

A CRISIS COMMUNICATION CASE STUDY OF AMERICAN
AIRLINES FLIGHTS 965, 1420, AND 587

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication and crisis response statements are vital in an organization's attempt to maintain a positive image. This study investigates crisis response strategies following American Airlines disasters. The framework for this study uses response strategies by Coombs. Research indicates various response strategies employed by those organizations that are confronted with a crisis. This study offers guidelines to assist the airline industry in crisis communication efforts.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Air travel has become such a norm in the Western world that either most Americans have traveled by air or have known someone who has. This mode of travel has run the course of time as both a positive and negative experience in journeys. History shows experiences in air travel can differ based on aircraft types, airlines, destinations, time and date, and weather. Once the traveler becomes airborne it could be a peaceful flight exploring Earth from 38,000 feet. This scenery at night could resemble a Lite-Brite game with the twinkling lights illuminating from below. On the other hand, air travel could also become stressful—from an overcrowded flight to unfamiliar noises and bumps at 38,000 feet while strapped in a tube next to a complete stranger. However, air travel is still recognized as not only statistically safe, but the safest way to travel compared to any other mode of transportation (www.boeing.com). For the last several years, accident and fatality rates have been declining (Fairbanks & Grabell, 2004). The decline is correlated with better equipment, technology, pilot training, and safety (Fairbanks & Grabell, 2004).

According to Boeing, 2004 statistical summary (www.boeing.com), the primary cause of air travel accidents by commercial jet fleet is indicated by: 56% flight crew, 17% airplane, 13% weather, 6% miscellaneous/other, 4% maintenance, and 4% airport or air traffic control. Since air accidents are inevitable, it is imperative that the airline industry respond strategically when they occur.

On Memorial Day weekend, May 25, 1979, at about 3:04 CST, American Airlines Flight 191 (DC-10 Aircraft) crashed just short of takeoff in an open field after departure from Chicago O'Hare International Airport, Illinois (NTSB, 1979 p. 1). The aircraft continued to climb in spite of the separation of the left wing and

engine that fell back toward the runway. Two hundred and fifty eight passengers and thirteen crewmembers died on-board, two people on the ground perished, and two others were injured (NTSB, 1979 p.1). The aircraft was destroyed on impact, which included an explosion followed by ground fire. The wreckage destroyed an old aircraft hanger, several automobiles, and a mobile home (NTSB, 1979 p.1).

American Airlines (AA) 191 was a tragedy compounded by a public relations' nightmare, and it became a disaster of surmounting obstacles. In 1979, American Airlines was trying to dominate the transatlantic routes, and McDonnell Douglas was manufacturing the DC-10 aircraft to compete against tough competitors such as Boeing. After the crash of Flight 191, American Airlines experienced internal conflict among their own employees; McDonnell Douglas lost millions of dollars in revenue, the entire fleet was grounded. Unfortunately at that time the NTSB and AA jumped to conclusion about the safety of aircraft. In the meantime, American Airlines showed monetary gains from the insurance company as well as a report surfaced claiming that AA was shredding important documents that identified the lack of AA maintenance which caused the accident (The History Channel, 2002). The NTSB determined that the cause of the accident was "the asymmetrical stall and the ensuing roll of the aircraft because of the uncommand retraction of the left wing outboard leading edge slats and the loss of stall warning and slat disagreements..." with contributing factors from the maintenance procedures of American Airlines (NTSB, 1979 p.1). Two months before the accident, Flight 191 underwent routine maintenance: the engine was removed using a forklift and then reattached; investigators believe this was the origin of the problem. What began as a small crack eventually brought down Flight 191 (Washburn, 1989). The traveling public was afraid of the DC-10 aircraft as a result of the crash. American Airlines and McDonnell Douglas pointed fingers at each other, trying to avoid blame for who was responsible for the accident. Initially, NTSB made claims that

a faulty bolt was the cause of the crash. This claim was dispersed by NTSB only two days after the crash. The claim resulted in a hasty conclusion with repercussions of false allegations assigned shortly thereafter (The History Channel, 2002).

Flight 191 was a classic example of a worse-case scenario for an aircraft accident. This aircraft accident was a learning experience for all involved. The NTSB now investigates everything fully and appropriately before the final findings are reported. American Airlines has set stronger standards for maintenance, and McDonnell Douglas experienced economic impact from the loss of the DC – 10 aircraft orders. This accident identified maintenance as a key player in the airline industry, and “cutting corners” could impact a catastrophic accident (The History Channel, 2002). Flight 191 validates the need for a very strategic crisis response strategy to be employed by companies in times of crisis. All players involved in Flight 191, including the NTSB, AA, and McDonnell Douglas, could have improved their industry if they had a crisis management plan in place, and adopted a crisis communication strategy by Coombs.

American Airlines (AA) was chosen by the author for multiple of reasons. American Airlines is the world’s largest United States’ commercial airline carrier, is considered one of the most profitable airlines in the industry, and has endured some of the worst aviation crashes in history. American Airlines has a notable crisis communication plan that other airline(s) respect as a superior model, according to John Hotard at AA Corporate Communications (Hotard, personal communication, February 15, 2006). Katie Fairbanks of the Dallas Morning News paper wrote, “American Airlines employees are following a plan that has been honed and practiced over decades“. American Airlines, unfortunately, has experienced commercial airplane crashes dating back to 1943. Each airplane disaster had a significant impact on how AA handled the crisis, and each one was a learning experience for the airline industry as a whole.

The author had access to public records supplied by the Corporate Communication department of American Airlines, and gained access to many of the company's press releases as an employee of American Eagle Airlines. Not only could this be seen as a limitation and a bias, but also as gaining insight and knowledge from a large corporation that would not be feasible to the general public.

The airline cases were selected by choosing accidents that were attributable to pilot error, weather, and mechanical problem. According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), most aviation crashes have more than one probable cause when the accident occurred, known as contributing factors.

American Airlines Flight 965 was included because the NTSB determined that the "captain and first officer committed a series of operational errors that led to the accident" (NTSB, 1995, p.29). American Airlines Flight 1420 was included because the NTSB deemed this accident as "flight crew's failure to discontinue the approach when severe thunderstorms, and their associated hazards to flight operation had moved into the airport area and the crew's failure to ensure the spoilers had extended after touchdown," with contributing factors also playing a vital role (NTSB, 1999, p. xii). The final airplane accident, American Airlines Flight 587, was determined by the NTSB to be due to "the in-flight separation of the vertical stabilizer as a result of the loads beyond ultimate design that were created by the first officer's unnecessary and excessive rudder pedal inputs" (NTSB, 2001 p. xi).

This study also reveals additional historical aspects of the company as related to a correlation of the past and the future. This overview includes both historical data concerning one crisis to another, and also the response and adequate preparation as required to meet the demands of such tragedies included in this study.

American Airlines History

History reveals American Airways as a small mail route developed by a young pilot named Charles A. Lindbergh on April 15, 1926. He flew a small bag of mail in his biplane from Chicago bound for St. Louis (www.aa.com). Soon Lindbergh proposed a United States airmail contract. After several negotiations and consolidations of 82 small airlines, The Aviation Corporation was formed. On January 25, 1930, four holding companies were combined and became American Airways (www.people.memphis.edu). In 1933, American Airways began flying an 18-passenger Curtiss Condor, with an on-board stewardess (www.people.memphis.edu). American Airways presented the first in-flight meal service in 1934 followed by the first hot meal in 1935 (www.aa.com). In 1934, American Airways became American Airlines (AA) (www.people.memphis.edu). On May 13, 1934 C.R. (Cyrus Rowlett) Smith became president of American Airlines (www.people.memphis.edu). C.R. Smith believed the future was in passenger travel, thus AA developed one of the first air traffic control systems, Air Traffic Control, Inc. (www.people.memphis.edu). By June 1936, American Airlines was the first airline to fly a Douglas DC-3 in commercial air travel. By February 1937, American Airlines carried its one-millionth passenger (www.aa.com). American Airlines made its first profit in 1938 and became the top domestic airline for 'total passenger miles flown' (www.people.memphis.edu).

