

The Communication Process in Airlines' Crisis Management

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to study airlines' crisis communication, before, during and after a crisis. The research is conducted using a mixed-method that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study consists of two parts. The first focuses on the Public Relations (PR) of value of airlines during 2010-2014 by collecting data of airlines' PR value from newspapers. The second part involves in-depth interviews with airline executives and staff as well as crisis communication management experts in social media.

The results of part one show that the three highest number of airline PR values were found with Thai Airways, Air Asia and Bangkok Airways. The in-depth interviews in the second part present the airlines' crisis communication management activities during different time periods. To prepare, prior to a crisis, they will prepare a crisis plan, communication tools and connections; train employees; simulate the plan; form a crisis team and practice safety drills. During a crisis, actions included implementing crisis analysis and management, data collection, arranging internal meetings to give updates, establishing a PR operation center, determining targeted audiences, choosing content designs and communication tools, controlling news sources and providing media updates. Finally, following the crisis, the procedures consisted of crisis summary, situation recovery and crisis management evaluation.

Keywords: Crisis, Communication management, Airlines

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Introduction

The airline industry has been challenged by crises, (Pannavach Pichaibavornphat, 2017), especially, more recently, during the digital communication era. These crises seem to be ongoing. All the incidents have led to valued case studies in crisis communication, especially such cases as those of Malaysian Airlines and Indonesian Air Asia. Both these airlines faced crises at roughly the same time, causing significant damages. Each managed their crisis differently, which led to very different feedback from internal and external stakeholders, or publics, on their actions. They each showed how poor communication management during a crisis can damage a company's image and credibility.

Communication management is something that every organization emphasizes when a crisis occurs as it impacts all levels of an organization. A crisis is traditionally defined as an unusual situation, or unexpected event. (Coomb, 2009) A crisis also happens fast and can occur at any time with no warning. Organizations that have prepared their communication management for a crisis will only experience a small impact. On

the other hand, those organizations who are not as prepared will encounter many issues when a crisis occurs, which can ruin their reputation and sustainability. A crisis can affect individuals or organisations, may cause financial and reputational damage, or can threaten stakeholder relations. (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007) Crises cannot be avoided (Guth, 1995). Crisis can always put businesses, products and services in danger. Organizations may lose a fortune when the public reacts to a crisis (Wilcox, 1994). Therefore, crisis management is a central area as it is a fundamentally important function for all organization. (Coombs, 2011) For these reasons, studying the process of crisis communication management of airlines is a must.

Research Question

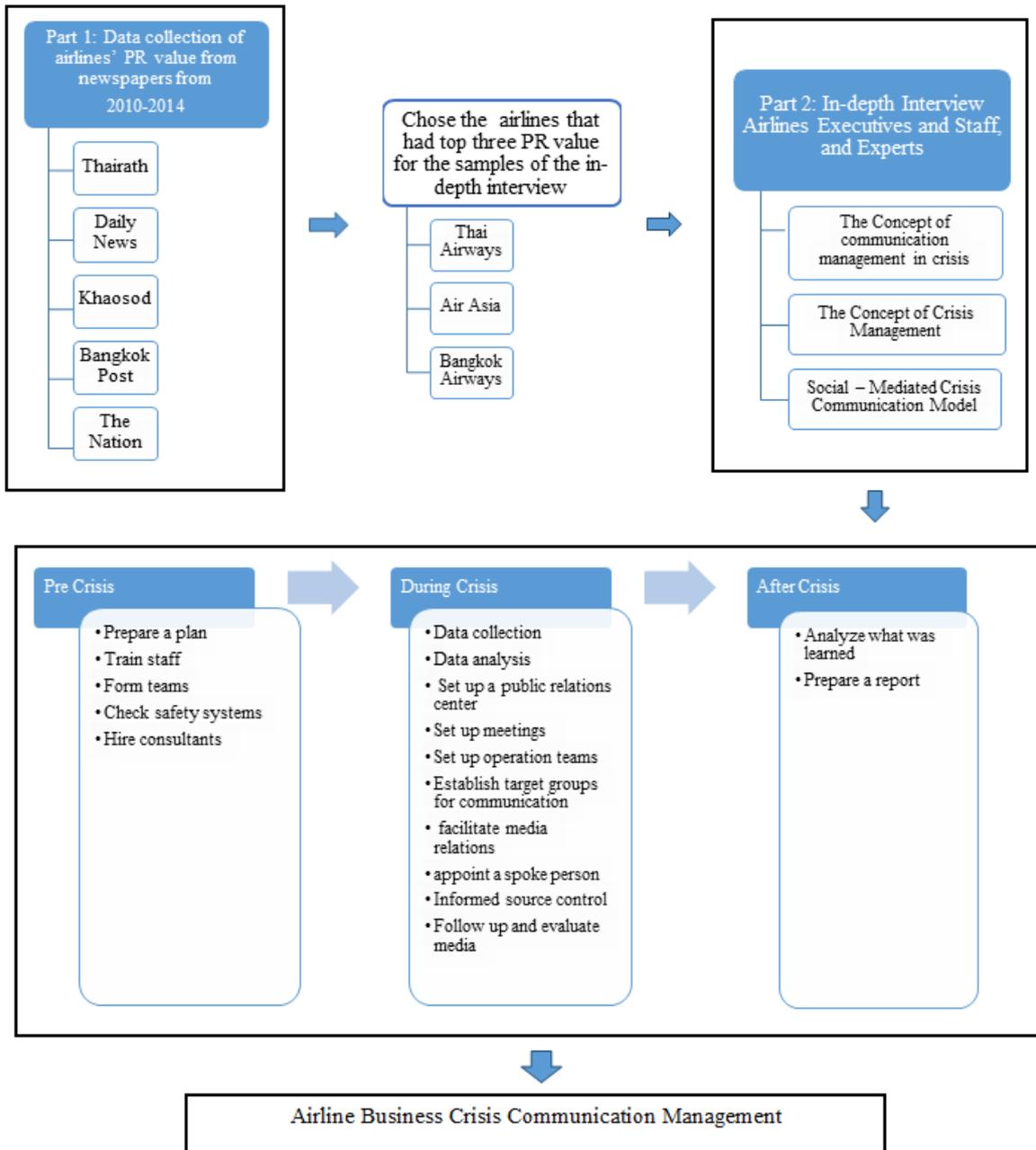
How do airlines manage crises?

