it wasn’t because of their immediate response. It was because they had a major reputational issue in the US for many years, around safety, leaks and other issues, which meant that, when they did have a problem, they were fair game. I do think there is more in the background with Malaysia Airlines. If you look at all the issues around mixed messages, even the text messages that were sent from the chief executive alerting the families that their loved ones were probably dead, and there seems to have been interference in terms of every element of crisis communications that came out of the airline. This airline is currently 69 per cent owned by the sovereign wealth fund of Malaysia. I believe that you had the chief executive and the operations team from Malaysia Airlines and then the government – the Civil Aviation Ministry, Transport Ministry, Department of Information, Prime Minister’s Office – all getting involved. As we all know when politicians get involved in a crisis, it becomes a nightmare. My advice is not to look at this as a case study of what is right or wrong, but to look at aspects that clouded judgments and the crisis management approach.

Sir Richard Branson is a great example of a leader who got it right in a crisis. When a Virgin Train crashed, he got in a helicopter (and flew to the site). He was advised by lawyers not to stand in front of the train and not to talk about Network Rail and the tracks. He stood in front of the train. He talked about how the tracks were suspect and he also talked about the driver being a hero. The media coverage was all about the driver being a hero plus the message Branson was pushing out – that it was the first-ever crisis for a Virgin transport business. He took control of the narrative.

Our job, as crisis managers, is to stop the process becoming the story. When process becomes the story, we’re dead because then it’s about us, and the story should never be about us. The problem when you have mixed messages, mixed personalities, different, competing egos and leaks, the process story will occur.

A vital part of crisis communications is to make sure the internal audience understands early on what you are saying yet they are so often ignored as companies focus on getting the message out to the external audience. They are big drivers of your reputation and they are big drivers of process stories. You need to keep them on side and up-to-date, to treat them as adults and give them as much information as possible but with the knowledge that it is probably all going to come out.

Christian Wolmar

Let me discuss an example I know well, the Ladbroke Grove train crash. There were several major mistakes there. Thirty-one people were killed, but at one point they were talking about 100 dead people inside a carriage and they couldn’t get to them. How did this come out?
John Mahony about? It came about because all the PR people were being far too careful. They were saying yes, it might be this in response to questions. But openness is the thing that journalists want. We want straightforward facts. No mumbling. No obfuscation. What were the barriers to openness? First of all, I think it was the culture of the organisation. Secondly, the police became involved. They are like politicians when they get involved; it’s a disaster area. They absolutely don’t want anything to come out, but then they start leaking and telling stuff off the record. And then there were the insurance companies and lawyers. Lawyers are there to advise you. They are not there to tell you what to do and what not to do. In situations like this, yes, there might be an issue around admitting fault, but there are ways around that. There are forms of wording that can be used. I think once lawyers take control, you lose humanity. That’s a huge mistake. You want your spokespeople to sound human, to sound open and not to read out legal statements.

Discipline is absolutely vital. You get the team together and say this is what we are going to do, and this is not what we are going to do. You want a tight controlled outlet, and to stop all speculation.

How many times does something minor become a problem because of the cover-up afterwards? It is so not often the incident, which people can accept, but the cover-up that causes the problems.

Relationships with journalists are vital. I have built up relationships with many press officers over the years but the best are those who do not stick to the party line and give the corporate guff. They speak to me as a human being, as somebody who they know is on the other side but who they will open up to. I am sure they get a better deal out of me — and I am somebody who does write critical stuff — and more balanced coverage than somebody who just feeds me the party line. And when a crisis occurred, they could use me as a conduit to say this is what really happened.

Corporates, in general, are really poor around expressing regret. We struggle hugely with the openness required to deliver regret, to capture that moment of emotion, of authenticity, of leadership, of language that allows people feel that you — as a business — care deeply about it. Often the reason that they cannot get to that moment is because lawyers say that regret equals an admission of fault. But regret is not an admission of fault. Regret is an expression of sympathy around an incident that has occurred. If you can actually get business leaders to unpick understanding regret and to step up to the plate and make that apparent, you start the situation from a position of strength. It is the moment you remember.

Think about what remedy looks like. For those of us in the crisis management world, understanding about when to talk about remedy and cure is also a key moment. Often we do it too early. Often we do it too late. But if you don’t get the cure piece right, then you have a problem. The issue for Malaysia Airlines is that there are hundreds of people under the ocean dead — bottom line. When you talk about cure in that environment, it is a very sensitive subject.

As communicators, when a crisis occurs, we push ourselves forward into the role of taking charge and we push leadership back. It will damage your reputation, people will perceive you in a difficult way. But they are there to step up to the plate. It is reputation leadership. And actually, we kind of make it about the process.

There is a requirement for leadership, but who you choose is the issue. Who is capable? Who is authentic? Who can deliver the message? You can argue whether it is the chief executive, the chairman or a specialist in the business, but people want to see leadership at the front of the organisation out there, doing it. It is not their natural terrain, but it is a requirement of the job. But we don’t train them to do that, actually. We don’t invest enough in reputation leadership for them to be very good at it.

[This discussion took place before the downing of Malaysia Airlines MH17]