

Crisis Management and Communication: Sriwijaya Air Sj182 Crash Flight

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ABSTRACT

Sriwijaya Air has been the talk of the public related to the missing of SJ182 Boeing 737-524 after four minutes taking off around Kepulauan Seribu from Jakarta-Pontianak. This incident put Sriwijaya Air in a crisis due to bad reputation which should be anticipated by the company's public relations through proper crisis management. However, the public relations of the company were never present in speaking up to the media during this crisis. Moreover, the Director of Sriwijaya Air only appeared to public few times, while the role of CEO in such situation is essential. Whereas social media enable fast and effective communication which can be used for effective marketing, public relations activities, as well as an efficient communication platform in crisis management. This qualitative study was conducted using case study to describe the crisis management carried out by Sriwijaya Air's public relation based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The results show that Sriwijaya Air's public relations had carried out the three stages of crisis management well. However, the response given by them to the crisis was quite slow.

Keywords: *crisis management; crisis communication; sriwijaya air; public relations*

1. INTRODUCTION

Airline companies are one of the transportation-industry sectors that are most vulnerable to crises, especially regarding aviation safety due to accidents [1][2]. Various factors can trigger the crisis experienced by the distribution industry, ranging from financial failures, management, and others [2]. Several airlines in Indonesia such as Merpati Airlines, Batavia Air, Mandala Airlines, Adam Air, and others went bankrupt because they failed to manage a crisis.

In the United States, the financial crisis also hit United Airlines with the case of 'United Breaks Guitars' in 2008 which was experienced by Dave Carrol. At that time, Carroll saw his \$3,500 guitar to be one of the items the airline violently threw from the plane trunk to the luggage cart. The complaint made by Carroll was of no avail. United Airlines instead asked Carroll to sign a statement not to file charges until finally the video of Carroll's revenge with the title 'United Breaks Guitars' went viral and United Airlines was considered a disaster and the worst management in

public relations [3]. As if not learning from the previous case, in 2017, United Airlines was again shocked by the incident of cabin crew dragging passengers [4].

In Indonesia, in the last 10 years, there have been several plane accidents that occurred from various airlines that claimed many lives. Starting from the Merpati Nusantara Xian MA60 PK-MZK in 2011, to the Mi-17 Military Helicopter belonging to the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) having an accident in 2019 [5]. Based on the 2017 IATA Safety Report, Aviation Safety Consultant, Keith Mackey, said the most common factor causing plane crashes was flight crew error. Planecrashinfo data in The Conversation also states that the proportion of accidents caused by pilot error has reached 50%. This is because the pilot is actively involved with the aircraft at every stage of the flight. Thus, there are many opportunities for errors to occur. Meanwhile, another factor is a mechanical failure which reaches 20% and 10% is caused by bad weather [6].

In early 2021, Indonesia was again shocked by the loss of the Sriwijaya SJ-182 Boeing 737-524 aircraft. The plane with the route of Jakarta-Pontianak was declared missing from the radar screen 4 minutes after taking off on January 9, 2021, in the vicinity of Lancang Island, Thousand Islands (officially Kepulauan Seribu). On the flight, this plane carried 50 passengers and 12 cabin crew.

Sriwijaya Air flew an old plane that is almost 27 years old. Two former Sriwijaya Air employees told Reuters that “there were strategic reasons for keeping such an old model in service beyond the cheaper acquisition cost. The smaller seating capacity of 120 was more appropriate for certain routes like Jakarta to Pontianak on Borneo flown by plane that crashed and the 737-500 could land at airports that were otherwise served by turboprops due to short runway lengths.” However, Sriwijaya Air did not respond to this [7]. Only the National Transportation Safety Committee (Komite Nasional Keselamatan Transportasi, abbreviated as KNKT) responded that the age of the aircraft does not have much effect if it is treated according to the applicable regulation [8]. According to researchers [9], natural disasters, industrial accidents, and intentional events are all examples of crises [10]. What happened to Sriwijaya Air is a major crisis that has the potential to harm the company and its image and reputation as well.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Crises are unpredictable events that impact the operations of an organization and threaten stakeholders’ expectancies related to health, safety, environmental and economic issues [11][12]. Crisis is an inevitable situation for every company although it has been anticipated before [13] and may or may not directly threaten a brand [14]. Crises are characterized by increased levels of uncertainty and thus require direction, action, clear information and accountability [15].

During the crisis, all parties are in a state of uncertainty, an unexpected situation that creates instability and uncertainty that causes increased panic. This can result in physical and non-physical damage that can affect the company's operations and threaten its reputation. [13][16][17]. In anticipating a crisis, companies must recognize the terms crisis management and crisis communication. This is because events occur quickly that it is difficult to think logically in crisis planning. Thus, crisis management is needed to prepare

for and overcome problems caused by crises [11] [13] [18].

