

Case Study of Asiana Airlines' Crisis Communication for the SFO Crash of Flight 214



ADV 860 Media Relations

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I. Background:

Asiana Airlines flight OZ214(Boeing 777), departed from Incheon International Airport, Seoul, South Korea, on July 6, 2013 at 16:35 (Korea time) to San Francisco International Airport, and crashed while attempting to land on runway 28 on July 6, 2013 at 11:28 (Local Time). Within the total 291 passengers from eight nationalities (19 business class, 272 travel class) and 16 crewmembers, 182 were injured and three female fatalities.

II. Stakeholders:

1. Victims

The 288 survivors needed to be communicated with because they were directly impacted from the incident. After the incident, victims wanted to know all the updated information: incidents details on the cause of the crash, the investigation process, sources they can use for further recovery, and the airline and other authority's contact information to clarify any related issues. Victims more easily had emotional reactions, because of their direct involvement. And if airline didn't handle the after-care properly, it would be vulnerable to face negative repercussions, like lawsuits or strikes in the future.

2. Victims' families

Victims' families were closely connected to victims. They very actively sought for related information and sources, and followed up all the investigating as well as after-care processes. Also, those families were counted as victims as well, if the airlines couldn't emotionally or practically make them satisfied (i.e., sincere apology, reasonable compensations), airlines might have faced potential risks, like lawsuits or boycotts.

3. Employees (including crewmembers)

After the incident, employees might lose their faith and trust toward the company. Therefore, it was really important to win their employees' heart back by showing them how responsible and reliable the company was. In this case, crewmembers were directly involved in the incident process; therefore, they were also kinds of "victims." Without providing them good treatments, like a reasonable compensation, Asiana could lose their company's credibility.

4. The Media

Most people rely on mass media to get information, especially for a disaster like this. Media has the ability to "frame" the issue or message as their intention. If the company has poor media relations, the media might not be willing to report positive news about the company or frame the story to meet the company's anticipation. Journalists might dig in more negative information and share with the public and influence the publicity, which could be a big risk for the company. Such as, when Asiana CEO kept silent after the incident, instead of choosing a positive angle, the media interpreted his action as secrecy.

What's more, media coverage can influence how the incident will progress. For example, if Asiana kept receiving negative reports, the public wouldn't let the incident pass.

5. *Related authorities*

Related authorities are important because they usually work closely together with the company. In this case, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and San Francisco International Airport (SFO) cooperated with Asiana to support all the investigation process. Therefore, good relationships with them, such as effective communication and cooperated attitudes, would bring fewer difficulties for Asiana during the investigating process.

6. *Potential clients*

It is important to keep updated information with the public to ensure information accuracy, or many people will adopt many unreliable sources. Also, with negative publicity, Asiana might lose some of their future business.

III. Communication Objectives and Strategies:

After the incident, Asiana released 5 press releases, posted 10 times on social media (twitter, Facebook and Google+) as well as hosted press conferences. Overall, there are five main communication objectives:

1. Update information and resource sharing
2. Reduce stakeholders' emotional turmoil and uncertainty
3. Express sympathy and apology (Not in the first press release)
4. Show support, long-term commitment, and responsibility to all stakeholders.
5. Recover the company images, reputations, and credibility.

Asiana released first statement on Twitter at 4:39p.m. July 6 to show their thoughts any prayers to all the victims (**See Appendix A**). Seven hours after the crash, Asiana finally released their first press release on Twitter, Facebook, Google+, and the Asiana's official website (**See Appendix B**). The press release mainly stated that Asiana is cooperating for the investigations in order to find the cause of the incident, which focuses on information and resource delivery. After that, a sequence of four press releases had been released on the company website until July 13th, which included phone number for more information, deep apology, family and victims accommodations and aimed to reduce emotional turmoil for all stakeholders (**See Appendix C to F**).