Objective of the Study

To study airlines' crisis management before, during and after a crisis.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Definition of variables

- Crisis refers to an abnormal and unexpected event that affects overall operations of an organization. (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007)
- Crisis management refers to the guidance of crisis management which is divided into three periods: planning before a crisis, action taken during a crisis and action taken after a crisis.

- Crisis communication refers to communication activities during a crisis by utilizing messaging and media to reach specific target groups.
- Communication process refers to the three stages of crisis communication: pre-crisis planning, operations during a crisis and operations post crisis (Sirintorn Mahamontree, 2004)
- Airline business refers to a business that transports passengers (Ananchai Sakdejayont, 2010)
- PR Value refers to the communication published via media and the media. For this research, PR values included newspapers such as Thairath, Daily News, Khaosod, Bangkok Post and The Nation.
- Fire starter refers to a starter to spark or point of ignition about a crisis. (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, 7 May 2017)

Conceptual and literature review

The Concept of Crisis Communication Management

Crisis communication is an important factor for an organization in its management policy. Communication is important in helping to deal with a crisis. Coombs (2007b) and Heath (2010) divided crisis management into three main work categories: First, pre-crisis (is concerned with prevention or preparation – what can be said or done to reduce the chance of crisis and moderate its harm if it occurs); second, crisis (actual response to a crisis); and third, post-crisis (revision, follow-up

information, lessons learned, and preparation for next crisis).

Academics have divided the scope of crisis communication into three stages (Sirintorn Mahamontree, 2004)

Part 1: Pre-crisis planning. Michael Bland (1998, p. 31) suggested a company should check about a potential crisis during this time frame.

Part 2: Operations during a crisis. During this period, the focus is on reducing the crisis and its negative repercussions by controlling the crisis promptly. (Duangtip Worapan, 2002) scoped crisis operations as follows:

1. When the crisis happens, inform all team members who are on the plan.
2. Send a team to collect primary data and report back to the operation center.
3. Setup a public relations center to facilitate and work with mass media.
4. Setup meetings to update on recent conditions.
5. Assign job responsibilities and set up operation teams.
6. Analyze target groups and gather information.
7. Facilitate media relations.
8. When target groups are identified, scope data to be shared with each group.
9. Identify selected media relations and channels that suit the target groups.
10. Appoint a spokesperson.
11. Inform source controls.
12. Follow up and evaluate media.

Part 3: Post crisis operations. Michael Bland (1998, p. 73) suggested that following a crisis,

the operation team should meet to analyze what was learned from the crisis.

This concept was applied in this study to help divide time frames of the crisis management process and develop questions for the in-depth interviews.

The Concept of Crisis Management

Leonard Saffir and John Tarrant, (1992) presented crisis management principles for solving a crisis, also called “the preventing and reducing the effect” of a crisis, which comprises steps: 1. Planning to solve a crisis, 2. Providing information, 3. Data collection, 4. Primary agreement, 5. Determining credible news sources, 6. Attempting to speak, 7. Showing sympathy, 8. Ensuring accuracy, 9. Acting cautiously in communication language usage and 10. Learning from previous experience.

This concept was applied to frame the study as it helped with the overall crisis management of corporate image from the beginning until the end of a crisis. The concept was also applied to design the questions of the in-depth interview, analysis and discussion to understand the procedures an organization follows to deal with a crisis.

Social - mediated Crisis Communication

Model: SMCC

Yan Jin, Brooke Fisher Liu and Lucinda L. Austin (2011) described this model as depicting a theory that helps to understand the social mediated crisis communication model. The structure of this theory is explained below.

1. An organization, or company, is the starting point of the communication process.

2. Social Media is a communication channel organizations use to send accurate information.

3. Traditional Media is a media that depends on strong relationships to control some information.

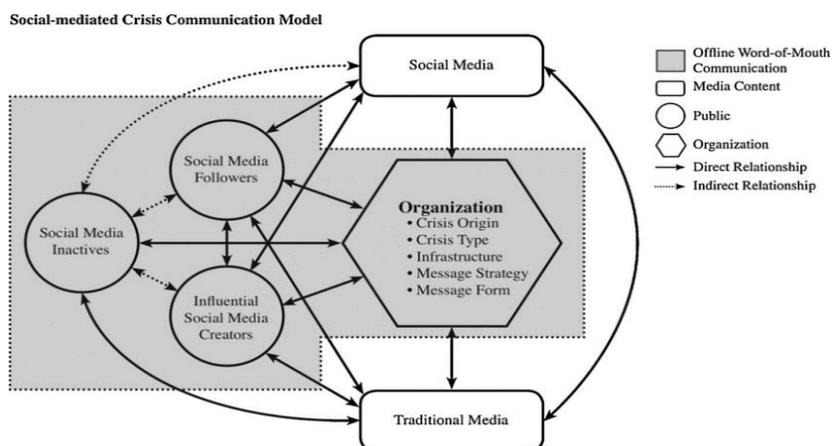
4. Social Media followers are a group of people who follow stories on social media.