Due to the potentially significant risks to reputation and financial assets associated with crisis, scholars and organizational managers alike devote attention to crisis anticipation and mitigation [19][20]. This study employs a dynamic, public-oriented view of crisis communication, which focuses on the dynamic, interactive process of crisis development, as opposed to the corporate-oriented perspectives prevalent in the field of public relations [21]. Heath (2004a) declared that crisis create rhetorical problems that require the organization suffering the crisis to “understand and respond to the various kinds of sense that are being made” about the crisis event and perceptions about decisions the organization made (or did not make) that contributed to the onset of the crisis [20].

Crisis management is a vital function for institutions or organizations [22]. Crisis management is a strategic planning process to minimize risks and uncertainties that occur. In dealing with a crisis, crisis communication is needed that has been designed to minimize damage to the image and reputation of the company [17]. Every large company should have a Crisis Management Plan (CMP). When a crisis occurs, companies/organizations often appoint a crisis management team (CMT) to prepare for and respond to a crisis. CMT is a group of people appointed by the CRO or other members of top management who are responsible for handling the crisis [23][24]. This is where the role and responsibility of Public Relations are needed.

The competencies tested on the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) exam, administered by the Universal Accreditation Board, are a good indicator of corporate communications responsibilities. The competencies represent nine Public Relations Organizations. Some of these include research, planning, implementing, and evaluating communication programs; stakeholder management, crisis communication, media relations and writing [25].

During a crisis, Public Relations or corporate communication must be responsive. This is because when a crisis occurs, there is an extraordinary increase in the flow of information causing the communication system to lose balance. The role of public relations is very important in creating positive news to offset negative news when faced with a crisis [26]. However, the fact is that in the Sriwijaya Air case, the public relations side did not appear to deal with the media at

all. It can be counted how many times public relations or corporate communication provides statements to the media. The one who confirms the plane crash is a third party or external party.

One of the roles of public relations is to be ready to be a spokesperson under any circumstances. Moreover, the presence of social media allows for fast and effective communication that can be used for public relations activities, as well as an efficient communication platform in crisis management. However, although the emergence of social media has brought the benefits of fast and effective communication, it has also provided room for the spread of negative communication [27][28]. From the description that has been put forward, it can be concluded that every company needs to have a plan in dealing with all possibilities that occur. In this case, the role of public relations is tested. A public relations practitioner is obliged to understand the right way when the signs of a crisis appear [17].

On his book, Benoit (1995) stated that crises become a threat to reputations when an individual or organization is accused of committing an offensive act. In other word, there is no reputational risk if there is no offensive action or accusation of liability for the act [18][29]. Based on his Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Coombs [11] argues that when it comes to crisis responsibility, the nature of the crisis shapes audience perceptions and attributions [11]. He divided crisis types into 3 cluster (1) victim cluster with low responsibility level, (2) accidental cluster with moderate responsibility level, and (3) preventable cluster with high responsibility [16].

During such crises, Coombs on his book suggests, especially in the initial crisis response stage, it is essential for an organization to be quick, accurate, and consistent. Kecepatan dan akurasi memainkan peran yang sangat penting dalam keselamatan publik. Speed and accuracy play a very important role in public safety. When public safety is threatened, people tend to know what to do to protect themselves [18][22]. Coombs also has proposed a model to account for the statements offered by crisis managers According to his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), crisis managers have a variety of crisis management message at their disposal: (a) denial strategies in which they attack the accuser, deny the existence of a crisis,

or scapegoat another, (b) diminishment strategies in which they offer excuses or justifications that minimize their culpability, (c) rebuild strategies in which they offer an apology and/or compensation, and (d) bolstering strategies in which they offer a reminder stakeholders of past good deeds, ingratiation and claim victim status or victimage [16][30][31].

Crisis responses can range between reactive or proactive, vague or transparent, defensive or accomodative, etc [23]. SCCT provides guidelines for what to say in the response to a crisis. According to this theory, the crisis response should be matched to the nature of crisis [32][33].

Then, how should the company respond to a crisis/event? According to Coombs [40] in Assegaf [34],[8] several things should be done, namely (a) be quick; (b) be accurate; (c) be consistent; (d) make public safety; (e) use all available communications channels; (f) provide some expression of concern of sympathy for victims; (g) remember to include employees in the initial response (h) be ready to provide stress and trauma counseling to victims of the crisis [11][34].

3. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objectives, the researcher employed a case study design to understand complex social phenomena [35]. Data were collected using content analysis of media monitoring on online mass media by collecting, reading, observing, and documenting news articles and social media that raised the issue of the Sriwijaya Air's plane crash. Furthermore, researchers also carried out data crawling on Sriwijaya Air's Twitter and Instagram account data as additional data.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, researchers present the results of media monitoring related to the news of Sriwijaya Air SJ182 Boeing 737-524 on four online media, namely: kompas.com, detik.com, CNN Indonesia and Reuters.

4.1. Finding

The results of the media monitoring that was carried out on several online mass media are presented in the table below.

No	Online Media	News	News Used in Data Analysis
1	Kompas.com	100	19
2	Detik.com	130	14
3	CNN Indonesia	49	6
4	Reuters	11	3
Number of News		290	42

Table 1 Results of Media Monitoring Reports on Sriwijaya Air SJ182 Boeing 737-524

Source: Research Finding, 2021

However, not all news can be used as researcher analysis data. Some of the news used as data analysis were selected through purposive techniques as data sources with certain considerations [36]. Some news was selected since they have more content-dense news.

Every company is likely to experience a crisis. Most of the literature on crisis communication management focuses on descriptions of crisis events and discusses "how-to" approaches to crisis management [18][37]. However, there are still many companies that do not have a crisis communication plan and management that is an example of how to act, be responsible to the public and manage their presence on social media, monitor the effects of the crisis [38].

Crisis management is a very critical organizational function. Failure to overcome the crisis can result in serious losses for stakeholders, the company, and even the "existence" of the company itself. Public Relations is an integral part of the crisis management team which plays an important role. Corporate Communication or Public Relations is a function that is recognized in almost every large company nowadays [39][40].

There are three stages to crisis management (1) pre-crisis, (2) crisis response and (3) post-crisis. The pre-crisis stage is the pre-crisis phase or the prevention phase, which involves efforts to reduce risks that are known to cause a crisis. Making a crisis management strategy, selecting and training a crisis management team, and conducting exercises to test the crisis management plan and team, including preparing a spokesperson, are all part of this preparedness [16] [40][41].

Based on the results of media monitoring, signs of a crisis have begun to appear when the Flight Radar website via its Twitter account @flightradar24 stated that the Sriwijaya Air SJ 182 aircraft lost altitude and

freefall about 10 thousand feet in less than one minute before lost contact [42].

Sriwijaya Air has chosen a spokesperson to deal with the media and the public. After the plane was declared to have lost contact, the spokesperson who provides information was the Minister of Transportation, the spokesperson from the Ministry of Transportation, President Director of PT Angkasa Pura II, Head of the National Transportation Safety Committee (KNKT), and President Director of PT Jasa Grace. In the press conference held, each spokesperson gave a statement regarding the disappearance of Sriwijaya Air.

The second stage is the crisis response, where this stage is what management did and said after the crisis hit. Public relations play a vital role in crisis response and aids in the development of messaging for varied audiences. This is considered by many studies as initial crisis response and reputation improvement as well as behavioral intentions [40]. Sriwijaya Air case is interesting for when the plane was declared lost contact, the first to give information to media was a press conference made by Major General TNI Bambang Suryo Hadi, Deputy for Operations and Preparedness of National Search and Rescue Agency and Minister of Transportation Budi Karya Sumadi.

When the media asked for information from Sriwijaya Air, Sriwijaya Air's Corporate Communication gave a statement that management is still communicating and investigating this case and will immediately issue an official statement after receiving the actual information. However, the delay in information provided by Sriwijaya Air's Corporate Communication made netizens raid the airline's Instagram account to inquire about SJ182 [43]. The picture above also shows that although the President Director of Sriwijaya Air was present at the first press

conference, he did not give any statement. Those who gave more responses and statements related to the Sriwijaya Air case were external parties such as the Minister of Transportation, KNKT, National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS), and Angkasa Pura II. Moreover, condolences for the Sriwijaya Air case were carried out by the Chairman of the KNKT, Mr. Soerjanto Tjahjono:

“saya sebagai ketua KNKT mengucapkan turut bela sungkawa atas musibah ini. Semoga kedepan tidak terjadi kembali. Sesuai dengan tugas KNKT, kami bertanggungjawab untuk melakukan investigasi apa penyebab kecelakaan pesawat agar tidak terjadi lagi di kemudian hari” [44].

The response and statement submitted by the Head of the KNKT should be carried out by corporate communication and the President Director of Sriwijaya Air. Coombs [18] suggests that companies must be quick, be accurate, and consistent because speed and accuracy play a very important role in public safety, forcing the companies to be the "response for the first hour". Therefore, Sriwijaya Air's Corporate Communication Team and President Director must provide a quick response regarding this case by giving an official statement to the public through the media.

