

(2015 Top Post) Malaysia Airlines: A Lesson in Crisis Management

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If ever an airline has suffered from bad press it is [Malaysia Airlines](#). The airline has suffered two of the biggest air disasters in history in a period of four months – MH370 (which has yet to be found) and now [MH17](#) shot down by a missile over Ukraine by Russian backed separatists. Even before these twin disasters, the airline was suffering severe financial losses. Its crisis response to the disappearance of MH370 was one of the worst in history (with no cohesive communications plan and showing a lack of sympathy for the family members of the lost passengers). Now with this latest disaster, the questions are can the brand survive and what does it need to do?

Short term, the brand is being helped by the media coverage over the downing of MH17. The focus is not on Malaysia Airlines but rather on Russia and the separatists who are presumed to have shot it down. As outrage mounts over the tragedy and the way the Russian backed separatists are allowing access to the wreckage and the victims' remains, mention of Malaysia Airlines has been in passing. Also working in the airline's favor is that with acts of terrorism, most people are willing to focus their attention and anger on the perpetrators rather than the airlines. For instance after 9/11, neither United Airlines nor American Airlines suffered any brand damage despite the fact that it was their planes that were hijacked.

Additionally, Malaysia Airlines seems to have learned from its mishandling of the MH370 crisis. This time they promptly revealed all the information they had available when MH17

disappeared. The airline's social media carried the same message that was being given officially. The company also announced that they will be fully refunding anyone who booked a flight on the airline but no longer feels comfortable traveling on it.

So short term, the airline is surviving and has handled the crisis adequately. Yet the real test for Malaysia Airlines will be in the days and weeks ahead. As the stories begin to shift from the crisis in the Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, the West's response to Russia, and such, the focus will shift again to Malaysia Airlines. All the stories about MH370 will resurface and criticism about the airline will be intense as will scrutiny.

So what should Malaysia Airlines do?

1. Bring in an outside communications agency to work on the airline's short-term and long-term branding and crisis response. The airline has been reluctant to do so and it has shown in some of its responses.
2. Select a spokesperson that can show empathy and address concerns that consumers and the media have about the airline. This person needs to show not only the airline's record of overall safety but how they have taken the concerns about the airline seriously and the steps they are taking to correct these issues.
3. Malaysia Airlines needs to take out full-page ads in the newspapers in their top markets addressing the latest tragedy, expressing sympathy, and outlining where the airline will go from here.
4. Having former passengers interviewed and used in promotions expressing their confidence in Malaysia Airlines. One of the first things I noticed after the downing of MH17 was the support that many former passengers were expressing for the airline.
5. Having a social media strategy that reinforces the message that is being given in the traditional media.

Malaysia Airlines is in an unenviable position. It will take a strong cohesive crisis communications strategy and branding effort to change public perception but it can be done. Don't write off Malaysia Airlines just yet.

About the Author: David E. Johnson is the CEO of [Strategic Vision, LLC](http://www.strategicvision.biz), a public relations and branding agency that specializes in crisis communications, branding, and media relations. Additional information on Johnson and Strategic Vision, LLC may be obtained at www.strategicvision.biz.