By 1939, American Airlines began trading on the New York Stock Exchange (www.people.memphis.edu). Near the end of the 1950's AA was the first airline to offer coast-to-coast, nonstop jet service (www.aa.com). In the 1980's AA offered the first frequent flyer program, AAdvantage (www.aa.com). By May 1982, "stockholders approved a plan for reorganization and a new holding company was formed, AMR Corporation, which became the parent company of American Airlines, Inc" (www.aa.com). By the end of 2001, American Airlines acquired TWA and became the largest commercial airline in

the United States. American Airlines was soon the largest domestic carrier and one of the most profitable airlines of the century.

On September 11, 2001 two AA aircrafts were hijacked and crashed during the terrorist attacks in the United States. The terrorist attacks also damaged AA's financial stability. Since the 9-11 attacks, every airline in the country has experienced financial difficulty. The airline industry has begun to restructure as a whole. Several legacy airlines declared bankruptcy during the following years, while other airlines tried to remain afloat. American Airlines remains optimistic and is continuing to fight against the odds to produce a profit. Since the early twenties, American Airlines has survived the turn of the century and has set a standard for all other airlines to follow. American Airlines has begun a restoration of the airline to regain a profit by reorganizing its fleet, workforce, and company. American Airlines is still the US largest airline and continues to reduce spending costs while remaining true to its passengers.

To more fully understand the relationship between American Airlines and there is a need to begin with a literature review focusing on a crisis definition and crisis communication, which will lead to a detailed case description of each accident. Next, crisis strategies and Coombs typology are examined. Then, the data will be examined following a discussion of the findings. Last, a discussion of limitations and future research will be included.

Crisis Communication

Crisis has become a common phenomenon because daily media reports concentrate on the most current tragedy as the news story. Because, a disaster or crisis does not discriminate among countries, religions, ethnic backgrounds, or organizations. Disasters are part of life because accident preparedness is a vital link between crisis communication in today's society.

There are several definitions for crisis; this study will adopt the definition by Ruff and Aziz (2003, p. 3): “a crisis is any incident or situation, whether real, rumored or alleged, that can focus negative attention on a company or organization internally, in the media or before key audiences.” Most organizations are under the assumption that crises are unpredictable events, but according to Ruff and Aziz most crises are predictable and expected (2003, p. 3). There are two crisis categories: crises that are ‘simmering’ and crises that are ‘sudden’. A simmering crisis is just underneath the organization’s surface and could explode at any rate (Ruff & Aziz, 2003, p. 3). Simmering crises are those that are predicted and expected, and if the organization can identify the warning signs that lead to a simmering event, then the crisis can be detained and managed in an effective way. Such crisis could include Hurricane Katrina in 2005, The Exxon Valdez oil spill, and Columbine. Those crises that are unpredictable are referred to as ‘sudden’. This could include emergencies, accidents, and terrorism, such as TWA Flight 800, Challenger explosion, and 9-11. Coombs (1999) developed a list of crises that can be defined as sudden crisis: “Natural Disasters, Malevolence, Technical Breakdowns, Human Breakdowns, Challenges, Megadamage, Organizational Misdeeds, Workplace Violence, and Rumors” (p.61).

Natural disasters can be described as weather damage or acts of God (Coombs, 1999, p.61). This could include earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and bad storms. If a commercial airline was to experience a crisis such as lightning striking the aircraft during a thunderstorm resulting in damage to the aircraft, an example of a natural disaster.

Malevolence is defined as “when some outside actor or opponent employs extreme tactics to express anger toward the organization or to force the organization to change” (Coombs, 1999, p. 61). This could include product

tampering, kidnapping, rumors, terrorism, and espionage. American Airlines experienced this on September 11, 1999, when terrorist hijacked two aircrafts.

A technical breakdown occurs when the technology fails. This could include industrial accidents, software failures, and product recalls. Such as faulty tires, like the Firestone tire, indicates a major product recall because the tread would separate from the tires, causing a roll over accident in the sports utility vehicles.

Human breakdowns occur when human error causes the event. This could include industrial accidents and product recalls due to human error. An example might be in the form of a mechanic not properly repairing a part on some type of machinery that could lead to an accident.

Challenges are defined by “the organization as being confronted by discontented stakeholders” (Coombs, 1999, p.61). This would include boycotts, strikes, and protests. Commercial airlines experience this crisis when employees strike to challenge the airline.

Megadamage develops when an accident causes environmental damage. This would include oil spills and radioactive contamination. A noteworthy case would be the 1989 Exxon-Valdez oil spill off the coast of Alaska that became known as the most damaging oil spill in the history of the United States, along with being the most expensive one.

Organizational misdeeds occur when the organization takes action that could harm the stakeholders. This would include a moral or illegal act by management. Additional research reveals the effects of the controversial Enron scandal with its home base in Houston, Texas. Today, this powerhouse is reduced to rubble with litigation finding misdeeds abounding in greed within this company’s boardrooms, which seems contributed to the company’s downfall.

Today, the illegal people are being tried in the court system to determine who is guilty of the illegal acts.

Workplace Violence happens when “an employee or former employee commits violence against other employees on organizational grounds” (Coombs, 1999, p.61). Additional findings are people who have been wronged by the use of discrimination language or jokes used in a workroom setting.

The final crisis event is named as rumors. This occurs when incorrect information is distributed about the organization and/or products. Rumors tarnish and damage the organization’s image and reputation. These rumors could alter the organization in the eyes of the public and stakeholders.

This study will focus on Coombs’ list of sudden crisis. The aircraft accidents will fit into these categories: Flight 965 is considered human breakdown; Flight 1420 is considered natural disasters; and Flight 587 is considered technical crisis.

CHAPTER II

CASE DESCRIPTIONS

National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)

The following aviation case descriptions are from the official investigation conducted by the NTSB, thus a description of the NTSB seems warranted. The NTSB was established in 1967 by Congress through the Independent Safety Board Act of 1974. The board was established to research transportation accidents, such as aviation, railroad, highway, marine, pipeline, and hazardous material (www.NTSB.gov). During the investigation process the NTSB determines “probable cause of the accident, issues safety recommendations, studies transportation safety issues, and evaluates the safety effectiveness of government agencies involved in transportation” (www.NTSB.gov).

American Airlines 965

On December 20, 1995, at about 9:42 EST, American Airlines Flight 965 crashed in Cali Colombia (NTSB, 1995, p.3). The Boeing 757 left Miami, Florida en-route to Cali, Colombia and crashed into the summit of El Deluvio. Flight 965 crashed killing 159 of the passengers and crew on board, four passengers survived (NTSB, 1995, p.3). The airplane was destroyed on impact. The captain, the non-flying pilot, had been employed with AA since 1969 and had acquired 13,000 hours of flying time. The first officer, the flying pilot of the aircraft had been employed with AA since 1986 and had logged 5,800 hours of flying time (NTSB, 1995, p.5). This accident was investigated by The Aerocivil of Columbia and the NTSB, because the accident occurred in an international territory.

The investigation of Flight 965 was difficult for both American Airlines and the NTSB because the investigation was at a summit of 8,900 feet above sea level. The NTSB could not properly secure the site, thus large quantities of

people climbed the summit and began filtering through the wreckage (NTSB, 1995 p.5).

American Airlines 1420

On June 1, 1999 at about 11:50 CST, American Airlines Flight 1420 crashed during landing at Little Rock National Airport in Little Rock, Arkansas (NTSB, 1999, p.1). The McDonnell Douglas MD-80 departed Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (DFW), Texas, en-route to Little Rock, Arkansas (LIT) with 2 flight crewmembers, 4 flight attendants, and 139 passengers on-board the aircraft (NTSB, 1999, p.1); the flight trip paperwork indicated that scattered thunderstorms to severe thunderstorms were evident from DFW to Little Rock was reported by American Airlines weather advisory. The captain was hired by AA in 1979, and was the flying pilot in charge of flight 1420. Flight 1420 was somewhat routine; the captain and first officer, hired by AA in 1999, had flown together previously and were confident about proceeding to Little Rock despite the weather. The first officer stated, in a post-accident interview, “there was no discussion of delaying or diverting the landing” because of the weather (NTSB, 1999, p.2). After the aircraft touched down in Little Rock, the first officer stated “we’re down” and about two seconds later he stated, “we’re sliding” (NTSB, 1999, p. 6). A report conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board concluded that, “after departing the end of the runway, the airplane struck several tubes extending outward from the left edge of the instrument landing systems, located 411 feet beyond the end of the runway; passed through a chain link security fence and over a rock embankment to a flood plain, located approximately 15 feet below the runway elevation; collided with the structure supporting the runway approach lighting system” (NTSB, 1999, p. 1). The aircraft was destroyed by post-crash fire and impact forces (NTSB, 1999, p. 1). Eleven people were killed including the captain. One hundred and eight people received serious or minor injuries, and 24 people were uninjured (NTSB, 1999, p.1).

