Successful Crisis Management in the Airline Industry:

A Quest for Legitimacy Through Communication?

Authors:

Anna Hansson

Tomas Vikström

Supervisor:

Caroline Waks

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the legitimacy and reputation of firms that have experienced severe crises can be restored through the means of crisis management and crisis communication strategies. Our focus is on the airline industry, analyzing how three European airlines have communicated and acted towards important shareholders during and following a fatal airline accident. The airlines that have been compared are Air France, Spanair and SAS; an analysis of their press releases, press conferences, annual reports and websites has been conducted. We found that Air France and SAS communicated more information compared to Spanair and also showed that they had a clear strategy to uphold their legitimacy through the crisis. When dealing with a crisis many stakeholders have a high demand for information and if the airline satisfies this need in a satisfactory way they live up to the stakeholders expectations and gain legitimacy. Communicating a clear strategy as to how the airline is working towards improving flight safety can be seen as an important part of upholding the airline's legitimacy and reputation after an airline accident, something that especially Air France has done through clear safety communications through their annual report and website.

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Firms and other organizations are dependent on the support of other groups and individuals for their continued survival (Pajunen, 2006). If an organization is considered to be illegitimate by those it relies upon for its survival, its stakeholders, they are likely to withdraw their support (Massey, 2001), making the future of the organization uncertain (Chess, 2001). An organization can be seen as legitimate if it is perceived by its stakeholders as acting appropriately, keeping to societies' norms and living up to the expectations of their stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Massey, 2001).

If the activities or products of an organization can cause its stakeholders unacceptable harm, these victims and other stakeholders that sympathize with them may consider the organization to be illegitimate. The organization may experience crises, which are usually defined as chains of events that have severe consequences, damaging human lives, property, the environment or all of the above (Stephens et al., 2005). These events are also at least partially unexpected (Massey, 2001). Due to factors such as the increased reliance on advanced and sensitive technology and the increase in the number and complexity of stakeholder relationships, crises are becoming more prevalent, severe and more difficult to control in the world of today (Massey, 2001; Stephens et al., 2005; Acquier et al., 2008). As such, knowledge regarding how to handle crisis events and reduce the negative effects they may have on an organization's legitimacy and reputation is becoming increasingly important for organizations and their managers.

An example of crisis events are aircraft accidents, which is the focus of our study. Such events are rare, especially in the developed countries of the world, much due to high safety standards set by national and international authorities (Transportstyrelsen, 2010). However, airline accidents do occur, and when they do they are often serious incidents with a high rate of mortality amongst the passengers. An airline accident can be considered a true crisis and something that all airlines consider to be their worst nightmare (SAS, 2008, p.6), and many airlines communicate safety as the company's top priority (Air France, 2010, p.4). In the airline industry legitimacy can be seen as being closely connected to, and also dependent upon how the airline handles safety. An airline that has been involved in an accident can experience questions being raised about the legitimacy of the airline that have to be dealt with in a

strategic way (Air France, 2010a). Prioritizing safety and avoiding incidents is consequently something that all airlines focus on constantly.

Another characteristic of airline accidents is that the media give enormous amounts of attention to these types of events that usually make headlines all around the world. The attention the airline is given by the media, the general public and authorities place a great amount of pressure on the airline in question that they must deal with simultaneously as they are dealing with the actual crisis. For this reason the airline's communications and actions during the crisis following an accident is of high importance that influences the way the airline is looked upon by stakeholders.

Due to the extreme circumstances of airline accidents, there could be interesting lessons to learn from how different airlines deal with such crisis situations and what the effects of their actions are on their legitimacy and reputation. This discussion has led us to our research question:

How did Air France, Spanair and SAS differ in the way they communicated and acted towards their stakeholders during and after the crisis following fatal airline accidents, and which actions have been taken to help restore the airline's reputation and legitimacy?

1.2 Purpose

The aim of this thesis is to investigate, analyze and compare how three European airlines, Air France, Spanair and SAS, handled the crisis and communicated with their stakeholders after being involved in an accident. We aim to investigate whether successful crisis management and communication has an effect on stakeholders' perception of the airlines' legitimacy. We intend to do this by analyzing the external communication of these companies, such as press releases and annual reports.