5. Influential Social Media creators are a group of people that influence the information shared with social media followers and social media inactive persons.

6. Social Media inactive group is a group of people who mainly get information from traditional media and social media followers.

This model was applied to understand the components of crisis communication on social media. These components are presented in figure 2.

Figure 2: Social – mediated Crisis Communication Model



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/263228949_fig1_FIGURE-1-Social-mediated-crisis-communication-model

Methodology

Part 1: Study of the PR values data of airlines between 2010 to 2014, applying sample selection of airlines with the highest PR values, which was then used to design the in-depth interview question.

Part 2: Qualitative study conducted by interviewing airline executives and staff, as well as, experts in digital crisis communication, focusing on airlines’ crisis management.

Populations, Samples & Sampling

Procedures

Part 1: Study of airlines’ PR values by examining selected samples of newspapers in Thailand published in Thai and English between 2010 – 2014. The largest circulation published newspapers were chosen as they capture readers’ attention and influence their opinions.

The bestselling newspapers in Thai are Thairath, Daily News and Khaosod while Bangkok Post and The Nation are the bestselling English newspapers. These five newspapers were used in

this study. After this, news concerning airlines published by the five newspapers were selected from “News Clippings Online” at Matichon Information Center. In total, there were 5,309 news articles were chosen for the study.

The 5,309 airline news articles then underwent a non-purposive sampling process by selecting newspapers per year and 2 months of each year. At the end of this process, there were 712 news articles.

The sample of newspapers was selected as each published their news and information both in newspapers and on social media. The sampling of PR value analysis in social media, however, was more difficult due to the timing of news published on social media varied. For this reason, a fixed sampling could not be utilized. The main media was therefore not applied as a source of information to study the crisis communication. However, the research did utilize a selection process for the organizations that presented news that effectively contributed to solving crises. The three airlines with the highest PR value were selected find the sampling for in-depth interviews.

Below, table 1 presents the number of newspapers selected twice per year from 2010-2014. airlines news stories randomly drawn from five

Table 1: Airlines Published News Randomly Drawn Twice Per Year from 2010-2014

Newspaper	Year	All Airlines News	Month	Airline News
Thairath	2010	166	February	18
			August	22
	2011	90	January	4
			April	8
	2012	124	October	16
			December	5
	2013	131	March	7
			September	10
	2014	99	June	5
			November	5
	Total	610		100
Daily News	2010	131	February	13
			April	9
	2011	122	November	10
			December	15
	2012	133	March	7
			September	8
	2013	151	January	13
			August	13
	2014	183	May	6
			June	4
	Total	720		98
Khaosod	2010	172	June	4
			November	11
	2011	130	March	13
			February	5
	2012	125	October	16
			December	3
	2013	105	January	10
			September	6
	2014	157	April	14
			August	20
	Total	689		102

Table 1: (Continued)

Newspaper	Year	All Airlines News	Month	Airline News
Bangkok Post	2010	538	June	20
			October	30
	2011	418	January	21
			April	21
	2012	404	May	26
			September	22
	2013	312	February	20
			March	26
	2014	354	July	27
			December	30
	Total	2,026		243
The Nation	2010	270	January	27
			June	10
	2011	213	April	12
			November	19
	2012	256	February	12
			December	20
	2013	303	May	25
			September	22
	2014	222	March	13
			October	9
	Total	1,264		169
	Total	5,309		712

Next, the 712 online news were printed as a paper to calculate and analyzed to determine their column-inch space. Each of the 712 news articles' column-inch space was multiplied by the advertising fee of each newspaper and multiplied again by news scores evaluated by four experts. After this, the news stories were evaluated according to into three ranges: Negative (-1), Neutral (+1) and Positive

(+2). The entire process provided a PR value of each airline for the period between 2010 to 2014.

The experts who assisted in this evaluation are as follows:

1. Napapha Savannarong, Lecturer, Communication Arts, School of Management and Information Sciences, University of Phayao

2. Ruginun Aурpitaksakul, Lecturer, Communication Arts, School of Management and Information Sciences, University of Phayao

3. Piyata Soontprnpiyapan, Lecturer, Communication Arts, Faculty of Management Science, Surat Thani Rajabhat University

4. Praewpan Pannuch, Lecturer, Communication Arts, Faculty of Management Science Surat Thani Rajabhat University

Part 2: According to Part 1 of this study, the three airlines that had the highest PR values were Thai Airways, Air Asia and Bangkok Airways. They were then chosen for the in-depth

interviews. The criteria of the selected interviewees were:

1) Executives or staff who have managed a crisis for an airlines.

2) Executives or staff who worked on policy control or were in charge of communication and public relations during a previous airlines' crises.

3) Executives or staff who planned communication or public relations and strategized communication in previous crises.

The in-depth interviews also included interviews with two experts in crisis communication in social media. Thus, there were a total of seven in-depth interviews.