Flight 1420 was a unique and devastating accident. It was unique because the accident was weather related with contributing factors of the flight crew's fatigue and decisions on landing. Unfortunately, it is unique because of the loss of life on board as well as the heroes and survivors of the impact. This accident gained extensive media attention because several survivors witnessed this event and became heroes in the eyes of the public.

American Airlines 587

At about 9:16 a.m. on November 12, 2001, American Airlines Flight 587 crashed in Belle Harbor, New York shortly after takeoff from John F. Kennedy International Airport (NTSB, 2004, p.1). Flight 587, an Airbus A300-600 which left JFK bound for Santo Domingo's Las Americas International Airport, crashed—killing all 260 people on board. Among the dead were two flight crewmembers, seven flight attendants and 251 passengers (including five infants), and five people on the ground (NTSB, 2004, p.1).

Flight 587 transpired at the worst possible time for both American Airlines and New York City. Two months prior to this accident, the world was forever changed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The impact of Flight 587 created additional horror and shock throughout the country, resulting in an extreme layout of publicized accounts resulting from another aircraft tragedy.

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What crisis response strategies did American Airlines use after the crashes of American Airlines Flights: 965, 1420, and 587?

RQ2: Did the crisis response strategies change from one crisis to another with the American Airlines Flights 965, 1420, and 587 crashes?

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Three-Stage Model of Crisis

Three-Stage Model of Crisis involves three distinct stages of crisis: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) this model is not affiliated with any one theorist but a mixture from several researchers.

The pre-crisis stage is normal operations of the organization before the onset of the trigger (simmering) event (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 97). When a crisis develops, the first response by the organization is to control the situation and the facts that are being collected (Daugherty, 1992, p. 51). The organization needs to handle the immediate demands of the crisis. The crisis stage embroil the simmering events until 'near' normal operations have begun (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 97). During this stage, extreme emotions appear which include stress, fear, anger, and shock (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 99).

The crisis stage begins when harm is being experienced in many forms and not only hurts the organization but also the stakeholders (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 99). During this stage the organization's profitability, stability, and reputation can be damaged (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 100).

The last stage, post-crisis, is the recovery and the learning stage of the tragedy. Post-crisis is when the investigation begins to determine why, how, and who is to blame, and what should be done to correct the problem (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p.101). This is the time for evaluating and analyzing how the organization handled the crisis (Daugherty, 1992, p. 77). The post-crisis stage is also responsible for 'restoring or protecting one's reputation' (Seeger,

Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p.101). This stage is also when the recovery efforts and cleanup begins, and rebuilding takes place along with heroes and leaders being recognized (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p.101-102).

Crisis Management Plan (CMP)

Studies have shown the need for a crisis communication plan to be initially constructed before the crisis hits the organization; development of this plan should begin in the pre-crisis stage. One of the most important components in constructing a crisis communication plan is to know the organization (Dougherty, 1992, p.3.). What product(s) are produced, what type of customers use the organization, what type of history does the organization hold, and what are the organizational goals and/or mission statement? (Dougherty, 1992, p. 3) It is extremely important to understand an organization's method of communication in the event of a crisis. Crisis Management Teams (CMT) are people inside the organization who are prepared to help with the crisis and make decisions within a group (Coombs, 1999, p.63). The CMT is also responsible for developing and maintaining a crisis management plan (CMP). The CMT designates a spokesperson to be the voice of the organization during the crisis (Coombs, 1999, p. 71). Most organizations need to have more than one spokesperson because a crisis is a 24-hour job and needs constant attention. No matter how much attention you give a crisis, it will never maintain the voice of the organization. A spokesperson also needs to have four components according to Coombs (1999, p.73). These components are pleasant on camera, answer questions effectively, present crisis information clearly, and can handle difficult questions.

It is vital that the spokesperson appears pleasant on camera; to have a clean appearance, show concern and compassion while communicating the message to the audience. In addition a spokesperson is an effective communicator in answering difficult questions as presented from the public. This

spokesperson needs to retrieve information accurately, relay it quickly to the media, and know how to handle the stress of the crisis (Coombs, 1999, p. 73). The spokesperson must be able to present the crisis information clearly and precisely by using non-technical terms or jargon. The last component is the ability to answer difficult questions by understanding tricky and complicated questions posed by the media. The crisis management team also needs to develop a crisis management plan (CMP) and communicate this plan to everyone involved during the crisis. Coombs (1999) identifies fifteen sections of a CMP (p. 79-83).

1. Cover page
2. Introduction
3. Acknowledgements
4. Rehearsal dates
5. Crisis management team
6. CMT contact sheet
7. Crisis risk assessment
8. Incident report
9. Proprietary information
10. CMT strategy worksheet
11. Secondary contact sheet
12. Stakeholders contact worksheet
13. Business resumption plan
14. Crisis control center
15. Post crisis evaluation

The fifteen sections are critical to maintaining and developing a CMP. The cover page, introduction, and acknowledgement provide information as to what is in the CMP, how to maintain the CMP, and the importance and relevance of the

CMP with employee signatures (p.80). Rehearsal dates are recorded when a training session has taken place. Next, the crisis management team (CMT) uses the contact sheet, which is a list of individuals in charge. The crisis risk assessment outlines what crisis may arise in the organization. Incident report and propriety information documents what happened during the crisis and what information needs to remain confidential to protect the organization. The strategy worksheet is a reminder to the CMT members of what actions need to be taken and what audiences the members must address. The secondary and stakeholders' sheet are contact lists of various CMT's and stakeholders who may need to be contacted depending on the crisis. Finally, the business resumption plan identifies how an organization will begin "business as usual" if the crisis interferes with the operations of the organization. The crisis control center is where the team is activated. Finally, the post crisis evaluation—evaluating the crisis after it is over by reviewing the strength and weakness of the CMP and CMT (Coombs, 1999, p. 80-83).

During a crisis the organization needs to recognize their internal and external stakeholders, could includes customers, competitors, employees, hospitals, government, and others in their surroundings or communities (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003. p. 6). According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003), a stakeholder is any group that has an interest in the organization. Daugherty (1992) composed a list to further define the stakeholders into enabling publics, functional publics, normative publics, and diffused publics (p.15). Enabling publics maintain the power and authority over the organization's resources. This includes agencies, local community, leaders, board of directors, and shareholders (p.15). Functional publics supply the organization with labor or service, and consist of employees, unions, and consumers. Normative publics have a shared value of the problem and consist of professional organizations and political groups. Diffused publics emerge during the crisis and are not members of the organizations. Diffused publics include the press and local citizens. Once

the public and stakeholders have been identified, the communication channels will be utilized more efficiently to get the message out to the public.

Crisis Communication Strategy

Crisis communication research is thriving in today's world. Crisis communication is not only well defined, but it also is being practiced through guidelines developed and adopted by organizations. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) sum up crisis communication by stating that, "communication is an ongoing process that enables organizations to monitor their environments before and during a crisis, to understand and respond appropriately, to construct a consistent interpretation, and to resolve the crisis and reestablish order" (p. 65). The major component of crisis communication is what the organization says and does after a crisis hits, known as the crisis response statement (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Crisis communication strategies are the responses an organization issues following a crisis (Coombs, 1999, p. 114). What an organization does and says after a crisis can positively or negatively affect the reputation or image of the company. "An organization's image or persona serves to identify the organization for publics and also to guide their responses to it" (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994).