2. Literature review

In this chapter relevant theory in regards to the research question of this thesis is presented. First, definitions of stakeholders, legitimacy and reputation management are presented. These definitions are important in order to understand the main topics of this thesis which are crises and crisis management. Within crisis management Situational Crisis Communication Theory is described which was developed by Coombs and Holladay. Finally, the importance of media in crisis situations is presented.

2.1 Stakeholders, Legitimacy and Reputation

Stakeholders are typically defined as those groups and individuals that the organization can have an effect on or who can similarly have an effect on the organization itself (Acquier et al., 2008). Stakeholders can become more or less important, or salient, to the organization. This typically depends on the degree to which the stakeholder in question possesses the attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency. Power is the extent to which the stakeholder can affect the organization's operations and survival. Urgency is the time pressure the stakeholders' claims place on the organization. Legitimacy is the degree to which the claims that the stakeholders are making on the organization are considered to be appropriate by society and the organization (Alpaslan et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 1997). Crises often affect multiple stakeholders (McDonald et al., 2010) some of which are stakeholders that the organization did not consider to be an important stakeholder before the crisis. This can lead to unexpected conflicts and difficulties (Quarantelli, 1988; Acquier et al., 2008; Alpaslan et al., 2009).

An organization's legitimacy can be seen as stakeholders' perception that the actions of an organization are appropriate, acceptable and keeping to society's norms and the expectations of the stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Massey, 2001). If an organization is thought of as legitimate by at least some of its stakeholders, it can expect to gain support from those stakeholders. As a result, legitimacy is highly desirable to the organization but also forces it to act in accordance with the expectations of its stakeholders. Since legitimacy arises from stakeholder perceptions that the organization's actions conform to societal norms, it follows that the organization will, to some extent, try to act in ways that conform to these expectations. Likewise, an organization can lose legitimacy by acting in a way that stakeholders deem to be unacceptable or failing to act in ways that they deem required for a legitimate organization. If that has happened, the organization must try to change that perception of illegitimacy, or face the possibility of organizational failure as it loses the support of its stakeholders (Massey, 2001). Reduced legitimacy makes the future of the

organization uncertain, as being perceived as illegitimate hinders activities the organization would normally engage in to reduce uncertainties, such as entering partnerships (Chess, 2001).

A concept that is very similar to legitimacy is reputation, which also arises from stakeholder perception and evaluation of the organization and can be seen as a very valuable asset due to the effect it has on the organization's ability to acquire resources (Deephouse and Carter, 2005). The organization's reputation can be affected by crises (Coombs, 2007). Developing and upholding a good reputation can create many benefits for the organization; it can attract new customers and investors as well as improving financial performance. It can lead to consumer loyalty, increased sales and positive word-of-mouth as well as creating a competitive advantage (Coombs, 2007; Pace et al., 2010; Romenti & Valentini, 2010; Rhee & Valdez, 2009). The company can also be perceived as a low risk investment and an attractive alliance partner and if the customer relies on the company's good reputation as an indicator of legitimacy this can contribute to the customer experiencing lower search costs (Rhee & Valdez, 2009; Coombs, 2007). A good reputation can also result in the customer giving the company the "benefit of the doubt" when experiencing uncertainty in a crisis situation. This depends on how strong the relationship is between the organization and the stakeholders and how much the stakeholders have invested in the relationship (Martinez & Norman, 2004; Ulmer, 2001). If stakeholder relationships are not strong before the crisis, those stakeholders that are harmed by the crisis or support those groups harmed by the crisis will withdraw their support and possibly worsen or prolong the crisis situation (Ulmer, 2001).