After July 13th, Asiana did not provide enough information and support to their stakeholders. They had infrequent posts, and even switched their social media communication strategy back to regular mode after July 13. Asiana did not respond to any social media comments or any media connection outside of Korea. According to Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx, "in the every rare event of a crash, airlines have a responsibility to provide their full support to help passengers

and their families by following all the elements of their family assistance plans” (Los Angeles Times, 2014). He also mentioned that “the last thing families and passengers should have to worry about at such a stressful time is how to get information from their carrier” (Los Angeles Times, 2014). Therefore, with the failing care of families, Asiana was fined \$500,000 by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Following are some communication strategies that were applied by Asiana:

1. **Apology:** In the press statements, twitter and Facebook posts, Asiana showed it’s sympathy many times, especially during the press conference. Yoon Young-doo, Asiana President and CEO, led his board members to bow in front of the public, which showed the most sincere apologize in Asian culture.
2. **Excusing:** Asiana refused to take full responsibility for the incident. During the first press conference, Yoon Young-doo denied the accident was caused by the pilot’s mistakes and lack of experience. He also stated that the mechanics error has “yet to be confirmed.”
3. **Scapegoat:** Asiana stated that the automatic speed controls of the plane had issues, which implied Boeing Company’s responsibility. Asiana’s spokeswoman also mentioned that the flight crew should take some responsibility.
4. **Attack:** Asiana threatened to sue KTVU for a live racial prank of their pilots’ Korean names.
5. **Compensation:** Asiana later promised to offer all of the survivors \$10,000 to support their needs. However, Yonhap, the Korean news agency, disclosed those families needed to agree to eight “silent” conditions in order to get the money.
6. **Silence:** According to Coombs “*Ongoing Crisis Communication*”, silence is not included in communication strategies, but Asiana applied “silence” as one of their main strategies. Asiana waited four hours to post the first tweet and eight hours to release their first press release. Also, when Yoon Young-doo arrived at San Francisco, he did not respond to the media. Asiana not only asked their employees keep silent during the crisis, but also they tried to keep both survivors and victims’ families silent too. This silence strategy caused Asiana to receive many critiques from both the media and the public.



IV. Media Reports and Responses:

Asiana’s first twitter post as well as their press releases was quoted by many news media, like USA Today, CBS, ABC-WFAA, and Business Insider. The CEO condolence quote in the July 13th press release as well as the statements on the July 7th news conference was quoted by many

mainstream media, like Fox News, ABC News, and NY Daily News, meaning they did successfully deliver their apology.

However, Asiana received many negative comments on their released statements. In an article wrote by Brad Philips, a writer on Mr. Media Training, Asiana should include what they wrote in the first Twitter post in their official press release, because “more people are likely to encounter Asiana’s official press release than its earlier tweet”(2013). Another article was written on The 15-Seconds Blog, “No doubt there are some cultural differences between what might be normal in Seoul and San Francisco — but the Asiana press release was so heartless it looked to us as if it might have been drafted in NORTH Korea”(2013). The Wall Street Journal also quoted “Asiana rejected offers to form a communication team in the United States to help respond to questions from families or the media”(2013). When journalists asked about Asiana’s response, the representative said, “It's not the proper time to manage the company's image”(The Wall Street Journal, 2013).

Asiana was blamed by spending "an inordinate amount of time" to respond to the crisis. The Wall Street Journal stated, “it took three days for Asiana Airlines to dispatch its chief executive and a team of staffers to Saturday's plane-crash site at San Francisco International Airport”(2013). After arriving in SFO, the Asiana CEO refused to answers all questions. Ira Kalb, professor of Marshall school of business, USC, wrote in Business Insider, “The airline did not have a trained public relations representative accompany the CEO to address the media either”(2013). Mr. Kalb implied that Asiana was hiding information. Dan Nakaso, a journalist at San Jose Mercury News quoted Chuck Byers’ comment, a marketing and public relations professor at Santa Clara University, in his report. Professor Byers commented that the CEO could show his leadership “by making a simple statement through a spokesman that he would not speak publicly because he needed to focus on the injured, the survivors, his crew and his customers”(San Jose Mercury News, 2013).

Asiana hosted a press conference in Korea to respond to the incident publicly. The CEO led all his board members to bow in front of camera unaware of cultural differences. Max Fisher, a journalist of The Washington Post, wrote, “bowing is common in South Korea but not really done in the United States” (2013).

Most of the reports were quoted from NTSB and SFO but not from Asiana. Asiana’s passive strategy was not familiar to U.S. crisis managers, according to The Wall Street Journal (2013). Asiana did not have an immediate initial post on their website and social media platform, which increased the negative coverage of Asiana. Asiana had a chance to limit the negative publicity when they released their first press release, but the “unsympathetic” content made Asiana received more critiques. After that, Asiana lost many chances to recover the negative media coverage by refusing to respond, not providing an adequate U.S. spokesperson, and lack of media posts. Asiana’s actions made them lose their credibility; thus, they failed to send out the communication messages.