According to Coombs (1999), communication does affect how the stakeholders perceive the crisis; thus the situation influences the selection of the crisis strategy. Crises are a threat to organizational image thus crisis management tries to restore the image (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). Organizational image is found in the rhetorical concept of apologia (Coombs, 1998). Apologia identifies how an organization defends their image from public scrutiny (Coombs, 1998). Since a crisis threatens reputations, it was believed that organizations would use apologia strategies to defend their reputations (Coombs, 1999). Image can be interpreted in many ways, but according to Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994), image can be a "value oriented interpretation...of some part of the world"

or a “composition of people’s attitudes and beliefs.” A study conducted by Baskin and Arnoff (1988) states that an image not only consists of the public’s perceptions, but also those images that encourage publics to act in particular ways. Images are “formed in the minds of customers, citizens, employees, volunteers, investors, or regulators, not simply through official statements of the organization, but through all activities” (Baskin & Arnoff, 1988). Berg (1985) defined organizational image as “shared understanding of what the organization is all about and how it should operate.” An organization’s image is important because images are related to members’ and nonmembers’ responses to an organization (Treadwell & Harrison, 1994). Images provide valuable information about the character of the organization.

The present study will adopt the definition of image constructed by Treadwell and Harrison (1994), who concluded that organizational image, is “a set of cognitions, including beliefs, attitudes, as well as impression about the organizationally relevant behaviors that a person holds with respect to an organization.” There are five strategies developed by Coombs (1995) to respond to a crisis strategies that were developed from attribution theory and grounded in Allen and Caillouet’s (1994) “synthesis of impression management strategies”. A crisis communication strategy has both verbal and nonverbal dimensions (Coombs, 1995). In other words, crisis strategies involve the “verbal (words) and nonverbal (actions) words the organization adopts during a crisis” (Coombs, 1999). The organization needs to take into consideration their accepted strategies to use depending upon the target audience, the type of crisis, the evidence available, the severity of the damage, the organization’s performance history, and any legal issues (Coombs, 1999). The strategy choice must be consistent with the type of damage created by the crisis (Stephens, et al. 2005). Coombs’ model is defined as follows: nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering (Coombs, 1995).

The nonexistence strategies try to abolish the crisis (Coombs, 1995). If no crisis exists, there will be no reason to associate a negative image with the organization. The objective is to determine that there is no link between the crisis and the organization (Coombs, 1995). There are four nonexistence strategies: denial, clarification, attack, and intimidation. Denial concludes nothing significant happened—no crisis. Clarification identifies with the denial response, but includes the justification and why there is no crisis. Attack consists of a hostile strategy, “which confronts those who wrongly report that the nonexistent crisis exists.” Intimidation is extremely hostile and suggests using power against some actor involved in the nonexistent crisis (Coombs, 1995). Lawsuits and physical violence could be forms of intimidation.

The distance strategy accepts the crisis and tries to develop public awareness while diminishing the association between the crisis and the organization (Coombs, 1995). The two distance strategies are excuse and justification. Excuse involves “minimizing the organization’s responsibility for the crisis” (Coombs, 1995). There are two parts to the excuse tactics, denial of intention and denial of volition (Coombs, 1995). This tactic may include scapegoating. Justification includes “minimizing the damage associated with the crisis” (Coombs, 1995). The organization tries to convey that the crisis is not that bad, considering it could be worse or was not as bad as a previous crisis (Coombs, 1995). Justification responses include “denying the seriousness of an injury, claiming that the victims deserved what happened, and claiming that the crisis event has been misrepresented” (Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

The ingratiation strategy tries to determine a public approval for the organization (Coombs, 1995). Public approval is identified by linking the organization to positive aspects. There are three aspects to ingratiation strategy, bolstering, transcendence, and praising others. Positive aspects are considered,

bolstering which may include charities, fair work treatment, and donations (Coombs, 1995).

Transcendence tries to identify the crisis in a positive, more desirable light (Coombs, 1995). The crisis is described as a goal that the public accepts.

The last ingratiation strategy is praising others, “and is used to win approval from the target of the praise” (Coombs, 1995). The praise will contribute to the group liking the organization (Allen & Caillouet, 1994).

The mortification strategies attempt to “win forgiveness of the public and to create acceptance for the crisis” (Coombs, 1995). Three mortification strategies are remediation, repentance, and rectification. Remediation offers some type of reimbursement or help for the victims (Coombs, 1995). Repentance involves asking for forgiveness. The negative aspects should be decreased as the public accepts the apology and forgives the organization (Coombs, 1995). Repentance would include a full apology to the public. Rectification involves preparing for action to prevent a reoccurrence of the crisis.

The suffering strategy is used to create sympathy from the public: a positive view instead of a negative link (Coombs, 1995). According to Coombs, (1995) “suffering portrays the organizations as an unfair victim of some malicious, outside entity.”

The crisis response strategy will help to protect the organization’s reputation and future interactions with stockholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). According to Coombs and company, “the crisis response statement shapes perceptions of the crisis and the organization in the crisis.” The nonexistence, distance, and suffering strategies all attempt to influence attributions publics make about the organization responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 1995). The mortification and ingratiation strategies identify the positive impression of the organization rather than negative aspects.

The initial crisis response, according to Coombs, (1999) is the first public response administered to the public from the organization. The crisis response should be “quick, consistent, open, sympathetic, and informative (Coombs, 1999). A quick response represents control when the organization responds quickly, and the organization appears to be in control of the crisis (Coombs, 1999). According to Coombs (1999) control also represents credibility. A fast initial response creates the idea of a crisis controlled by a credible organization (Coombs, 1999). The organizations must speak with one voice to enforce the consistency of the response (Coombs, 1999). Speaking with one voice is defined as “coordination of the efforts of the official spokespersons and discouraging other organizational members from becoming unofficial spokespersons” (Seitel, 1983). Consistency helps establish the credibility of the initial response, thus becoming more believable (Coombs, 1999). Therefore, Coombs (1999) describes consistency as the “openness as the availability to the media, willingness to disclose information, and honesty.” Sympathy should be communicated during the initial crisis statement. The spokesperson needs to express concern for the victims who are those individuals who have suffered physically, mentally, or financially from the crisis (Coombs, 1999). Compassion is closely related to credibility and trustworthiness of the organization (Coombs, 1999). Expressing sympathy and compassion would create the image of a trustworthy and credible organization. Once the organization has expressed sympathy, it does not necessarily mean the organization admits responsibility for the situation (Coombs, 1999). Once a crisis has been identified, the stakeholders want immediate information on what has happened and how the crisis will affect them (Coombs, 1999). According to Sturges (1994), “there are several types of instructing information: the what, when, where, why, and how information about the crisis; stakeholders need to be told if there is anything they themselves need to do to protect themselves from the crisis, and last stakeholders should be told what is being done to correct the problem” (p.28).

Data

The data of this study will primarily focus on how American Airlines responded to each aircraft accident and if the strategies changed from one accident to another. The following will specifically focus on the AA press release and the media reports from two major newspapers. Other materials consist of the following:

1. Press Releases from American Airlines
2. Crisis Response Plan from American Airlines
3. CARE Team Procedures
4. Media Reports
5. National Transportation Safety Board Reports

Press Releases from American Airlines

Press releases are defined in a letter from American Airlines and quoted statements from an AA representative. The noted press releases are as follows in their entirety as released to the media and in chronological order. Also indicated in the inclusion are: phone numbers for family members about the AA flight that crashed, the statement from the CEO of AA, the partial and final passenger lists after next of kin had been notified, aircraft facts, aircraft maintenance, and various information that AA released to help identify the cause of the accident.

Crisis Response Plan

The crisis response plan from AA was last updated in May 2005. Some of the information in the response plan may not have been in place during past aviation accidents. This information was supplied by the Cooperative Communications department at American Airlines, to determine hour-by-hour crisis action. There are two major players identified in the hour-by-hour scenario, the Media element and the Operations element. The Media element is

concentrating on the media while the Operations focuses on what is happening at the crash site.

Hour One

American Airlines will assemble a Media Response Team, during the first fifteen minutes. American Airlines will issue an initial release which is a confirming release. Next AA will issue an additional release with added details that will be released ASAP (as soon as possible). American Airlines will also direct media advisory to Headquarters (Fort Worth, Texas). American Airlines will determine who handles the local and network television interviews. American Airlines will begin television interviews at Headquarters, will begin to establish a strong liaison with the media, and will begin to prioritize documents and ensure proper content of the documents. In Operations (field work), Go-Teams are being alerted and mobilized; CARE (Customer Assistance Relief Effort) members are being assigned, briefing areas are being set-up, assigning a passenger list coordinator is assigned, a designated writing/speechwriting team is confirmed, identify flight matter experts, coordinate with labor unions, issue initial CEO statement, and establish an open phone line to System Operations Center (SOC).