2.2 Crises

There are many definitions of what a crisis is, though these descriptions often share common characteristics. Crises are chains of events that have severe consequences (Hale et al., 2005), damaging human lives, property, the environment or any combination of the above (Stephens et al., 2005). Common to nearly all definitions of crises is the element of surprise (Massey, 2001). Either the triggering event of the crisis itself was unexpected or considered to have a low probability of occurring (Hale et al., 2005; Alpaslan et al., 2009), or the triggering event was expected to happen sometime in the future, but not at the time when it occurred. As the triggering event was not expected, the organization will lose control over the situation for at least a brief time (Stephens et al., 2005). It is central to the definition of crises that all crises harm one or more stakeholders. Due to the consequences for stakeholders, crises bring into

view the organization's legal and ethical responsibilities and how well they are seen to be fulfilled (Alpaslan et al., 2009). Depending on how this is perceived, organizations face the possibility of severe consequences for its image, reputation and future survival from those who blame the organization for the crisis and the woes of its victims or who consider its efforts to be lacking (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Because of the high stakes and the risk that they will escalate during a crisis, the organization must act quickly to regain control and try to reduce the damaging effects of the events to its stakeholders and its reputation (Hale et al., 2005; Massey, 2001; Stephens et al., 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Crises can be classified into three broad types, or clusters: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster and the intentional cluster. In the victim cluster, we can find those crises that are seen to be wholly caused by external forces or agents, such as natural disasters. In the accidental cluster, we can find those events which are seen by stakeholders as being partially outside of the organization's control and which were not the caused by organizational malice or misdeeds. Examples of accidental events include those caused by technology failure. In the intentional cluster those crises that are seen to have been caused by the organization intentionally risking the safety of stakeholders can be found (Hale et al., 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

2.3 Crisis Management

Since crises are undesirable for organizations, crisis management is an important task for management and nearly all organizations have crisis management and communication strategies (Wester, 2009). Crisis management is considered to have three phases; the prevention phase, the response phase and the recovery phase (Hale et al., 2005).

Prevention phase

Before the crisis occurs, it is generally preferable to try to prevent it from happening. In the prevention phase, the degree to which crisis prevention efforts are taken depend on how important management considers crisis prevention to be (Hale et al., 2005). Additionally, while there are often some indicators or warning signals that the events are coming, they may be overlooked or ignored, which would make prevention very difficult for the organization (Stephens et al, 2005). Since the crises are surprising events (Hale et al., 2005; Massey, 2001; Stephens et al., 2005), it follows that the probability of the crisis occurring at the time it did was not accurately predicted ahead of time. As a consequence of this, the organization may

have implemented some degree of safety measures, deemed them to be adequate and then, falsely as it turns out to be, felt a sense of security that a crisis has been prevented. In this phase, it is also advisable to build up an image of legitimacy and trustworthiness, as that will serve the organization during the response phase (Hale et al., 2005).

Response Phase

However, when avoidance and prevention efforts have failed and a crisis event occurs, the organization must try to limit and contain the damage done to stakeholders, property, the environment and the organization itself by responding to the crisis (Hale et al., 2005; Stephens et al., 2005). When the initial reports of the crisis event arrive, they are likely to be contradictory, incorrect or ambiguous, due to the stressful circumstances of crisis situations and the abovementioned communication limitations. As a result, crisis managers will have to make decisions about how to interpret these reports. This interpretation will affect the choices of how to act in response to the crisis (Hale et al, 2005; Nelkin, 1988). The crisis management team of the organization must quickly decide how the organization will have to act to deal with the crisis. Due to the time pressures that the organization faces, it will be forced to make a tradeoff between information searching and action, and as a result, the initial communication and actions will likely be based on limited information and characterized by ambiguity and confusion (Hale et al., 2005; Stephens et al., 2005). Those at risk of being harmed must be informed how they are to protect themselves and harmed stakeholders need to be helped as much as possible (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). The quality of the actions taken in these early stages of the response phase can have a major impact on the safety of affected stakeholders, sometimes being the difference between life and death (Hale et al., 2005; Wester, 2009; Ulmer, 2001). Other stakeholders will consider it to be illegitimate if the organization takes too long in meeting the legitimate demands from the harmed stakeholders for actions that will reduce their harm (Alpaslan et al., 2009). Additionally, if the organization does not quickly react to the crisis, the media will accuse the organization of acting irresponsibly and ignoring the crisis (Romenti & Valentini, 2010).

Aside from providing instructions for stakeholders to protect themselves, showing concern for the victims and their kin is also considered one of the cornerstones of successful crisis communication (Martin & Boynton, 2005).