The role of public relations when the company stumbles into a crisis is very strategic. Especially the CEO's involvement in managing the crisis for being the company's spokesperson can have a positive impact on the company's image [45]. This is supported by the results of a previous study, that how sadness is expressed through the voice of a CEO of an organization in crisis, greatly affects public perception during a crisis. Expressions of sadness and empathy are especially relevant to consider in a crisis context. This is because sadness is the emotion that is most often expressed nonverbally in response to a crisis [46][47]. The company's spokesperson should not avoid expressing empathy and sadness both verbally and nonverbally because it can stimulate stakeholder empathy for the company, especially during a crisis [48].

This indicates that the response given by Sriwijaya Air's corporate communications is quite slow. The researchers analyzed the development of information since the plane was declared missing and found that both the official website, Twitter account, and Instagram of Sriwijaya Air looked deserted. Sriwijaya Air has just issued an official statement via social media (Twitter and Instagram) on January 9, 2021, at

21.37. Meanwhile, the press conference was held by the Minister of Transportation, KNKT, Basarnas, PT Angkasa Pura, and PT Jasa Raharja as well as assistance to the President Director of Sriwijaya Air was carried out in advance. Information is an important function to help reduce one's anxiety. Sriwijaya Air's corporate communication does not use its social media intensively to provide information related to the development of investigations and actions that have been carried out. The results of the data crawling through Sriwijaya Air's Twitter account found 3308 tweets and 12,100 retweets with no response at all from Sriwijaya Air. The management only posted a statement 3 times without giving any response. The same thing happened on Instagram. However, to show their sympathy, Sriwijaya Air changed the appearance of the Sriwijaya Air logo from red and blue to gray as a form of empathy.

In the world of public relations, information can be used as a pain killer on crises and accurate information can be used as proof of developing issues [45]. Moreover, with the presence of social media as the most popular communication platform in the modern era, social media has become the most widely used way to communicate information quickly, especially in crisis management [28][49]. Therefore, in a state of crisis, the Sriwijaya Air company should always update the information per hour by utilizing all existing media channels.

The next step taken by the management of Sriwijaya Air during the crisis was to prepare an emergency operation center and a crisis center post in 4 locations, (1) at Soekarno-Hatta Airport Terminal 2D, the Family Command Post in the inner corridor, and the Media Post in the outer corridor; (2) Pontianak Supadio Airport; (3) Pier II Jakarta International Container Terminal (JITC) Tanjung Priok, North Jakarta; (4) Antemortem Command Post for the POLRI Kramat Jati Hospital, East Jakarta. Moreover, Sriwijaya Air has also prepared hotline numbers that can be contacted, namely 021-80637817 for passenger families, and 021-80637813 for media [50].

However, Sriwijaya Air should also be able to provide health post services and psychological and spiritual counseling services for families and relatives of SJ182 victims. It aims to provide support and assist the families of victims in dealing with the pressure and stress because their families and relatives are part of the victims of SJ182. This is as suggested by Coombs, that in a crisis, one of the actions that must be taken by the

company is to be ready to provide stress and trauma counseling to victims of the crisis [40].

In the post-crisis stage, since the crisis emerged until finally, the news about the SJ182 dimmed, both the leadership and corporate communication of Sriwijaya Air have not given an official statement regarding the cause of the SJ182 plane crash either verbally or in writing. However, Sriwijaya Air has fulfilled its obligations and promises to provide compensation of IDR 1.25 billion per passenger from PT Sriwijaya Air's insurance policy. At this stage, the company returns to business as usual. The crisis is no longer the focus of management's attention but still requires attention. This phase is a reputation improvement phase. Management must fulfill the promise of information during the crisis phase or risk losing the trust of the public who want the information [40].

5. CONCLUSION

Even though the three stages of crisis management have been implemented well, there is a need for an increase in the speed of responding to a crisis, the courage of public relations and CEOs in dealing with the media during a crisis is very important and crucial. Social media can also help in crisis communication. Furthermore, compared to the Air Asia Q8501 case, it is the best crisis management of all time. The CEO provides maximum assistance, some of which are providing direct information, utilizing social media, making the public and victims feel always accompanied, providing facilities, trauma centers (counseling services for the victim's family) to the funeral process for the airplane cabin crew as well as compensation for the victim's family. This is a lesson for big companies to have an optimal Crisis Management Plan (CMP) and Crisis Communication Plan (CPP). Further studies are expected to fill the gap regarding communication crisis and deeper management to carry out Image Restoration after the crisis.

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BIODATA

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