
Southwest Airlines Flight 1380 Crisis

Introduction

Southwest Airlines experienced what is defined as a crisis a few years ago when flight 1380 had engine trouble mid flight which resulted in engine failure. This then ultimately led to the death of a passenger. Taking into account Southwest's reputation, along with crisis history, and the type of crisis (SCCT) altogether help explain the response of Southwest to the crisis and how it affected the overall reputation of the airline.

Pre-Crisis

As already outlined previously, the history of an organization is one of the most important to the SCCT's model of a crisis. An organization's reputation is one of two company related factors that impacts how a crisis is perceived by stakeholders and other organizations so it should be managed by the organization. Southwest benefits from having a nearly spotless reputation prior to this crisis with the airline industry and its stakeholders. Southwest's mission statement is "dedication to the highest quality of customer service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and company spirit" ("About," 2018), and Southwest has lived up to and fulfilled its mission. Southwest is known for its unparalleled customer service a good example of this coming from an employee giving up personal food for a pregnant customer in need of a meal and most recently implementing a free replacement option for damaged luggage (Hyken, 2016).

One reporter recently stated that "The company had cultivated a loyal and family-like culture since its earliest days, with the bonds forged during good times helping sustain employees through one of Southwest's most trying times" (Shine, 2018, p. 2). Southwest's impeccable reputation is demonstrated by being ranked first for having the fewest customer complaints, being the only airline that has not gone bankrupt, holding forty four years of consecutive profitability, and being ranked eighth on *Fortune* magazine's list of most admired companies in the world ("2016," 2017). Also Southwest was named by *Forbes* as being "one of America's most just companies" ("2016," 2017, p. 3). Southwest's reputation has led to a strong structure for its reputation during a crisis.

Southwest's crisis history, the second company related factor affecting response strategies is spotless when being compared to other airlines and major companies, but it too has had its ups and downs facing three significant crises in forty seven years of establishment. The first was in 2005 "when a landing plane skidded off the runway in snowy weather and into traffic, striking several cars and killing a 6 year old boy in one of them" (Shine, 2018, p. 6). This crisis falls into the category of accident or victim crisis depending on the scope of the crisis and whether or not to take the snowy conditions into consideration. The response to this crisis was "Southwest Chief

Executive Gary Kelly expressed the airlines condolences within house of the accident" and he flew to the scene along with several hundred members of the crisis response team, which was not allowed in other airlines (Schmeltzer, 2005, p.1).

The second major Southwest crisis was a technology malfunction that was troublesome for days. In July of 2016, "Southwest Airlines experienced a massive technology failure, rendering huge portions of their computer systems inoperable for more than 12 hours. To get back on track the airline had to cancel 2,000 flights causing a four day tsunami of customer frustration" (Baer, p.1). Along with canceling flights communication became an issue and caused much confusion for several hours. Southwest apologized for the technology failure, customer service employees stayed up all night responding to customer service requests, and they created a video and posted it further explaining the issue and furthering their apologetic. Though this incident was another crisis, not necessarily as bad as the others, Southwest's customer service reputation remained unblemished.

The final major crisis in the history of Southwest was the failure of an engine in mid flight which resulted in an emergency landing. A "Boeing 737-700 from New Orleans was in flight to Orlando when the fan blade separated from the fan disk" (Lam, 2018, p. 1). No major action was taken in regards to this crisis other than an FAA recommendation to inspect similar engines. This third event in Southwest's history is significant taking into consideration the current crisis.

Southwest's Response

Southwest's response to this crisis sticks to the mission statement of the company in particular to keep the needs of its customers first in every situation. Showing "care for the customers started almost immediately as the plane's pilot, Capt. Tammie Jo Shults, walked the aisle to check on her passengers" (Shine, 2018, p. 1-2). She was thought to be a hero not only because of her demeanor during the crisis but because of the concern she demonstrated for her passengers.

During Kelly's press conference he demonstrated his deeply felt sorrow for the loss of the passenger saying that "the family and the loved ones of the deceased customer are our immediate and primary concern, and we will do all that we can to support them during this very difficult time and the difficult days ahead" He also said that Southwest would fully cooperate with the investigations of the incident. He again expressed and reassured customers of safety and their priority along with that of the crew. Kelly assured everyone that following NTSB's investigation all of the findings would be released to the public. Kelly made sure to restate that the engine had been routinely inspected two days before and passed inspection and that they did not see any problems with the engine or plane.

As a final show of care for their customers Southwest "arranged a special flight to Dallas Tuesday night that was available only to flight 1380 passengers and that was staffed with a veteran crew who provided regular updates throughout the trip" (Shine, 2018, p.2). Within a 12 hour period a video was posted about Southwest "inspecting its engines ahead of the announcement of the FAA's goal to inspect all engines" (ABC, 2018). Southwest did not stop their efforts of communication after this though many employees remained in contact with the passengers and those directly affected by the crisis. Southwest's response to this was to award each passenger \$5,000 to cover immediate needs. The final act of apology by Kelly was an email to the customers in which Kelly once again apologized not only on behalf of himself but on behalf of all of Southwest.

Analysis of the Crisis

Considering SCCT and placing Southwest's flight 1380 crisis into categories of SCCT, their pre-crisis reputation was impeccable which aided in maintaining its reputation following the crisis. Taking into consideration Southwest's previous crises being so similar to this one there is a reason to assume that Southwest's crisis has been damaged. But the way Southwest responded to this crisis and the fact that the NTSB concluded that this accident was caused by fatigued metal on the engine that blew apart. This is not something that Southwest could have prevented so the blame was not assigned to them. Taking into consideration the actions of Southwest in terms of response actions followed the SCCT pattern. Kelly primarily chose to diminish the crisis using framing words to shape the crisis the way you want it is a way to diminish the crisis.

Another factor of the response was the compensations given and the apologies also fall into diminishment strategies. Looking at the crisis and response Southwest did not intentionally use any bolstering mechanisms further enhancing the reputation of the company. The primary crisis response strategies seen in this crisis are diminish and rebuild.

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