Hour Two

American Airlines will issue a follow-up news release with an updated status and prepare the CEO for a media briefing. Corporate Communications will also begin monitoring and analyzing news coverage. The company will also continue doing interviews at Headquarters, ensure the media response is in high gear, maintain liaison with media, and begin considering network television requests. In Operations, a time is being scheduled for a CEO briefing, Go-Teams are getting ready for a launch to the site, and Corporate Communications determine where the site will be set. Also, determining the status of the passenger list, the CEO statement is complete and ready for the media.

Corporate Communications is also deciding if and when the CEO will go to the site, the crisis website is being updated, and ensure Flight experts are available, the CARE teams covered, and keep domestic and international offices updated.

Hour Three

The Media group is conducting a CEO briefing in Headquarters, and issues a follow-up news release with latest details. Corporate Communications is also watching for disturbing media trends and prepares to counter. In Operations, Corporate Communications is being established at Origination and Destination cities, determining the status of the passenger list and when the full or partial list can be released. The company is also drafting a CEO statement for site visit if appropriate, the crisis web site is updated, CARE team updates are provided, and continue to keep domestic and international offices informed.

Hour Four

The media aspect is monitoring local and network coverage, conducting local and network television interviews, and addressing network news show request. The company begins to prepare for second day story issues and to counter negative media story lines. The Operations aspect begins with Go Team arrival at site and sets up command center, establishes media contact, and NTSB contact. Also, determine the status of the passenger list including full or partial list is refined, continuing CARE coverage, ensure origination and destination cities properly coverage by AA representative, and determine if CEO will visit site. Also, AA begins the logistics on a memorial service, and how to thank local organizations for their support. American Airlines also update the crisis website and keep domestic and international offices informed.

CARE Team Procedures

In 1993, CARE was created. Customer Assistance Relief Effort (CARE) is a program created by American Airlines to assist passengers and their families with their immediate needs after an accident or major incident

(www.jetnet.aa.com). The CARE team consists of 1,200 specialists who are trained volunteers from American Airlines, American Eagle, and other AMR subsidiaries (www.jetnet.aa.com). When the CARE team is activated, volunteers are notified immediately. The volunteers are assigned to serve as a liaison between the airline, the passengers and their families. Once assigned to a family, CARE team members stay with that family for as long as their assistance is needed and appropriate (www.jetnet.aa.com). The CARE team does not perform counseling duties.

Media Reports

The media reports consist of two major newspapers that reported the aircraft accidents, *The Dallas Morning News* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Dallas Morning News* was chosen because American Airlines Headquarters is located in Fort Worth, Texas, and the *Dallas Morning News* covered extensively all of the mentioned aircraft accidents. The *Chicago Tribune* was chosen because it is a major news source and to give balance to this analysis.

National Transportation Safety Board Reports

The aircraft accident reports were examined and published by the NTSB. Once the investigation has begun every aspect of the aircraft and/or airline is under an exhaustive investigation, which could include: (list is not exclusive)

1. Personal information of the Captain, First Officer, and the Flight Attendants
2. Airplane Information, such as maintenance records, weight and balance information, and previous flights on the day of the accident
3. Meteorological Information, such as airport weather information, National Weather Service Information, and American Airlines weather information
4. Airport Information, such as runway location
5. Air Traffic Control Tower Information

6. Flight Recorders, such as, Cockpit Voice Recorder, and Flight Data Recorder
7. Wreckage and Impact Information

The investigation could take months or even years and the NTSB is the entity in charge. The NTSB also mandates recommendations that will be enforced by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) (NTSB, p.171, 1999).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

American Airlines 965

It was five days before Christmas when Flight 965 crashed into a mountain and 159 people perished, five people survived the accident, and one dog survived which was still inside the cargo container. American Airlines had a tragedy, but not just any tragedy: one in an international territory on top of a summit. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the Cali Radio Caracol quoted as saying, “they saw the plane crash and a large explosion in the Andes Mountains outside Cali” (Chicago Tribune, 1995). A majority of the passengers were Colombians traveling to see their families during the holiday season (Chicago Tribune, 1995). Several passengers were United States citizens, and the State Department was struggling to find the exact number of United States casualties because many of the passengers held dual citizenships (Chicago Tribune, 1995). According to the NTSB, this was American Airlines’ first international aircraft accident that was considered fatal. (www.nts.gov). American Airlines appeared to issue 12 press releases to the media and the public regarding Flight 965.

American Airlines Response to Flight 965

December 21, 1995

The first American Airlines’ press release (1995) confirms that, “AA lost contact with Flight 965 en route from Miami to Cali, Columbia, reports indicate that the aircraft is down somewhere in the vicinity of Buga, but that has not been confirmed” (p.1). This statement indicates that AA is declaring the instructing information, a full disclosure about the crisis. American Airlines indicates what has happened, when, and the location. The release states that AA will not speculate about the possible cause and that AA is working closely with U.S. NTSB, U.S. State Department, and local Colombian officials. This statement is

using rectification by taking action to help resolve the accident. The release also gave a toll free number for English and Spanish-speaking persons to call if information was needed about passengers on-board.

The next release appears the same day, and it confirms that (1995) “officials in Columbia have reached the crash site and there appears to be no survivors. American’s records indicate 152 passengers, eight crew members, and four infants were on-board. American Airlines will release a passenger list after next of kin have been notified” (p.1). This release implies a full disclosure by confirming the information that Columbia officials related to AA. Since this was an international crisis, it took several hours before an AA representative could actually be at the site of the accident.

Robert Crandall, Chairman and CEO of AA, held a press conference and confirmed that Colombia officials reach the crash site and appears to be no survivors he states, (1995)

First and foremost, our thoughts and prayers are with the families and loved ones onboard the flight. It is a terrible day for all of us. Every day, in every way we can, we seek to make our services completely safe; and all of us are terribly sorry that this tragic accident occurred. . Here is what we know, contact was lost with the aircraft at 10pm EST, the aircraft involved has a flawless safety record, and the crew of the aircraft were very experienced and have flown to Latin America previously (p.1).

In this statement, Crandall expresses sympathy saying, ‘thoughts and prayer are with the families and loved ones onboard the flight.’ Crandall’s expressions of compassion for the victims’ families support Coomb’s theory of the important link between compassion and credibility. Crandall’s compassionate words establish the organization as trustworthy and concern about the stakeholders (1999, p. 119). This statement from AA also tells the public instructing information of the crisis, factual events, the where, and how the crisis

develops (Coombs, 1999, p. 120). American Airlines uses a mortification strategy by accepting responsibility, by indicating repentance, and by stating a full apology, (1995) “Every day, in every way we can, we seek to make our services completely safe; and all of us are terribly sorry that this tragic accident occurred” (p.1). American Airlines (1995) also employs the justification strategy by arguing, “the aircraft involved has a flawless safety record, and the crew was very experienced and has flown to Latin America previously” (p.1). According to Coombs (1999), full apology “is the most accommodative because it involves taking responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness” (p. 123).

Mr. Crandall states (1995), “CARE members have arrived and are working closely with the family members” (p.1). This response indicates that AA is using mortification strategy—specifically remediation and rectification—by taking action and letting the public know how AA is helping the victims. He also states (1995) that this “terrible event, which claimed several members of the AA family, strikes at the hearts of the tens of thousands of AA employees. Above all else, safety has characterized our company’s history” (p.1). In this response, Crandall is again using sympathy and the repentance strategy by comforting the company that also lost people on board the aircraft.

Crandall also states (1995), “nothing is as important to us as the millions of passengers who place their trust in American and honor us with their business and on the eve of a very busy holiday weekend, I want to give the traveling public my personal assurance that our commitment to safety is and always will be our first priority” (p.1). American Airlines is emphasizing the safety of the aircraft by using the justification strategy, stating the commitment to safety, and it is the first priority

The following press release confirms the names of the crewmembers, and the President of AA, Donald J. Carty states (1995), “our thoughts and prayers are with those aboard the aircraft as well as their families and loved ones. We

deeply mourn the loss of our passengers and of our valued colleagues” (p.1). This statement represents the mortification strategy by sympathizing with the families, loved ones, and the AA employees.