V. Communication Implications:

1. Silence is not always a good strategy:

Asiana adopted “silence strategy” to the all the crisis management process, from CEO to crewmembers; causing the media coverage to accuse Asiana of secrecy. In the social media era, everyone can be source. For example, the first post to expose the incident was from a bystander, which provided the wrong information to all the media (**See Appendix G**). Therefore, keeping silent could easily tangle a company in rumors, which could cause the company to spend extra efforts dealing with it. Since journalists could not get information from the company, they might easily seek for some other unreliable sources. In order to keep credibility and recover the image toward the public, proper messages should be shared, especially for a crisis like air crash.

2. Asiana should hire a local spokesperson as well as a media contact person:

A well-trained spokesperson can be the company’s “one voice,” and frame the answers appropriately to convince the public. Especially for those controversial questions, a well-prepared spokesperson could help the company’s executive officers avoid inappropriate responses. Also, a “local” spokesperson is necessary for the international crisis. Local spokespersons have more knowledge of local cultures, customs as well as effectively contact other local media, as well to be reached by local journalists; which can prevent those journalists from reporting news from unreliable sources.

3. Culture differences should be considered:

Crisis response plan should be well prepared before the crisis happens. Asiana seemed to have fewer preparations for dealing with crisis, which made them have really slow and improper reactions toward the incident. Because this was an international incident, “crisis manager will be less familiar with how to manage a crisis and communication in the host countries than in the home country”(Coombs, 2008).

While handling cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to consider about the cultural differences into communication strategies and platforms. For example, when Asiana hosted a press conference, CEO led all his board members to bow in front of the public. This action in Asian culture show the most deeply apology, but it did not make sense for U.S. culture.



Also, media relations and social media platforms are different from culture to culture, especially because Twitter and Facebook are banned in China. Since media had big influence on publicity, to figure out how to interact with and respond to local media is very important part for an international company. In the incident, not all of the stakeholders were Asian, and the culture difference should be factored into Asiana’s communication strategy.

Appendix:

A. The first Twitter:

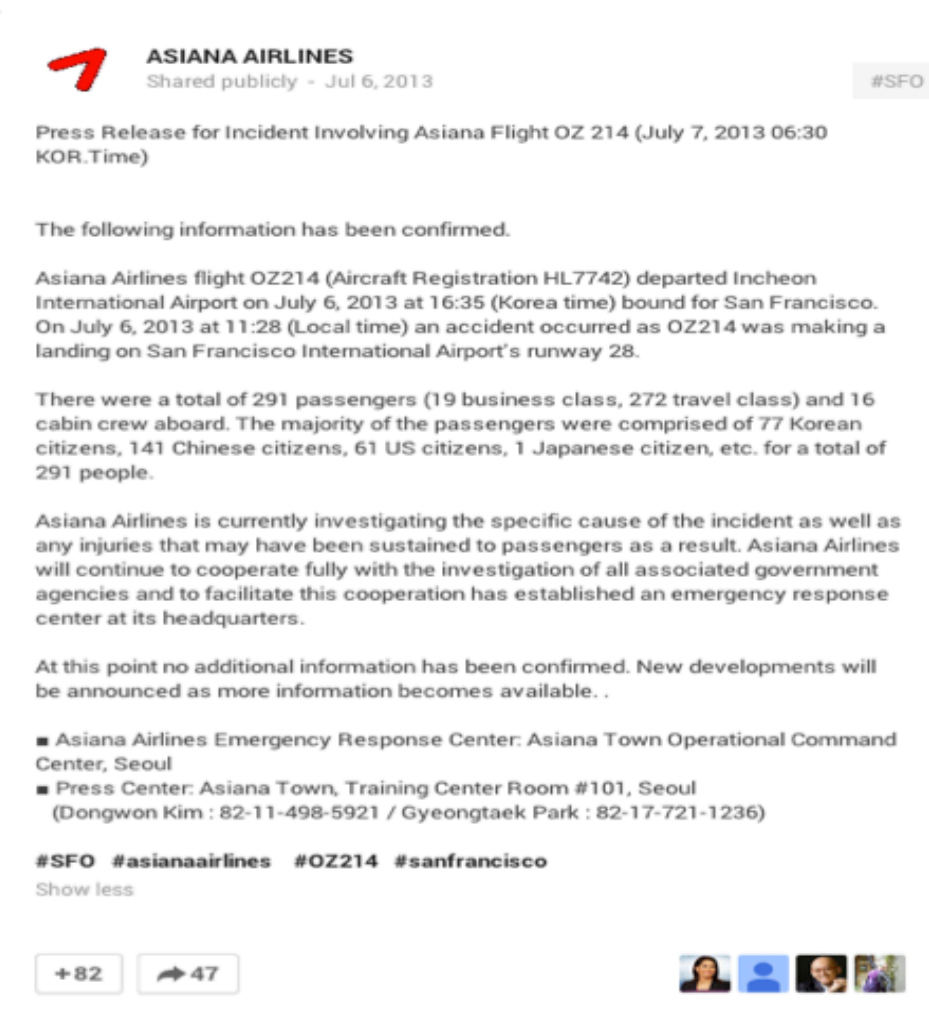


Asiana Airlines @AsianaAirlines 6 Jul
Our thoughts and prayers are with all the passengers, and flight crew on the flight. We hope to provide you with further info asap.
Collapse ← Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite *** More

1,281 RETWEETS 154 FAVORITES

4:39 PM - 6 Jul 13 · Details

B. The first press release:



ASIANA AIRLINES
Shared publicly · Jul 6, 2013 #SFO

Press Release for Incident Involving Asiana Flight OZ 214 (July 7, 2013 06:30 KOR.Time)

The following information has been confirmed.

Asiana Airlines flight OZ214 (Aircraft Registration HL7742) departed Incheon International Airport on July 6, 2013 at 16:35 (Korea time) bound for San Francisco. On July 6, 2013 at 11:28 (Local time) an accident occurred as OZ214 was making a landing on San Francisco International Airport's runway 28.

There were a total of 291 passengers (19 business class, 272 travel class) and 16 cabin crew aboard. The majority of the passengers were comprised of 77 Korean citizens, 141 Chinese citizens, 61 US citizens, 1 Japanese citizen, etc. for a total of 291 people.

Asiana Airlines is currently investigating the specific cause of the incident as well as any injuries that may have been sustained to passengers as a result. Asiana Airlines will continue to cooperate fully with the investigation of all associated government agencies and to facilitate this cooperation has established an emergency response center at its headquarters.

At this point no additional information has been confirmed. New developments will be announced as more information becomes available. .

- Asiana Airlines Emergency Response Center: Asiana Town Operational Command Center, Seoul
- Press Center: Asiana Town, Training Center Room #101, Seoul (Dongwon Kim : 82-11-498-5921 / Gyeongtaek Park : 82-17-721-1236)

#SFO #asianaairlines #OZ214 #sanfrancisco
Show less

+82 ↗ 47

C. The second press release:

| Press Release

Official Asiana Statement from HL7742 Incident Press Conference

2013-07-07 16:31

We at Asiana Airlines would like express our utmost sympathy and regret for the distress experienced by the passengers of HL7742 and their families as a result of this accident. We apologize most deeply.

Asiana Airlines flight HL7742 departed Incheon International Airport on July 6, 2013 at 16:35 (Korea time) bound for San Francisco. On July 6, 2013 at 11:27 (Local time) an accident occurred as HL7742 landed on San Francisco International Airport's runway 28.

A total of 291 passengers were aboard the aircraft. (77 Koreans, 141 Chinese, 64 Americans, 3 Indians, 3 Canadians, 1 French, 1 Japanese and 1 Vietnamese)

Asiana Airlines has established emergency response centers to ascertain the cause of this crash and to look after injured passengers and contact their families. Asiana continues to actively cooperate with all Korean and US governmental institutions in the ongoing investigation.

D. Third Press Release:

| Press Release

Statement from July 8th Press Conference on HL7742 Incident

2013-07-08 15:42

Asiana would like to provide a brief update regarding the status of HL7742.

The special charter flight dispatched by Asiana Airlines yesterday at 13:33 (Korea Time) carrying twelve support staff, eight government inspectors and members of the Korean media has arrived on location in San Francisco. Its passengers have begun supporting the victims and their families and assisting in the investigation.