Recovery Phase

When there is no risk of further damage to stakeholders or the organization itself, the organization enters the recovery phase. In this stage the organization attempts to learn from the event, manage public perception and restore any damage it has sustained to its legitimacy and reputation (Hale et al, 2005; Stephens et al., 2005). What organizations say during crisis communication affects how people perceive the events and the organization itself. This affecting the organization's reputation and legitimacy and the reactions that stakeholders will have (Stephens et al., 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Organizations can use crisis communication strategies to maintain their reputation and thus prevent the relationships they have with their stakeholders from going sour. Organizations can do this by influencing the perception of the event, for instance by downplaying the severity of the event, such as when excuses are made or the blame is shifted upon a scapegoat. They can also do this by influencing the perceptions stakeholders have of the organization, so that it appears to be sympathetic or remorseful (Stephens et al, 2005).

2.4 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs and Holladay's (2002) Situational Crisis Communication theory is one tool that can be used during the recovery phase. It states that stakeholders perceive the crisis and the organization based on whom they perceive to be responsible for the events (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, Coombs, 2004). As a result, organizations can try to protect their reputation and legitimacy by minimizing the perception stakeholders have of the organization's responsibility for the events (Stephens et al., 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, Coombs, 2004). The primary factor that stakeholders take into account when determining their perception of the organization's responsibility for the event is the type of the event. If the event is one which the organization could control, such as one caused intentionally or by human error, stakeholders will have a negative perception of the event. If the event is one which the organization could not wholly have controlled, such as technical failures or accidents, stakeholders will only attribute partial responsibility for the event. If the event was wholly outside the organization's control, stakeholders may consider the organization to be a victim as well and react with sympathy and loyalty (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004; McDonald et al., 2010).

Besides the causal type of the event, other factors may increase the responsibility that stakeholders attribute to the organization for the event (Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay,

2002). If the organization has a history of past crises, organizations suffer worse damage to their reputation, as crises are then considered to be relatively stable phenomena related to the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2002; Coombs, 2004). Additionally, if the crisis is severe, it will also cause more damage to the organization's damage (Coombs, 2004). Bad relationships with stakeholders will also affect the perception of the crisis, as that can be considered a sign of lacking capabilities in multiple areas (Coombs, 2004; Rhee & Valdez, 2009).

These factors will determine what message strategies are the most appropriate for the organization to use in its crisis communication. The greater the threat to the organization's reputation, the more accommodating of stakeholder needs and claims it has to be. If the organization is not perceived to be responsible for the events, it can place its own interests first and communicate in a more defensive fashion (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). If the organization is to reap the greatest benefits from its message strategies, it must adapt them to the severity of the crisis, the causes of the crisis, the existing credibility and image of the organization (Stephens et al., 2005). For crises that can be placed in the victim cluster, and where there are no additional factors present, the organization may only need to communicate instructions to stakeholders at risk and use the most defensive types of responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). For accidents where there are no additional factors, organizations are likely to use defensive strategies like making excuses, denial of the crisis existence or extent, portraying the organization as a victim and reminding stakeholders of the organization's past accomplishments (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). For those crises that were caused by intentional acts or human error, organizations will need to take responsibility, make apologies and promise to take corrective action (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Using messages of a more accommodating nature shows that the organization takes responsibility for the event, which leads to positive stakeholder responses (McDonald et al., 2010). However, taking responsibility can entail legal consequences, and spokespersons are often recommended to take no or as little responsibility as possible for the event by the organization's legal representative (Wertz & Kim, 2010; Coombs, 2004). While this strategy may be a safe option, admitting responsibility has many benefits. Accepting responsibility leads to lower settlements, better reputation, and increased support for the organization (Pace et al., 2010). The concern that admitting responsibility in crisis communication may result in negative repercussions from stakeholders have previously led some organizations to be very

reluctant to share information about the events, what the risk of the events occurring were and what actions have been taken to deal with the situation. However, withholding information can have serious negative consequences in the long run (Wester, 2009). As more accommodating communication requires more resources to produce and such communication may lead to greater risks for the firm, spokespersons will likely strategically select and use those message strategies that are the most effective while still fulfilling the demands of stakeholders (McDonald et al., 2010).