Table 2: Participants of the in-depth interview

Number	Airline/Company	Name	Title
1	Thai Airways	Samat Phom-On	Director of Emergency Management and Crisis
2	Thai Airways	Boonleard Nuanlaor	Digital Social Media Manager
3	Air Asia	Nuttawut Jitarthan	Public Relations Manager
4	Air Asia	Moke Promma	Corporate Communication Executive
5	Bangkok Airways	Thasorn Taksinapan	Media Relations Manager
6	Diginative Co, Ltd	Kunchalee Sumleerat	Founder
7	AIA Co, Ltd	Chinsin Klungthong	Assistant Digital Marketing Manager

Research Tools

Part 1: A data evaluation form was developed for the communication and public relations experts who analyzed the sample data,

which included both Thai and English newspapers published in Thailand, is presented in table 3.

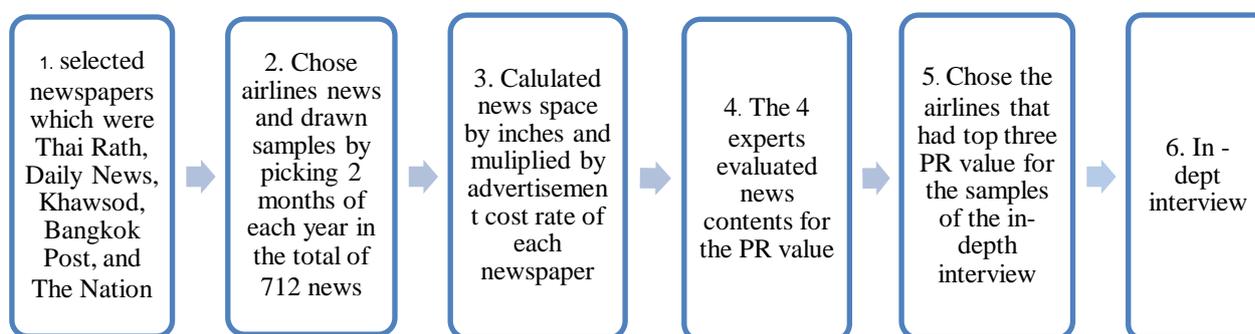
Table 3: Data evaluation form for communication and public relations experts

Number	Date	News Headline	PR Value Evaluation Range		
			-1 Negative	+1 Neutral	+2 Positive

Part 2: The in-depth interview was semi-structured and included open-ended questions to allow the interviewees to freely express their opinions.

These are two stages of this study which were data collecting of PR value of airlines for finding the airlines that had top three PR value as a sample group and the in-depth interview and by following the steps listed below.

Figure 3: Two stages of the study



Research Results: Part 1

The research results of Part 1 show that the top three airlines in PR values were Thai Airways (TG), Air Asia Airline (AK) and Bangkok Airways (PG).

Airlines with top three PR Values

1. Thai Airways (TG)

The results of the study show that Thai Airways had a total PR value of 6,812,539 THB, calculated from 2,841,019.6 THB in 2010, 1,180,543.3 THB in 2011, 1,971,281.2 THB in 2012, 35720.7 THB in 2013 and 783,974.89 THB in 2014.

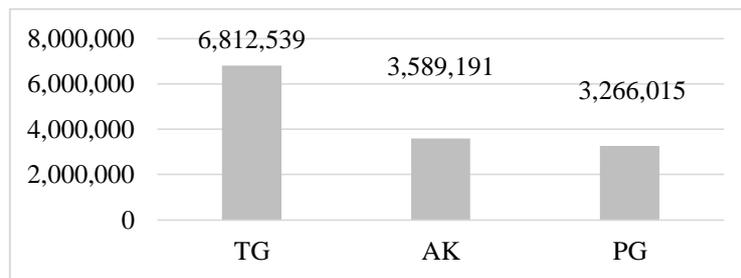
2. Air Asia Airlines (AK)

The results of the study show that Air Asia airline had a total PR value of 3,589,191 THB, calculated from 677,802 THB in 2010, 145,467 THB in 2011, 520,398 THB in 2012, 1,169,178 THB in 2013 and 1,076,346 THB in 2014.

3. Bangkok Airways Airlines(PG)

The results of the study show that Bangkok Airways had a total PR value of 3,266,015 THB, calculated from 907,580 THB in 2010, 882,182 THB in 2011, 509,880 THB in 2012, 400,247.5 THB in 2013 and 566,125.4 THB in 2014.

Figure 4: PR values of top three airlines from 2010 – 2014



The three airlines with the three highest PR values were selected as the sample group for the in-depth interviews as The three showed more effective communication management with their news and information had more positive input and better content than other airlines.

Research Results: Part 2

The interview results were divided into three stages: pre-crisis, operations during a crisis and operations after a crisis, with details listed below.

Preparation for Crisis Management

Preparation: The results show that the airlines had prepared a crisis plan, communication connections and communication tools, including a list of online influencers and bloggers.

“...Thai Airways has four stages, which are: 1. Reduction, i.e., reducing chances of a crisis; 2. Readiness, i.e., preparation of a plan, practice, connection searching and equipment preparation to manage a crisis; 3. Reaction, i.e., adhering to a plan stimulation as much as possible; and 4. Recovery, i.e., returning the situation to be normal as soon as possible” (Samat Phum-On, Interview, 6 May 2016)

Staff Training: The results show that crisis management training was conducted for both domestic and overseas staff, including

workshops and academic conferences. The airlines also provided training in social media as they wanted staff to better understand digital communication.

“The organization’s training on social media was for everyone, from the top to junior level, as a social media crisis actually occurs more often within the organization than outside. So, this is needed for our protection.” (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, 7 May 2017)

Plan Stimulation: The results show that airlines conducted drills before any actual crisis.