Asiana Airlines is providing airfare and lodging for families of the passengers. In the event that the number of family members seeking support increases, Asiana is also preparing to operate additional charter flights.

Two Korean family members departed for the United States yesterday. Another four are expected to depart today followed by an additional four on Wednesday. Asiana Airlines is also supporting twelve Chinese family members and six Chinese government officials, who will depart from Shanghai for the United States (via Incheon) today.

48 injured persons are being treated at local hospitals in the San Francisco area. Each hospital is staffed with dedicated personnel and transportation to provide the utmost support for the victims and their families.

Asiana Airlines will continue to exert great effort in providing assistance and on the ongoing investigation.

E. Fourth Press Release:

| Press Release

Statement from July 9th Press Conference regarding the HL7742 Incident

2013-07-09 18:01

Asiana Airlines would like to provide a brief update on the status of the HL7742 incident.

Asiana Airlines is putting forth great effort to assist the families of the passengers on flight HL7742. As of this afternoon, family members of 6 passengers have departed for San Francisco, and families of another 4 Korean passengers are scheduled to depart at 5:25pm local time. Furthermore, 5 more families will be departing tomorrow and 2 more on the 12th.

With regard to the Chinese passengers, one of our employees is escorting 12 family members and 6 government officials from Shanghai. The group departed last night and is on their way to San Francisco via Incheon. We would like to take this moment to again express our deep regret and offer our most sincere condolences.

In San Francisco, Asiana employees in coordination with United Airlines employees are devoting all their energy in providing on-site assistance and aid. Asiana will be dispatching 13 more employees to ensure a more smooth operation.

Moreover, 5 Korean passengers who were on flight HL7742 is scheduled to return this evening at 5:28pm. We will spare no efforts in providing assistance that the passengers may need. President & CEO, Young-Doo Yoon will also be traveling to San Francisco this afternoon to get a better understanding of the situation and to provide any additional assistance needed.

Asiana Airlines will continue to exert great effort in providing assistance and on the ongoing investigation

F. Fifth Press Release:

| Press Release

Asiana Laments Loss of Third Passenger

2013-07-13 13:56

According to San Francisco General Hospital, another passenger who was aboard flight HL7742 has passed away this morning after having been hospitalized in critical condition following the accident.

The hospital is respecting the wishes of the girl's parents that no further information be publicly released at this time. With this regretful loss of life, the death toll of the recent Asiana crash landing has risen to 3.

Asiana Airlines President and CEO, Young-Doo Yoon expressed his deepest sympathies by saying, "My deepest condolences go out to the grieving family and loved ones of this passenger and to all those who have been affected by this regretful incident. We will devote all attention and efforts to support the families of the victims and expedite recoveries for the other injured passengers".

Asiana will continue to provide updated information as soon as it becomes available.

G. The first tweet from a bystander:

 **Krista Seiden**
@kristaseiden Follow

Omg a plane just crashed at SFO on landing
as I'm boarding my plane
pic.twitter.com/hsVEcVZ2VS

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [Buffer](#) [More](#)



1,465 RETWEETS 146 FAVORITES

H. Other Social Media Posts:

 **Asiana Airlines**
July 7

[ATTN] We have a new contact number for any inquiries regarding the incident of flight OZ214 on Saturday, July 6th.

Please contact 1-855-422-7214 for better assistance.

Thank you for your continued support, patience and understanding at this time.

Like · Comment · Share 362 71 31

 **Asiana Airlines** changed their cover photo.
July 8

For up-to-date press release and further information regarding Flight OZ214, please refer to the links below:

English: <http://j.mp/12xnzyX>
Korean: <http://j.mp/12Q22At>
Chinese: <http://j.mp/12RTWf6>

For phone inquiries in the US, please contact the following hotline: 1-855-422-7214.

Thank you for your continued support, condolences, encouragement, and concerns during these trying times.

Information for Incident Involving Asiana Flight OZ 214

We at Asiana Airlines would like express our utmost sympathy and regret for the distress experienced by the passengers of OZ flight 214 and their families as a result of this accident. We apologize most deeply.

Asiana continues to actively cooperate with all Korean and US governmental institutions in the ongoing investigation.

ASIANA AIRLINES 

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