2.5 Media's role

A crisis is often highly visible, receiving significant media coverage, due to the sensational - and thus newsworthy - effects it has on its victims (Stephens et al., 2005; Nelkin, 1988). This is one of the reasons why crises pose such a large threat to organizations. If the crisis is portrayed by these media reports in such a way that people will sympathize with its victims and blame the organization for the events, the organization will be perceived to be illegitimate by many of its stakeholders. This is due to the societal norms of the Western societies of today about ensuring the safety of humans, property and the environment (Nelkin, 1988; Massey, 2001).

Media coverage of an organization's activities during crisis can have a large effect on the organization's image and reputation (Romenti & Valentini, 2010). Media coverage of crises can affect the perception and attitude regarding the events and the organization's activities, as well as the policies for how to control the risk of the event occurring again (Nelkin, 1988). The media can affect the importance the public places on the event and the attitudes communicated in the media affects whether the actions of the organization are perceived to have been legitimate or not (Nelkin, 1988; Romenti & Valentini, 2010).

As the media are separate from the organization, the organization has no or very little control over the content of their reporting (Nelkin, 1988; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). While the organization has total control over the content in the messages it distributes through its own webpage and similar channels, most people will get their information about the crisis through the media (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). This ensures that it is important for organizations to get the support of the media (Wester, 2009).

How well the initial communication with the affected stakeholders and the following communication to other publics are performed will often affect the organization for years to

come (Hale et al, 2005). While most crises are eventually forgotten, crises that are especially severe or which have memorable features, such as having been handled particularly well or poorly, may linger in the memories of stakeholders, possibly tarnishing the reputation of the organization for decades. This effect can be prolonged if there are reports of the event archived (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

Since stakeholders greatly desire information about the event so that they can place them into context, responding to that need with open communication can be a valuable strategy for repairing the organization's legitimacy (Stephens & Malone, 2009; Seeger & Ulmer, 2001). When stakeholders receive more information about the crisis, they perceive the event to have been less serious (Stephens & Malone, 2009). A constant flow of information can thus be seen as a criterion for successful crisis communication (Martin & Boynton, 2005).

3. Method

In this thesis we aim to answer our research question; "How did Air France, Spanair and SAS differ in the way they communicated and acted towards their stakeholders during and after the crises following fatal airline accidents, and which actions have been taken to help restore the airline's reputation and legitimacy?" In order to do this we have gathered and presented the theoretical framework above and following this chapter is the findings of our empirical study.

In our empirical study we decided to focus on Air France, SAS, and Spanair. We chose these airlines because they have all experienced major accidents with many casualties within the last ten years and they are all regular passenger airlines and not of the low cost kind. The data for our analysis has been made up of secondary data that we have collected from a wide variety of sources. We limit ourselves in our study to secondary data due to the fact when contacting the airlines they were reluctant to give out information about safety procedures or policies, especially because airline accidents are a very sensitive subject. Secondary data is defined as data that has been previously collected for some other purpose and can be made up of both raw data and published summaries. There are three main areas of secondary data; documentary data, survey-based data and multiple source compilations (Saunders et al., 2009). The data we have collected is mostly of the documentary kind in written format, such as press releases, annual reports, homepage information and media coverage of the accidents by Swedish daily press. We are aware that such secondary data is, by its nature, colored by the biases of those who produced it and can only cast light on a limited subset of the events we are interested in. However, since we are primarily interested in the external communication of these companies, we consider such secondary data, which is part of the external communication, to be sufficient for our purposes.

3.1 Press conferences and press releases

When looking at press conference material, we analyzed the first press conference held by the airlines after the accident. In this way they were comparable because of the similarities between the airline's situations at the time. It was however a problem that the conferences were held in the native language of the airline for Air France and Spanair. For this reason we located translated versions of the press conferences in news reports from BBC and ITN news. The disadvantage that comes with this method is that we were limited to the part of the press

conference that the news channel found interesting and therefore translated in the broadcast. We were unable to find recordings of the press conference held after the SAS accident as the event occurred more than ten years ago. We located quotes from this press conference in Dagens Nyheter and used this information to get a picture of the press conference.