“We conduct drills twice a year at Don Mueang Airport such as a bomb drill, plane fire drill...” (Moke Promma, Interview, 26 May 2016)

Forming a Crisis Operations Committee: The results show that airlines set up a crisis operations committee to be prepared for an actual crisis. The committee comprises many people from different departments with the ability to manage a crisis. They would not take action in a crisis until the crisis plan was activated.

“We have a LINE group and the team is always on stand-by... The group consists of representatives of the following departments: Flight Operations, Ground Support, Airline Crew, Engineering, PR, Pilots, Business Development and Law...” (Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

Experts also set up a social media operation team in preparation as well.

“Setting up a social media operation team is not complex. If people in the organization understand the flow of digital communication, then, everyone will be able to act. So, the organization does not need many people familiar with digital communication, but it needs a controller who understands how the organization functions.” (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, May 7, 2017)

Warning Signs Testing: The results found that airlines regularly checked for warning signs, internally and externally.

“We are monitoring social media data 24 hours a day. We can be notified at any time, especially when there is negative feedback, hot topics or posts that are shared many times.” (Moke Promma, Interview, 26 May 2016)

Operations During a Crisis

Crisis Analysis: The results show that the airlines frequently analyzed crises collect information and implement action.

“There is always an analysis of a crisis. If it is a serious crisis, the Emergency Response Plan will be activated, which will involve staff from many departments. If it is a minor crisis such as social media topic and we have the source and information of the posting, we will decide how to correct the issue.” (Moke Promma, Interview, 26 May 2016)

Online crisis management also analyzing situations by collecting and analyzing data to determine how a crisis occurred. One step in the analysis is grouping data under four colors, each

color identify the roles and responsibilities of each team.

“We analyze conditions by grouping them under the colors green, yellow, orange and red. Green means a normal case. Yellow is a typically a complaint we can manage by our regular process. Red means a crisis that needs to be rectified, and orange is not a crisis but a situation the needs attention as it can develop into a crisis; so, it needs to be monitored.” (Kunchalee Sumlee, Interview, 5 May 2017)

Crisis Management: The results show that the airlines managed crises that required a crisis plan, including social media crises. This demonstrates how high impact crisis management needs a crisis plan and operations team.

“Crisis management is led by the Crisis Management Team, which is divided into five sections, Crisis Planning, Crisis Logistics, Crisis Operations, Crisis Finance & Administration and Crisis Communication. After the plan is activated by the Crisis Team Director, the Crisis Planning team will determine the roles of each section.” (Thasorn Taksinapan, Bangkok, Interview, 31 May 2016)

In a social media crisis, an airline would directly contact the affected people to stop the spread of negative feedback to a greater online audience.

“...To manage online negative posts about our airline, we have two different ways to manage it. The first, in the case a complaint is sent directly to our complaint system, we will proceed by following prepared steps. On the other hand, if a complaint is posted on Facebook or the Pantip website, the airline may

not be able to solve a problem [immediately], and thus, we may not be able to follow the steps we have provided. We will consider case by case to see on how to fix the issue but mostly we would contact the passengers directly. Some cases, we don't notify the public on how we correct the problem, talking directly to the passengers is better.” (Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

Thai Airways utilized online influencers' connections to help with online crisis management.

“When we find negative feedback about the airline while monitoring online posts, we don't respond to all of them, but will respond to situations on Thai Airways' media channels such as Facebook by utilizing an advocate group who supports the airline as well as online influencers who share links to respond, telling how the airline is working to solve these issues on Facebook. The advocate group will work to change the negative feedback to positive feedback. Besides sharing links, they post positive stories about the airline to dispute the negative feedback. Normally, no one seems to argue with a negative post; however, in reality, people may disagree with it. We ask this group to share an opposing opinion and later, this negative feedback may change to a positive result. In the case of posting fake information about the airline, the advocate group will monitor that data for us as well.” (Boonleard Nuanlaor, Interview, 5 June 2016)

The experts discussed the crisis management process, which includes Preventive, Proactive and Reactive components, which

require simultaneous action during the three steps of online media communication management: discovery and analysis, communication and evaluation.

“The components of crisis management are Preventive, Proactive and Reactive, which interact. During the preventive phase in the communication process, we need to act to prevent a crises from occurring. The reactive phase kicks in when our customers have problems with our service. We need to provide them with satisfactory service. The proactive phases means reaching out to customers. For example, when we receive negative feedback, we will talk to customers right away. Meanwhile, there are three steps in online communication management. The first one is discovery or posts and analysis, looking for the spark that can set off a crisis. The second step is communication applying the right style for a particular audience as we cannot communicate with everyone using the same style. Some cases don't need group communication as sometimes personal engagement works better. The third step is evaluation as we need to evaluate the situation to determine if it is almost over or will continue to grow. So, the flow chart of crisis management will tell us on what needs to be done and when. During the evaluation stage, we need to check two things, discover and analysis and communication; then it's back to the evaluation. We will keep checking this until the situation calms down, and then is over. If we think the situation is over when actually it is not, this means we reacted too soon, and this can create a new crisis. Sometimes, we try to fix a problem, but

this can actually make the situation even worse. A crisis can actually rise and fall. A situation may seem almost over, but a new factor can cause it to rebound. We need to end the crisis as soon as possible.” (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, 7 May 2017)

Crisis Data Collection: The results show that the airlines collected crisis data. Furthermore, the two experts emphasized the importance of frequent data collection and evaluation among online influencers and instigators, especially to ensure that there were not any hidden agendas.