The press releases announces, (1995)” there were unconfirmed reports of a very small number of survivors. Therefore, not all the individuals listed below should be considered casualties“(p.1). This statement reiterates a public apology by stating the instructing information about the latest information that AA has received; the company is maintaining an openness with the media by disclosing information as soon as the company receives it. The release indicates that this is not a complete list and that AA CARE teams are working (1995) “around the clock to assist passengers’ family members” (p.1). American Airlines seems to have an inconsistent message about the actual number of survivors. The company is battling to maintain a consistent message about who was onboard the aircraft and how many survived, if any. This statement is also representing the remediation strategy by helping the victims by dispatching the CARE team.

December 22, 1995

The next couple of press releases identify the final passenger list along with four passengers who survive. The release also includes the fact sheet of the aircraft, including maintenance procedures and records.

News Media Reports

The *Chicago Tribune* reported breaking story of the crash along with contact numbers for the public needing to contact the American Airlines. Whereas, The *Dallas Morning News* reported a statement from AA on December 29, 1995 stating the company was (1995)

Sadden that human error on the part of our people may have contributed to the accident. The accident reminds us that aviation, while not inherently dangerous, is terribly unforgiving of any inattention to detail. We will be cooperating fully with the Columbia authorities as their investigation of the accident continues (p.1).

This statement appears 34 days after the accident, and AA is using mortification strategies—striving to receive acceptance from the public for the accident by reporting human error as the cause of the accident. Rectification is also being employed by AA stating that the company is still cooperating with the investigation to prevent a reoccurrence from happening.

It appears that the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Dallas Morning News* constantly quoted the American Airlines' Company as declining to comment. Both newspapers reported statements from AA after the final investigation which was released in 1996.

American Airlines 1420

American Airlines 1420 began as a typical flight bound for Little Rock even though thunderstorms and rain were in the vicinity of the Little Rock airport. Flight 1420 ran off the end of the runway on June 1, 1999 at approximately 11:50 pm CDT. The *Dallas Morning News* reported that “all passengers seem to remember the same thing, flames everywhere. Many wondered how they escaped from the fiery cabin into the waist-deep water where the aircraft came to rest beside the Little Rock Airport (June 3, 1999). Nine people were killed (two more passengers later died because of the extent of their injuries) and 83 were taken to the hospital (Parker, 2000). Several passengers received second and third degrees burns over 60 percent of their bodies and heavy smoke inhalation from the accident (Parker, 2000). The chairman of the NTSB investigating the crash noted (1999) “that he will save his harshest criticism for the slow response of the ground emergency crews” (Parker, 2000). Several survivors were critical of the emergency crews stating that ”crash victims were pelted with hail and

heavy rain while waiting about 18 minutes before the first emergency crews radioed that there were “walking wounded’ and asked for a bus to get the people” (Parker, 2000). American Airlines appeared to issue four press releases in regard to this accident. The accident gained media attention because of how many passengers survived this nightmare and those who were ‘walking wounded’. Among the passengers were local heroes who helped others passengers get to safety. These accounts enabled the crash to become more personable, and these vivid stories were of astounding magnitude concerning the outcome of the actions following the crash.

American Airlines Response to Flight 1420

June 2, 1999

The first press release was issued on June 2, 1999 at 3:00am CDT. This press release confirmed that Flight 1420 went off the end of the runway in Little Rock Arkansas, with lightning and thunderstorms in the vicinity of the airport. The release also confirmed that the (1999) “aircraft fuselage is broken in multiple locations and that a fire occurred in the rear of the aircraft after it came to a stop” (p.1). In addition American Airlines indicated that the aircraft was carrying 139 passengers and a crew of six. This release is applying instructing information: identifying what has happen, when, and where the crisis has taken place. The release states (1999), “American can confirm that there are fatalities and survivors associated with this accident, but the number is unknown” (p.1). The release also states that AA will not speculate, and AA is working closely with local, state, and federal authorities. American Airlines is using, instructing information. The press release also gives information for family members to receive information and the location of the next AA briefing. The next two press releases were conducted on June 2, 1999 to inform media of the location and time of the next up-date.

June 3, 1999

American Airlines released the final passenger and crew list on-board Flight 1420. The list was separated into three categories: survivors, crewmembers, and fatalities. The airline released the (1999) "final passenger list after the Arkansas coroner's office confirmed the deaths of eight passengers and one crewmember" (p.1). The release also stated that CARE team was activated and that AA was cooperating with the NTSB. American Airlines also released the aircraft facts for Flight 1420 which include:

1. Tail number: N215AA
2. Date Delivered: August 1, 1983
3. Number of Cycles: 27,103
4. Number of Flight Hours: 49,136
5. Release Maintenance Checks

Additional instructing information indicates that full disclosure was warranted on the accident aircraft. The company also used a mortification strategy to explain to the public that AA is using remediation, offering some type of compensation by employing the CARE team. American Airlines is also exercising rectification by working closely with the NTSB.

New Media Reports

The *Dallas Morning News* and *Chicago Tribune* focused on the survivors and headlined the story as front-page news. The media reported the humanistic survival stories with quotes of various reactions to the crash. The *Dallas Morning News* confirms that AA stated, '118 passengers survive, along with five crew members'. It appears the news media did not print any other statement from AA concerning a crisis response statement.

American Airlines 587

As American Airlines challenged the second major disaster in two months, Flight 587 crashed only 12 miles from the site of the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks. Flight 587 crashed on November 12, 2001 in the neighborhood of Belle Harbor, New York, which is home to many police and firefighters' families, and is clustered in a middle-class community (Kugler, 2001). Many families lost firefighters, police officers, and employees at the Cantor Fitzgerald Financial Firm in the World Trade Center attacks. More specifically, this area already had lost 70 percent of its people in the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 (Kugler, 2001). This neighborhood endured damages from the impact of the airplane: four homes destroyed, three homes received substantial damage, and three homes received minor damage (Kugler, 2001). The *Dallas Morning News* quoted officials: "they are increasingly confident that Monday's crash was an accident, not an act of terrorism" (Jackson, 2001). American Airlines was forced to battle another air disaster, which came at a devastating time for the nation as a whole.

This crisis was a learning experience for American Airlines, Airbus, and the public. American Airlines was trying to recover from the events of September 11, 2001 when the American Flight 587 crashed. This crash was devastating because of the previous circumstances, and was another shock to New York City; just a mere 2 months after the terrorist attacks, this crash immediately raised fears to both Internal and external stockholders. The public became very concerned with the impact of the crash and how it would affect the airline industry, the people of New York, and American Airlines. Residents were reported saying, "We hadn't even finished burying the dead. We have many more funerals to go," said Liz Sulik, president of the Rockaway Chamber of Commerce. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said, "People should remain calm. We're just being tested one more time, and we're going to pass this test,

too” (Jackson, 2001). Flight 587 was the deadliest crash involving a United States air carrier, excluding September 11, 2001.

American Airlines Response to Flight 587

November 12, 2001

American Airlines issued their first press release within fifteen minutes after the accident occurred; it included instructing information: for family members seeking information about passengers on-board the aircraft, phone numbers for both in the United States and in Santo Domingo. American Airlines issued eleven press releases on November 12. By 9:20 am CST, AA confirmed the crash on Flight 587 as well as a preliminary passenger data list. American Airlines also stated (2001), “American Airlines will not speculate as to possible causes of the accident” (p.1). This initial release included instructing information, as well as full disclosure from AA. The CEO of AA, Donald Carty made his first statement at 11:45am CST. He stated (2001),

It is a sad day. Nothing grieves me more than to have to report to you that this morning; an American Airlines flight was lost in New York. I will be leaving for New York immediately to lead the American Airlines CARE Team that is responding to today’s accident. Our primary concern will be to provide support to the families of our passengers and employees lost today, to all of our employees and to the people on the ground in New York (p.1).