Press releases were found at each airlines respective homepage. Both Air France and SAS had all press releases about their accidents in the archives. Spanair had three press releases regarding the accident on their corporate website, but more were found on the SAS website as they were the owners of Spanair at the time of the accident.

3.2 Annual reports and Safety Communication through Airline Website

We analyzed the annual reports of the airlines the year the accident occurred. We looked at how much attention was given to the accident and if there was a clear connection between the accident and information about the airline's flight safety procedures. We also searched for information about flight safety on the airline's corporate websites. We are aware that all this information originates from the airline in question and therefore must be regarded with a critical eye.

3.3 Media Coverage

In our data collection of media coverage we limit ourselves to Swedish daily press consisting of Svenska Dagbladet and Dagens Nyheter because we find these newspapers to be trustworthy and legitimate. We have chosen three articles for each of the accidents spanning from the day of the accident to one week after the accident occurred. In this way the description of the airline in the crisis situation is comparable since they were written under similar circumstances.

4. A Study of Airline Communication and the Actions Taken

In this section we will present how three European airlines communicated and acted during and after they experienced a fatal airline accident. After giving some background information on the airlines and the chosen accidents we will describe press releases, annual reports and media coverage in order to receive an indication as to how quickly and thoroughly the airline responded to the crisis.

4.1 Background information

Air France

Air France was created in 1933 and since then has grown to become one of the largest airlines in the world. Today the airline has 183 destinations in 98 countries with 1500 daily flights. The airline owns 396 airplanes and employs 74 320 people, that including subsidiaries. In 2004 Air France merged with KLM and created the largest transportation group in Europe. Air France is part of the Sky Team Alliance, (Air France, 2010b).

The Air France Accident

Flight AF447 left Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on May 31th bound for Paris Charles de Gaulle airport. On board were 216 passengers and 12 crew members. During flight over the Atlantic the airplane entered a zone of stormy weather. An automatic message from the airplane was sent to the air traffic control centers and expressed that the electric circuit had failed. At this time the aircraft was far from the coast, and air traffic control centers in Brazil, Africa, Spain and France tried to contact the aircraft but did not succeed. On June 6th bodies of the passengers were found and parts of the wreckage were located. To this day, the exact cause of the accident is not known because the wreckage and "black boxes" containing voice and data recordings have not been found (Air France, 2010c).

Spanair

Spanair was founded in 1986 and gradually developed service within Europe, Spain and eventually also intercontinental services. Since the airline was founded over 104 million passengers have flown with Spanair (Spanair, 2010). Spanair was sold in 2002 and became a member of the SAS Group in 2002. Seven months after the accident the airline was sold again for €1 (SAS, 2009a).

Spanair flight 5022 crashed during takeoff on August 20th, 2008. On board were 172 people of which 154 died. The aircraft attempted a first takeoff but returned to the gate after technical problems and passengers were told that they might have to change aircraft. The technical problems were resolved and it was during the second attempt to take off that one of the engines caught fire and the aircraft crashed to the ground after only reaching an altitude of around 60 meters. Fire spread quickly in the wreckage of the aircraft that was fully fuelled (Madrid TT-Reuters).

SAS

SAS (Scandinavian Airline Systems) was founded in 1946 as a merger between the national airline companies in Sweden, Demark and Norway. After more than 60 years SAS has become a major airline and serves destinations all over the world and was in 1997 one of the founders of Star Alliance, which to this day is the largest airline alliance in the world (SAS, 2010b).

The SAS Accident

On October 8th, 2001 SAS flight SK686 was taking off from Linate Airport in Milan bound for Copenhagen. During takeoff the flight crashed into a small private airplane on the runway and crashed into a luggage hangar and caught fire. All 104 passengers and six crew members perished, as well as four people in the private jet and four people working in the hangar. At the time of the accident there was thick fog at Linate Airport and the private jet ended up on the wrong runway. The accident was ruled to be caused by air traffic control mistakes and four people working at Linate airport were sentenced to prison, amongst them the airport director who was sentenced to 8 years (Hygstedt, 2004).