“We collect data for two reasons. The first, which is during the operations stage, we need to collect data to report to the related departments following the data notification time schedule. The second, which is collecting data during the communication stage, is to find answers to such questions as: What is the crisis? What is the executive announcement? What is the date and time of the next news release? We also continue to monitor trends based on data that has already been presented. If the trend is negative, the team needs to figure out how to fix this.” (Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

Public Relations Operation Center: The results show that the airlines set up public relations operations centers only once a crisis plan has been activated.

“When a crisis occurs, the airline will allocate a room for the crisis management center. This is a special room as it will not be used for any other purpose. The room has

management tools and equipment such as TVs for monitoring data and news from TV programs as well as other communication tools.” (Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

Crisis Summary Meeting: The results show that the airlines always have a crisis conclusion meeting.

“Our airline emphasizes the importance of a summary meeting with internal and the external stakeholders. This protects the airline from future communication problems and misunderstandings as the airline works to do our best by sounding clear and without any doubt. This leads to effective management.” (Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

Communication Target Groups Analysis: The results show that the airlines designated different communication target groups and then developed different content for each group. Airlines communicate first with the target group most affected by a crisis and the media.

“In a crisis like a plane crash, the target groups that need to be contacted are family and relatives of the injured and victims. The airline should communicate with internal groups before communicating to external groups such as journalists. If we don’t effectively communicate with the internal group, this may cause mistakes, misunderstanding and further issues.” Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

The experts emphasized the importance of communication with online influencers, instigators and stakeholders, as well as understanding the factors, node, spread and voice as defined for online communication.

“It depends on the case; if you have 60 cases, you will manage these in 60 different ways. There are three social media management factors, node, spread and voice. We need to understand the voice to be able to control the situation. When the voice is high, the situation can quickly inflate and create a crisis. The other important factor, thus, spread. In digital PR, we need to reduce or kill the spread as soon as possible. Node is important as it is the spark that causes the voice and then the spread of news by those called fire starters as well as online influencers. We need to communicate to these groups, especially the influencers, who help form the node. We need to communicate a lot with this group. After this communication, it is hoped they will delete their posts to stop the spread. In some cases, we do not need to engage directly with them. Some of these can spout nonsense and be aggressive and rude. We should ignore them when we can.” (Chinsin Klunghong, Interview, 7 May 2017)

Communication Content Design: The results show that the airlines control crisis communication content based on the development of a situation. The content is drafted and then edited before it is released. The experts in social media emphasized the importance of a human sense in online media.

“Applying a human sense to communication means not using formal language as people will think the sender is much like a concrete wall. We give a human sense to a statement by showing how we feel really sorry about what happened. If a crisis takes place in our family, how would we feel? It’s important to

draft a message that will making people feel that we really care about them and we are trying to solve the problem. We may not find a solution immediately, but we are trying our best. We want them to realize that we are here to help and will make sure that the same mistake will not happen again.” (Kunchalee Sumlee, Interview, 5 May 2017)

Communication Tool Usage Management: The results show the three airlines utilized communication tools to manage crises focusing on both external and internal stakeholders using offline and online media. The expert applied the principle of Paid-Owned-Earned Media in social media communication management.

“Media comprises Paid-Owned-Earned Media. We have to work hard on our own media as we need our organization to be strong. With paid media, we need to monitor the media we paid for, especially where there is a crisis. With earned media, we have to avoid risks as this is not our space. We may create a crisis which can’t be controlled. We should let people come to us in a controlled environment, so we can control the situation. The management needs to act case by case and should not need stick to one media. If a crisis is caused online, then let it be resolved online. Where it starts, let it finish, for example, with a crisis caused on Twitter, let it be finished on Twitter. With Node, Voice, and Spread, which I mentioned previously, when a crisis appears on Twitter, do not let it spread elsewhere. Facebook is not the place to deal for this crisis. If the crisis starts on Facebook, then let it be done on Facebook. This is the simplest way

to resolve it, unless the crisis has already spread elsewhere.” (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, 7 May 2017)

Media Relations: The results show that the airlines used the media during a crisis through the actions of their public relations teams.

“The airline uses the media during a crisis of the organization. Our public relations department will be in charge of collaborating with them.” (Samat Phum-On, Bangkok, Interview, 6 May 2016)

Informed Source Control: The results show that the airlines pay attention to controlled news resources, especially staff and associates of their organization.

“During a crisis, we communicate with staff and ask them to cooperate by being careful sharing negative feedback and comments online. They are not allowed to give information to the press or act like news sources.” (Natthawut Jitarthan, Interview, 13 May 2016)

Post Crisis Operations

Summary of Situation: The results show that the airlines summarize a crisis in reports and meetings.

“We have a meeting to summarize the situation and its effect. There is an evaluation on how much damage the crisis caused, who were affected, how operations worked and how to adapt to ensure the same mistakes don’t reoccur in the future. All of the information is included in a report submitted to the airlines’

executives.” (Thasorn Taksinapan, Bangkok, Interview, 31 May 2016)

Post Crisis Recovery: The results show that the airlines pay attention to post crisis recovery.