Again, AA used mortification strategy to gain forgiveness for the tragedy by following up with remediation: offering compensation by stating that Carty will (2001) “lead the CARE team...the primary concern will be to provide support...” (p.1). Carty (2001) is also showing compassion and sympathy for the victims and the city of New York.

At this time, we have no indication of what caused the accident. We have moved quickly to help organize the response and to support the investigation. Toward the end, I have already been in touch with Andrew Card at the White House and with Mayor Giuliani and Governor Patki in New York, as well as with officials in Santo Domingo(p.1).

This response indicates the distance strategy by acknowledging the accident and weakening the link between the cause of the accident and AA. Carty also appears to apply rectification by indicating he has “been in touch with, The White House, both the Mayor and the Governor of NYC” concerning the accident. Carty stated (2001),

Let me provide some basic facts about the flight today. It was AA Flight 587, an Airbus A300 aircraft en route from New York Kennedy to Santo Domingo. The airplane was lost today shortly after take off from Kennedy Airport. The preliminary passenger list indicated the aircraft carried 246 passengers and a crew of nine (p.1).

Carty is using instructing information to the public and the media. Once Carty arrived in New York City, he had a press conference with Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Governor Pataki where he stated (2001)

It is a sad and tragic day. I want to express my deepest sorrow and sympathies to the families of our passengers and employees who were lost today and to those missing here in New York. I will be meeting with families later today and tomorrow to convey my thoughts personally (p.1).

Mortification is being employed by asking for forgiveness and stating an apology. American Airlines seems to briefly touch on the suffering strategy to win the sympathies from the public; during this time, the tragedy was still

somewhat unknown, and AA could have been an unfair victim once again in an airplane crisis.

Mr. Carty explained that he arrived in New York with 60 AA employees, and members of the CARE team, to assist the families in New York and in Santo Domingo. He also reviews the steps that AA has taken, such as

1. Activated a toll free telephone number for families seeking information
2. Sent the passenger list to the NTSB
3. Spent last several hours contacting family members of those on board
4. company offered immediate financial assistance to the families
5. Carty was in touch with the White House and federal authorities to coordinate the response and investigation
6. Carty was in contact with the New York Mayor and Governor; he thanked them for their support.
7. Carty a recognized the emergency personnel responding to the scene

In addition, Mr. Carty also states that he (2001) “has no information on the cause of today’s accidents, and AA is cooperating fully with the NTSB accident investigation” (p.1). Carty again utilizes the instructing information and full disclosure to the media and the public.

Mr. Carty’s last words are (2001):

Given the changed world we live in today, it will be important- now, more than ever—to quickly and accurately determine the cause of this accident. It may go without saying that our nation, New York City, and AA have been though a lot over the last few weeks. The pain of another significant loss is hard for all of us to accept. But we will collect the energy and spirit to do what we can to support these families. On behalf of all of the people at AA, that is what I am here to do (p.1).

American Airlines is exercising the suffering strategy by trying to gain sympathy from the nation. Carty is also using distance strategy by acknowledging the crisis and using justification to draw back to the events of the “last few weeks” (referring to September 11, 2001). He is using the ingratiation strategy by connecting AA to positive actions, and “collect the energy and spirit to do what we can to support these families”. American Airlines released a partial passenger list and completed crew list at 11:51p.m. CST, and said they would continue to update the list as family notifications occurred.

November 13, 2001

Mr. Carty (2001) sent a letter to the President of the Dominican Republic; he stated that he is sending a “common friend” to oversee the operations in Santo Domingo. In addition, he also noted that AA has a “long and proud history in the Dominican Republic and our people have been a part of the community..., working together..., to strengthen the economy and build for a brighter future. You can be sure that this spirit of cooperation and support for the Dominican Republic and its people will be at the very center of everything we do in the coming weeks and months” (p.1).

Carty is utilizing the ingratiation strategies by indicating a “common friend and the long and proud history”. He is actually using both, bolstering and praising the Dominican Republic for “working together and strengthening the economy”; American Airlines also uses the remediation by “cooperation and support” to show aid for the people of the crisis.

November 14, 2001

American Airlines released the final and complete passenger list. All next of kin have been notified.

November 16, 2001

American Airlines decides to ground the Airbus A300 fleet pending tail section examinations of all 34 aircraft. Also, AA releases aircraft facts of Flight 587, which are as follows:

1. Airbus Industrie, A300-600R
2. Manufactured in Toulouse, France
3. Aircraft Registration (tail #): N14053
4. N14053 entered service new with AA on July 12, 1988
5. Capacity: 251 seats
6. Normal Crew: 2 Pilots and 6-9 Flight Attendants
7. Powered by two General Electric turbofan engines
8. Total A300-A600Rs in AA fleet (including this aircraft): 35 aircraft
9. Most recent Maintenance check on November 11, 2001; October 3, 2001; December 9, 1999

This is a factual account of mortification—especially rectification—by actually grounding the Airbus to show both sympathy for the loss of life and that AA wants to prevent this crisis from happening again. American Airlines also applies both full disclosure of the aircraft and instructing information.

News Media Reports

The *Dallas Morning News* was reporting, “authorities had no reason to suspect that the crash was a terrorist act” (Langford & Morris, 2001). The *Dallas Morning News* for the next couple of days continues to write:” this was an accident, not an act of terrorism.” The newspaper also printed Don Carty’s, CEO of AA, first response to Flight 587 word for word. The *Dallas Morning News* seemed to be consistent with AA’s message by supplying information to the public that was quoting word for word what AA had released.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this study of crisis communication strategies and aircraft accident responses, research uncovers contributions to crisis communication. Coombs is arguing in a time of crisis, for a quick initial response to show organizational control and credibility (Coombs, 1999, p. 116). Coombs also states that an organization must speak with one voice to show consistency of the organization by employing an official spokesperson (1999, p. 117). The organization also needs to remain open with the media, to disclose information, and to be honest (Coombs, 1999, p. 117). Expressing sympathy to the victims is vital in the crisis response strategy and has been linked closely with credibility (Coombs, 1999, p. 119).

Because of the nature of each aircraft accident, some strategies can be eliminated immediately. Due to the magnitude of each crash, Flight 965, 1420, and 587, and the media coverage of the events, AA does not have the option of using the nonexistence strategies, which includes denial (claiming that no crisis occurred), clarification (an explanation of why there is no crisis), attack (against someone wrongly claiming that no crisis exist), or intimidation (a threat against the one causing the damage) (Coombs, 1999, p. 122). The following sections explore the findings in greater depth, and are followed by discussion of limitations and future research in regard to crisis communication strategies.

Discussion of Research Question One

The first research question asked what crisis response strategies did American Airlines utilize after the crashes of Flight 965, 1420, and 587. Analysis indicates that AA used a variety of crisis response strategies, developed by Coombs for each crisis.

The crisis response strategy of Flight 965, 1420, and 587 each involved using a quick response, having openness with the media, providing full disclosure, being honest, and expressing sympathy for the victims.

Pre-Crisis Stage

Pre-crisis stage is normal operations before the onset of the event hits the organization (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 97). During the crashes of Flights 965, 1420, and 587, American Airlines' first response was to control the situation and identify the facts at the time of the crisis. According to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, this is when extreme emotions appear such as stress, fear, anger, and shock (2003, p. 99). When AA issued the first response to each accident, the company's main concern was to issue a quick response, maintain openness with the media, full disclosure of the accident(s), honesty, and expressing sympathy for the victims.

Crisis Stage

The crisis stage begins when harm hurts the organization and the stakeholders (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p. 99). This stage develops the minute the aircraft is in danger, which led to the crash of Flights 965, 1420, and 587. During this stage, American Airlines' profit, stability, and reputation were damaged with each aircraft accident, especially Flight 587. Flight 587 contributed to a decline of profits for American Airlines and definitely raised concerns for the reputation and stability of the airline industry.

Post-Crisis Stage

This stage focuses on the recovery phase and begins the learning process for all involved. Post-crisis is when the investigation begins to determine why, how, and who is to blame, and what should be done to correct the problem (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, p.101). This is when American Airlines steps back and begins to analyze what has happened and how can the company prevent a recurrence. The NTSB plays a vital role during this stage and

begins to identify the causes of the accident(s). This stage is when the recovery efforts and cleanup begins, and rebuilding takes place along with heroes and leaders being recognized (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003, pp.101-102). Flight 1420 related well with the post-crisis stage because of all the heroes resulting from that accident.

