

# Boeing's Responses To Its 737 MAX Crashes Lacks Empathy & Timeliness

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Boeing Chairman, President and CEO Dennis Muilenburg issued the following statement:

"First and foremost, our deepest sympathies are with the families and loved ones of those onboard Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302.

"Boeing continues to support the investigation, and is working with the authorities to evaluate new information as it becomes available. Safety is our highest priority as we design, build and support our airplanes. As part of our standard practice following any accident, we examine our aircraft design and operation, and when appropriate, institute product updates to further improve safety. While investigators continue to work to establish definitive conclusions, Boeing is finalizing its development of a previously-announced software update and pilot training revision that will address the MCAS flight control law's behavior in response to erroneous sensor inputs. We also continue to provide technical assistance at the request of and under the direction of the National Transportation Safety Board, the U.S. Accredited Representative working with Ethiopian investigator."

That statement was issued to the media on March 17 via

PRNewswire.

On April 4, the Boeing President and CEO issued a follow-up-up statement, also on PRNewswire that was also posted in a video statement on Twitter. Muilenburg said the manufacturer acknowledged the role of the software in the fatal crashes of Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302. both of which took place on the manufacturer's highly popular 737 MAX.

And that's one of the many problems with the way Boeing has handled its PR crisis.

By disseminating statements via electronic means, it gives the impression that the Boeing executives are fearful of answering unexpected media questions. While I don't advocate that a CEO of a company face the media in all PR crises, in a situation like this, high Boeing executives should have made themselves available to answer questions at a press conference.

After the second crash, Boeing should have voluntarily asked authorities to ground the planes until the cause of crashes were known and corrected. Especially damning was the news revealing that Boeing wanted to charge extra for an additional safety feature on the planes.

By utilizing controlled media to issue its statements, the PR responses to the crashes lack empathy. It was a business as usual response. This was a situation where human-to-human engagement was and is necessary. And the statements seemed like they came out of the PR crisis 101 playbook.

Also, because of Boeing's insistence for months that there was nothing wrong with its new software, whatever statements the company makes in the future will be questioned. As the New York Times reported on April 4, "Boeing dismissed concerns about a powerful new anti-stall system on the 737 Max for months, insisting that pilots could deal with any problems by following a checklist of emergency procedures."

Boeing finally admitted software fixes were necessary only when they were forced to after investigative reports became public. In my estimation, that was a major PR blunder. Doing so, positioned the company as untrustworthy.

If I was advising

Boeing, I would suggest the following:

- Convene a no-holds bar press conference.
- In addition to the CEO and other high ranking executives answering media questions, a detailed explanation should be provided about the investigation that Boeing is undertaking, where it stands today, the findings, and what safety precautions Boeing will take to make certain that that the planes are again safe to fly.
- Because this story will not fade away for years, Boeing should establish a media hotline for reporters writing follow-up stories. Doing so will assure that Boeing statements will be included in the stories.
  
- Updates on the progress of fixing the problems should be posted on Boeing's website once a week.
- Once the problem has been fixed, another press conference should be held, this time featuring

the individuals who have worked on correcting the problem.

- A series of one-on-ones with aviation beat writers of major pubs should be instituted after the problem is fixed.
- Also, a series of Op-Eds explaining Boeing's commitment to safety.
- A good corporate citizen program should be undertaken.

Frequently, when no loss of life or criminality is involved, I advise clients with a PR crisis to wait a day or two, sometime even a week, while the situation is being investigated before instituting a PR crisis response. That's because, history shows that depending on the situation, often the crisis disappears by itself.

In Boeing's case, keeping a low profile after the initial plane crash was not a bad strategy because the facts of the crash were not known. But once the results of the crash became known, Boeing should have taken the lead in the investigation and acted as a company whose first concern was the flying public's safety. Instead, by being forced to ground its plane, it acted like a company that put money above safety.

As with the the Exxon Valdez oil spill, in Alaska in 1989, the Boeing PR crisis will forever be part of public relations crisis history. It will take many years for the company to again be regarded as a caring corporate citizen. Whatever plans the company undertakes as it attempts to regain the public trust, the old hackneyed PR crisis playbook must be discarded. (It appears to me that it was used in the Boeing response.) New and bold thinking is necessary, because as I've

said for years, "There is no one size fits all PR crisis plan."

**About the Author:** Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr \(at\) juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com) and [artsolomon4pr \(at\) optimum.net](mailto:artsolomon4pr@optimum.net).