“The management during stage three, called Recovery, focuses on returning the situation to normal as soon as possible with the least amount of damage. The important thing is finding the right opportunity.”(Samat Phum-On, Interview, 6 May 2016)

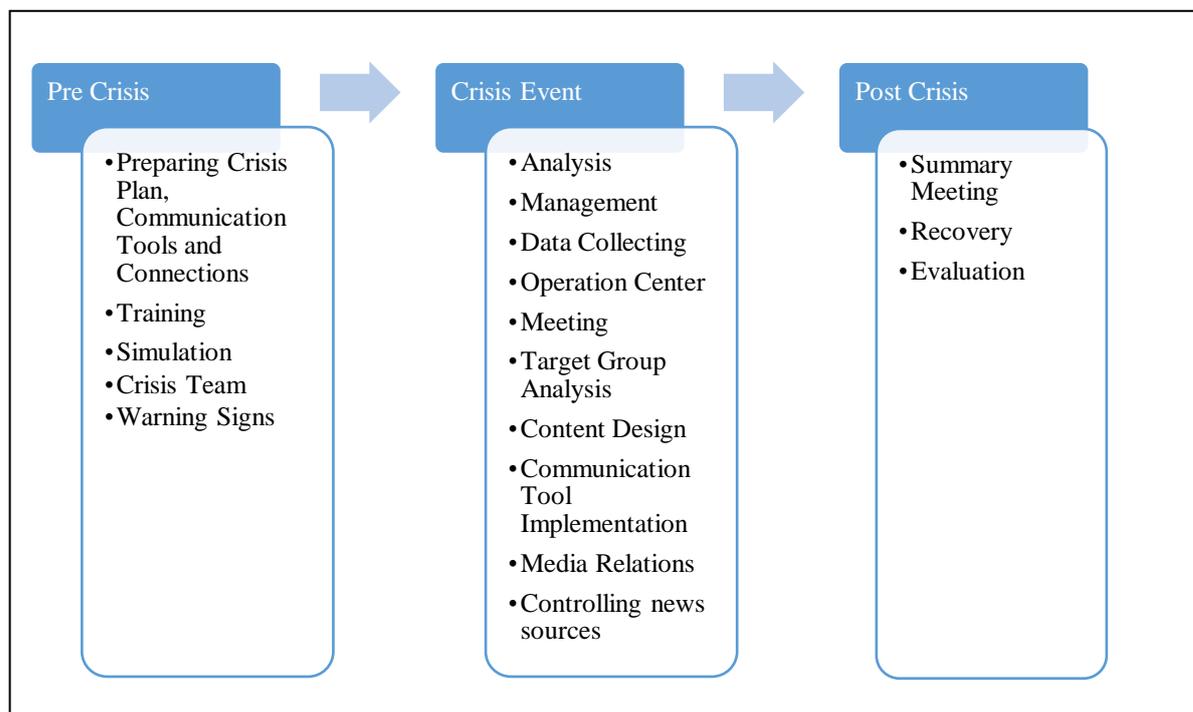
Management Plan Evaluation: The results show that prepared crisis management plans always worked as expected.

“Each crisis has different details and is always challenging. A prepared plan will work 90% as expected, and another 10% is the unpredictable that we cannot control.” (Thasorn Taksinapan, Interview, 31 May 2016)

The experts said there should be an evaluation and follow-up of the management plan following a social media crisis like other situations. If an online crisis cannot be managed by the airlines, the experts suggested to implementing a Silent Policy.

“After analysis and evaluation, if the crisis is still in a serious condition, the best thing to do is to remain silent. You need to have a silent policy. In a case like this, you need to remain silent until the situation is back to normal. Keep silent on every channel.” (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, 7 May 2017)

Figure 5: 3 Stages of Crisis Management



Discussion

From the results of this study, it was found that the crisis management process was consistent with the concepts of crisis communication management, which include warning signs testing, public relations operation centers, media relations, summary meetings, communication target group analysis, content communication design, summary and evaluation.

This concept emphasized the importance of the crisis communication, which is important in solving an organization's problems. At the beginning of pre-crisis preparation, (Duangtip Worapan, 2002) suggested that forecasting a crisis is necessary by paying attention to current situations that may cause a crisis while considering previous crises. The warning sign test helps prepare airlines to be aware of a minor problem before it turns into a

crisis that is more difficult to control. The pre-crisis phase is the most important period to prevent any crises (Kunchalee Sumlee, Interview, 5 May 2017). This study found that the airlines regularly conducted both internal and external safety testing. In digital communication, the airlines focus on social media data checking. For example, they utilize online reputation management and social listening. The airlines acknowledged they faced problems in digital communication management and reacting in a timely manner to prevent a crisis from materializing.

Public relations operation centers were set up during a crisis. This is done to facilitate and organize operations staff and handle the media. For example, Thai Airways had a Crisis Management Operation Center, which acted to provide one-stop service to provide information

about a crisis. The center provided quick and effective management, directing the dissemination of information in one direction.

The airlines provided facilities to the press to help them work effectively when presenting the airlines' news and information during a crisis. The study found that this was under the control of the airlines' public relations departments. Their departments regularly updated information to help the press promptly and effectively publish airlines news and information during a crisis. This way, the airlines were able to control news topics as well.

The airlines had summary meetings to update information and create common understanding. For example, Air Asia communicated directly with those affected if the crisis was minor. On the other hand, the airline had a daily meeting to update everyone involved to prevent rumors from spreading through online media and the press during a major crisis. The meetings helped the team acquire accurate information which could be applied to decision making and problem solving. The meetings protected the airline from misunderstandings and miscommunication, which ensured more effective crisis management.

The airlines analyzed their communication target groups. Each group needed different data and information depending on the level of an emergency. The airlines considered these differences to adapt messages according to each target group and the current conditions. For example, Bangkok Airways communicated

with the group most directly affected first to try to rectify the problem as quickly as possible.