Distance Strategy

The main focus of the distance strategy, according to Coombs, is to accept and develop public awareness for the crisis. Distance strategy uses two different approaches: excuse and justification. Excuse tries to reduce the company's responsibility for the event. Justification tries to reduce the damage associated with the crisis (Coombs, 1995). American Airlines employed the distance strategy in Flight 587; Donald Carty used this strategy by recognizing the link between the cause of the accident and AA. Previously AA had lost two aircrafts in the 9-11 terrorist attacks, and AA was trying not to be re-associated with that event. American Airlines was attempting to accept and acknowledge the crash of Flight 587 while reminding the public that this accident was not as horrific as the events of 9-11.

Ingratiation Strategy

Ingratiation strategy, according to Coombs, tries to remind the stakeholders that the organization has done good deeds for them in the past. There are three aspects to this strategy: bolstering, transcending, and praising others. Bolstering is linked with positive aspects. Transcending identifies the crisis in a more positive light. Praising others tries to win approval from the targeted audience (Coombs 1995). American Airlines used the ingratiation strategy with Flight 587 by connecting AA to a more desirable, positive light after the accident. Donald Carty used this same strategy when he wrote a letter the President of the Dominican Republic in reference to the crash of Flight 587,

describing how AA was helping the Dominican Republic and became part of their community.

Mortification Strategy

Coombs also states that the mortification strategy attempts to win forgiveness and accepts the crisis. Mortification has three categories: redemption, repentance, and rectification. Redemption offers some type of reimbursement of help for the victims. Repentance involves asking for forgiveness. Rectification entails preparing to prevent a reoccurrence. American Airlines employed the mortification strategy for all three of the aircraft accidents: Flights 965, 1420, and 587. American Airlines wanted the public and the stakeholders to forgive AA for the accidents. Redemption was displayed by AA by immediately dispatching the CARE team members to the site of the accidents, and by offering compensation to the victims and the victims' families. American Airlines used repentance in Flight 587 and later in Flight 965 by stating a full apology for the accidents. Rectification was used in three accidents: Flight 965, 1420, and 587. American Airlines repeatedly states that AA is working closely with authorities and the NTSB to investigate the accident. After the final report by the NTSB, AA implemented the new procedures as well as new safety measures to ensure the accidents would not occur again.

Suffering Strategy

The suffering strategy is used to gain sympathy from the public (Coombs, 1995). American Airlines displayed this strategy after the accident of Flight 587. The stakeholders, American Airlines, and the nation were still unsure of what happened to Flight 587, which was the first crash after the September 11, 2000 terrorist attacks. American Airlines wanted the public to understand that the company could have been an unfair victim in another terrorist attack.

According to Coombs (1995), the first initial crisis response statement should include these important elements: quick, consistent, open, sympathetic,

and informative. American Airlines exhibited all the qualities in each aircraft accident, Flight 965, 1420, and 587. American Airlines issued a quick response, kept a close openness relationship with the media, used full disclosure, was honest, and expressed sympathy and compassion for the victims and the victims' families. Sturges (1994) also argued for the what, when, where, why, and how information to be conveyed about the crisis. American Airlines used this type of instructing information to keep the stakeholders and the public up to date on the latest information about the crisis.

Discussion of Research Question Two

The second research question asked if the crisis response strategies changed from one crisis to another with the American Airlines 965, 1420, and 587 crashes. The results yielded that American Airlines used different strategies depending on the circumstances of the crash. American Airlines' crisis management plan (CMP) employed different strategies for each accident.

Flight 965 was determined to be pilot error, or human breakdowns according to Coombs. American Airlines concentrated on the mortification strategies: to be forgiven and to have the public acknowledge the accident. American Airlines pursued rectification by working closing with Columbia officials to determine the cause of the tragedy and remediation by showing compassion and sympathy for the victims by repentance through the AA press releases. American Airlines also retained an openness with the media by using instructing information to keep the public updated on the what, where, and how of the investigation of the accident. American Airlines implied the justification strategy by stating the flawless safety record of the aircraft.

The crisis response statements are similar for Flight 965 and Flight 1420. Both Flight 965 and 1420 used strategies such as instruction of information, full disclosure, and the mortification strategies. The response for Flight 1420

focused on the instruction information (full and open relationship with the media) and the mortification strategy; rectification was also used to ensure that AA was working closely with the NTSB to determine the cause of the crash, and used the remediation strategy to imply that AA was helping the victims and the victims' families by sending the CARE team.

The response to Flight 587 used some of the elements from both Flight 965 and 1420 but also implied a different strategy. Flight 587 was devastating because of the previous terrorist attacks in New York City. This crash became the unknown accident, causing anxiety to the public around the world. American Airlines once again concentrated on instructing information by maintaining a full disclosure, openness, and honesty with the media. American Airlines also used the mortification strategy by focusing on repentance, remediation, and rectification. American Airlines utilized the distance strategy by creating acceptance while weakening the link between the accident and American Airlines by using justification to remind the public and the world of what happened to AA several months earlier, on September 11, 2001. According to Coombs, justification is used to portray to the public that the crisis is not as bad as a similar crisis (Coombs, 1999). American Airlines exercised the ingratiation strategy by gaining approval by bolstering and praising the company to the Dominican Republic President. Bolstering reminds the public of the existing positive aspects (Coombs, 1999), while praising others is used to gain approval from a certain audience. The last strategy AA used is the suffering strategy to gain sympathy from the public. Carty used this strategy to identify with the public that AA could once again be an unfair victim in a tragedy beyond their control.

According to this present study, AA focused on instructing information that let the public know what had happened, when, where, why, and the how about the crisis. American Airlines issued a quick and fast initial response that conveyed to the public that the crisis was under control. American Airlines

remained open and honest to the media while revealing everything that AA knew about the accidents, and also while expressing sympathy and compassion to the victims and the survivors. Coombs (reference) indicated that compassion is linked with credibility that helps maintain the image of the company. American Airlines also tried to remain consistent by speaking with one voice and keeping the message consistent. Flight 965 had inconsistencies with the passenger name list, but that could be contributed to several factors and was not necessarily the fault of the airline. In conclusion, the crisis response strategy seems to differ, especially with Flight 587. Flight 965 and 1420 held very similar responses by using the same elements but in a different order, and the message varies since the audience was different. Flight 587 was somewhat unusual from the previous accidents because of the severity of the crash and the circumstances leading up to the accident.

In conclusion, American Airlines used different crisis response strategies for each accident, and the strategies changed from one accident to another. Depending on the context of the accident, AA would use different strategies. There is also a greater extent of influence of how American Airlines will restore their image based on different entities such as Homeland Security, NTSB, and FAA (Federal Aviation Administration). These entities all play an important role in how airlines will react when there is a crisis.

Limitations

As with any research, there are limitations and future research that should be addressed. The first limitation is possible bias with this project considering that the author worked for American Eagle/American Airlines. The bias could also be defined as a great asset to gain information from inside the AMR Company that is not generally public knowledge or information.

Another limitation was that the American Airlines flights that were selected (965, 1420, and 587) were coded by the author as pilot error, weather, and mechanical accidents. The NTSB had several contributing factors, and did not isolate to one major finding.

The final limitation was that the author had access to the press releases that AA released to the media in each accident, but some of the press releases were missing from the files. It should be duly noted that the press releases may have been missing and this study focused on the written press releases versus oral press releases or news stories.

Future Research

Future ideas and facets for tomorrow's research are intricate maneuvers with long lasting effects. Crisis communications and aircraft accidents can become traumatic incidents to society and airline industries with a need for complete research to ensure an accident free future. A noteworthy prevalence is a need to gather information on the spot when such accidents occur. There is vital need to research the tragedy beginning in the first minute of the mishap, not letting one hour go by without an in-depth study of the accident before, during, and after the incident. An additional suggestion following this study is the need for supplementary research in comparison of different air carriers—either domestic or international. The strategies of Coombs' crisis plan (stated in this study) could cross the boundaries of cultures and reach out to the helpless victims or survivors during an event of trauma and the horror of the unknown.

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