

## Crisis Case Study

### A Compassionate Use Of A Web Site During Time Of Tragedy

By Richard K. Long

It was the sort of call that sends shivers down the spine of even veteran public relations practitioners. Alaska Airlines Flight 261 was in trouble, and the pilots were reporting problems keeping the aircraft stable off the Southern California coast.

In less than two hours, at about 4:36 p.m. (PST) on January 31, an initial alert turned into a confirmation that Flight 261 had gone off the radar screen after apparently plunging from 17,900 feet into the Santa Barbara Channel northwest of Los Angeles.

For Lou Cancelmi, vice president of public relations for Alaska Airlines, it was time to mobilize a lean but well-prepared group of three professionals and an outside consultant.

The airline's first public statement came from a news release issued just 56 minutes after the crash. Consisting of four sentences, the release confirmed what Alaska knew at the time. Flight 261, en route from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to San Francisco, with continuing service to Seattle, disappeared from radar 20 miles west of Point Mugu, Calif. The airline said the U.S. Coast Guard had been dispatched to the scene. It also promised that details would be posted on the airline's Web site, [www.alaskaair.com](http://www.alaskaair.com)

About 6:45 p.m., Alaska sent "Accident Release #2" confirming the crash and indicating the plane, a Boeing MD-83, had been carrying 80 passengers and five crew members.

The airline promised release of a passenger manifest as soon as possible and alerted reporters and concerned parties to a newly created hotline at 1-800-553-5117.

Next, the airline released a profile of Flight 261, including details about the aircraft involved and its maintenance history. By now, it was apparent that Flight 261 had experienced horizontal stabilizer problems that hampered the pilots' ability to control level flight.

Cancelmi and Alaska's chairman and CEO, John F. Kelly, left for Los Angeles International Airport as soon as they were updated on details of the crash. While they were in the air, Alaska issued a 9:20 p.m. accident update that said 83, not 80, passengers were aboard.

Kelly and Cancelmi arrived at LAX about 11 p.m. and immediately convened the first of numerous press briefings, concentrating solely on what they could confirm about the accident. Over the next several days, Alaska held continuous briefings in person and via phone hook-ups. The company distributed 26 news releases in the two weeks following the accident.

Alaska also made extensive use of the Internet. Chuck Taylor, aerospace reporter for the *Seattle Times*, tells *Tactics*, "Alaska Airlines leveraged the Web like no other airline has." Kim McDaniel of *The Salt Lake Tribune* devoted a lengthy column last Feb. 5 to the timely information she found on the Web site. She wrote, "The front page of the site contained a simple but lengthy letter from the company president. It was professional but compassionate. Rather than sounding like something from the legal department - carefully worded to avoid responsibility - it seemed to come from the heart."

McDaniel continued, "...I still assumed the rest would be filled with 'coming soon' messages or sparse information. But I was wrong. Several news releases with information on the company about the accident already were available. There were safety reports dating back nearly 30 years, a 24-hour contact number and even a stock photo of the type of plane that had gone down ... I was amazed, not because the company had all of this information in hand (they typically do) but because it was online not two hours after the accident."

Taylor and three other *Seattle Times* reporters, plus a photographer, left immediately for the scene. By the end of the week, a fifth reporter had joined them. A week later, two *Times* reporters remained in southern California, while Taylor shifted his focus to Washington, D.C., as the National Transportation Safety Board investigation gained momentum.

Taylor applauded Alaska's handling of a tough situation. "They were on it very quickly, much more so than most other airlines would have been," he says. "They had no factual glitches, and they were very aggressive in rebutting negative news coverage, but we can't fault them for that."

The *Seattle Times* was involved in the most challenging story about the crisis. Based on information from a normally reliable source, the *Times* reported that the doomed aircraft had experienced mechanical problems earlier in the day, on its southbound leg from Seattle to Puerto Vallarta. The *Times* thought the report had been confirmed by the NTSB, which proved not to be the case. The *Times* went with its story on February 1, then ran a page-one clarification and apology the next day, after it realized the error.

Crisis management experts seem to agree on several key steps in dealing with a disaster, including:

- The organization must respond quickly, with substantive information.
- Senior line officers must be visible and demonstrate compassion.
- The organization must take substantive actions proving, beyond a doubt, that it wants to be part of the solution, not the problem.
- In circumstances where much is happening and people are under considerable strain, the organization must avoid complicating its task by making tactical mistakes.

The list could be longer (or different), but it's fair to ask how Alaska Airlines performed on at least these four criteria.

**Quick and Substantive Information** - In an industry where there are few "small" accidents, Alaska likely set a new standard for the amount of useful information distributed to multiple stakeholders in record time. Cancelmi doesn't know how many media queries his team handled. "It was in the hundreds, but nobody was counting," he says. "What kept the number down was the fact that we had a very effective Web site."

As McDaniel wrote, "While the situation is never one a company wants to experience, Alaska Airlines has set a terrific example of how to be prepared and how to use the Web fully. By having not just information, but the right information up and easily accessible, it helped itself and everyone involved."

**Line Management Involvement** - In Taylor's words, "Kelly did very well. He was personally involved and visible, and he spent a lot of time with the families of the victims." He also participated in the most significant live press briefings.

**Substantive Actions** - The airline took several steps that showed its awareness of public concerns about safety. Alaska assigned some 400 employees to assist families and friends of the victims. These specially trained employees helped with transportation arrangements, lodging, and any other service they could provide in a delicate situation. So intense was the effort that Alaska ordered its grief counselors to take paid time off after a solid week of working with distraught families and individuals.

Alaska paid special attention to its own family. In addition to the five crew members killed in the crash, some 30 of the 83 passengers were employees or dependents who were flying on "non-revenue" tickets, a benefit frequently extended to airline employees and their families. Alaska Airlines held a private memorial service for employees and their families on Feb. 12 at Seattle's Key Arena.

The airline also "retired" Flight 261 and said no further airline operations would be conducted under that designation. While this is a common airline practice following fatal crashes, Alaska remembered to do it and told key stakeholders why they did so.

On March 24, Kelly announced formation of an external audit team to conduct an independent investigation of all aspects of Alaska's operations. Within two weeks, the team grew to nine members who had an average of nearly 40 years of experience in commercial, government and military aviation.

**Avoiding Complications** - In any crisis, Murphy's Law kicks in. Alaska Airlines had its share of distractions, including the erroneous story about prior problems with the ill-fated MD-83. Reporters already knew of an investigation of the airline's maintenance operations at Oakland, Calif., based on allegations from a company mechanic that he had been forced to falsify documents. Skipping the denial stage, Alaska tackled the issue frontally and told its side of the story while simultaneously dealing with the crash of Flight 261. *(Note: The maintenance investigation has been expanded to include Flight 261. And on June 2, the FAA said it had identified significant flaws in Alaska's maintenance practices and gave the airline 30 days to demonstrate that it could correct these problems. Otherwise, the FAA was prepared to close Alaska's major maintenance centers. )*

No organization is perfect in a crisis. Alaska Airlines gets far better than passing marks for its handling of a complex and heartrending situation. They have very likely set a new standard for other airlines and industries to meet in trying circumstances.

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