The airlines' communication content design during a crisis was dependent on the situations. The content would be drafted and then adjusted to fit a specific situation. This is consistent with the concept that released content is adapted to meet a target group's specific need (Duangtip Worapan, 2002).

Informed source control, both internal and external, is another strategy that the airlines paid attention to. They focused especially on internal stakeholders, who are primarily organization staff. For example, Air Asia communicated to their staff during a crisis by asking them to be cautious about releasing negative comments. The organization emailed every staff to tell them not to share comments online, give interviews to the press or act as a news source, which could make the crisis more serious.

The crisis summary and evaluation of the plan were conducted after the crisis was over. This is consistent with Bland (1998, p. 73) as he suggested that after a crisis is over, the operations team should meet to analyze what was learned from the crisis as well as prepare a report to summarize the event. This should include what improvements are required while focusing on different target groups, including those still interested in or following up crisis with concern of a relapse.

The crisis management concept includes crisis management preparation, plan stimulation before a crisis, establishment of an operations committee, data collection and

informed source control. Leonard Saffir and John Tarrant, (1992) presented principles of crisis management described as, “preventing and reducing the effect” of crisis as much as possible. The results of this study are consistent with this concept.

For crisis preparation, the airlines prepared a plan, communication connections and communication tools. For example, Thai Airways has formed connections with advocate groups and online groups that support the airline. They help to correct rumors and check data concerning the airline on social media.

For crisis plan stimulation, following planning, the airlines tested their plans to see if they work. This also prepares staff on their roles and responsibilities when a crisis does occur and helps them work more effectively. This also helps to foresee any mistakes. The results of this study found that the airlines valued stimulation. For example, Thai Airways conducted stimulation then issued a report, recording the results of the plan along with comments on the results.

When it comes to the operations committee, the airlines formed teams comprising members who are important to crisis management. For example, Bangkok Airways has a Crisis Management Team to manage a crisis, which is consistent with the research of Ee Ling J. Tan (2003), which conducted a case study of Singapore Airlines and its crisis communication. He found it was very important that airlines have a well-trained crisis communication team. Good preparation showed that in a crisis, the

operations staff assumed their their roles and responsibilities very quickly.

Data collection should come quick to gain a better understanding of the situation. As a crisis occurs very quickly, an airline should prepare data, information and pictures that are needed by the press to release to the public. Without this information, the press would have to find the information from other news sources, and then the airlines would lose control of the positive direction of the organization’s news. This helps give positive tone to the information. For example, Air Asia has divided data collection into 2 types. The first is organized by the operations team and includes the evolution of the situation which they share with other involved teams. The second type is managed by the PR team, which includes collecting data from people involved in the situation. The organization is also open to receive data from other sources.

Results of the study from the social media crisis communication experts show that data evaluation is important, especially on online influencers and the fire starters, instigators of news or rumors.

Moreover, the results of the study of crisis communication in social media are consistent with the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC), which emphasizes the importance of components such as organizations, or, in this case, airlines that tend to have crises more than other organizations. As social media has the ability to quickly spread news and information, the number of news followers has been increasing

annually (Chinsin Klungthong, Interview, 7 May 2017). This includes social media influencers have an impact on social media receivers. It is very important to note that all components are interrelated in crisis communication in the digital period (Yan Jin, Brooke Fisher Liu and Lucinda L. Austin, 2011). Therefore, organizations needs to realize the importance of creating good relationships with social media influencers and their organizations' social media followers, as both groups have the ability to efficiently spread an organization's information during a crisis via social media (Yan Jin, Brooke Fisher Liu and Lucinda L. Austin, 2011).

Conclusion

This research shows the importance of communication in crisis management in the airline business, which is consistent with W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry L. Holladay (2010), who presented that communication takes the lead role in the entire process of crisis management.

This also includes internal organizational communication among those who have direct roles and responsibilities, as well as, the external organizational communication between the stakeholders and public. This is because communication is a process that completes the information gap, reduces the uncertainty, strengthens knowledge and understanding, and maintains good relationships.

Moreover, the results of the study show the influence of online social media that has become a powerful media which is utilized by airlines as a tool to manage crises at the present

time. As Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1998) said, cyberspace has been a valuable tool helping public relations officers working in bigger scopes. Social media is an important communication tool for organizations of this generation as it becomes more and more popular in corporate communications (Wright and Hinson, 2009).

Online social media crisis management is thus important for organizations. As consumers participate in online social media, communication via traditional media is not enough (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Organizations need to adjust themselves and utilize online social media to interact with their consumers as they can quickly respond and pass along information to consumers (Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal & Hughes, 2013). This includes social media influencers who are public leaders and have the ability to exchange information and act as opinion leaders of online communities (Van Dijk, 2012). Once the crisis occurs, an organization can learn from their mistakes so they will not let them repeat.

Research Limitation

The limitation of this study is that only PR values were determined only for newspapers published in Thailand and not from around the world. Furthermore, no other media was considered.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future research should expand to include newspapers publishing airline news in different countries, as airline business covers the globe, and news and information are

disseminated in many countries. Studying airline news published in different countries could lead to a selection of different organizations and an examination of opportunity to study the airline business elsewhere other than just in Thailand.

Application of Research

Airline staff and executives of all departments should receive training to have a better understanding of crises. Crises are related

to all staff, not just executives because everyone is important to crisis management. When staff understand a situation, they can help to stop the spread of information and manage the problem promptly. Thus, it is important to have an understanding of crisis communication management from the very beginning of their career with an airline.

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