4.2 Communication during the crisis
Air France

On the day of the accident Pierre Henri Gourgeon, CEO of Air France held a press conference at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. Gourgeon stated that the crew was very experienced and had many flight hours in service and that there were no problems in the aircraft's safety records. Gourgeon continued with saying that the whole airline was deeply touched and share the mourning with the relatives of the passengers. He said that they will pass on information as soon as they know anything. What they knew so far was that the aircraft had passed

through storms and that automatic messages of system failure were sent from the aircraft (BBC, June 1st 2009).

After the accident, the Air France website was adopted to the crisis situation. The site showed less graphics and pictures than usual and instead of the normal booking engine on the first page visitors were given news about the crash and provided links for further information (Simpliflying, 2010).

Air France has compiled all press releases concerning the AF 447 and gives information about when it was last updated. In total there are 25 communications, including press releases and memos asking the press to respect the privacy of the relatives of the victims. The press releases are in both English and Portuguese and already in the first release there is information about the number of passengers onboard, offering a toll free number for further information and stating that the airline shares the anxiety of the families of the passengers. Information of how relatives are being taken care of is also mentioned (Air France, 2010c).

In the second press release more detailed information is given about the circumstances around the accident. It was stated that the aircraft entered an area of stormy weather and that a message concerning electric circuit failure from the aircraft was received. Information about the pilot's long experience and reports of the aircraft's latest maintenance check was also stated. Technical information about engine types and the age of the aircraft was also shared (Ibid).

The subsequent press releases continue to give further details that are of interest to the general public. Much attention is given to expressing condolences to the relatives and friends of the passengers, and at the same time giving an update to all the efforts that the airline is making to help the relatives but also what is done to investigate the causes of the accident and the agencies it is involving and cooperating with. In the third release which was published the same day as the accident was announced the nationalities of the passengers was released and the possibility of contacting the airline in order to receive knowledge of whether a loved one was on board was given (Ibid).

The press releases that follow continue to give information about how the airline has lived up to safety standards and that all recommendations from the airplane manufacturer have always been followed. Continuous condolences are expressed, especially when bodies start to be found. Constant gratitude is also communicated towards state authorities helping in the search

for the wreckage of the airplane. Attention is also given to the employee volunteer program which sprung into action when the accident was a fact; the airline mobilized approximately 4000 volunteers within the company to help in all areas of the crisis management and gives details of their training in the eighth press release (Ibid).

On June 3rd there is a press release informing about the inter-religious prayer ceremony that was held in Paris in honor of the victims. The press is asked to respect that this service is for family and friends only and that they are encouraged to follow the ceremony from outside the cathedral where television screens will show the service (Ibid).

On June 15th there is a press release answering the question of how Air France is providing support to the relatives and friends and starts by stating that the expectations of the friends and family of the victims are varied. It continues:

"They are legitimately demanding information and transparency, even though the circumstances of this tragedy are slowing the progress of the investigation and Air France itself is unable to obtain all the necessary information, which is collected and centralized by the French and Brazilian authorities." (Ibid.)

The remaining press releases concern the progress that is made in the investigations concerning the causes of the accident. Links are shared to the French Air Accident Investigation Bureau as they publish two reports on the accident. The last press release was published in May 2010 and the last update of the press releases was made in June 2010 (Ibid).

Spanair

On the day of the accident Spanair gave a press conference and the airline's spokesperson stated that at times like these the first priority is to attend to the relatives of the victims. He continued to say that qualified caretakers were making their way to Madrid as a part of the crisis team that would take care of relatives to the victims (ITN World, 2008).

Information about the Spanair accident of 2008 is found in the news archive. Three press releases are offered which gives information about the accident and numbers to call. After this there is no more mention of the accident in the news archive at all (Spanair, 2010b). SAS, who wholly owned Spaniar at the time of the accident, offer 13 press release articles about the accident from the date of the accident, August 20th until September 1st (SAS, 2010c).

The first press releases confirm with regret that that the accident has occurred and gives toll free telephone numbers for worried relatives and friends but gives no information on what has happened or how many people were involved (SAS, 2008a). It is in the third release that it is revealed how many passengers and crew was involved but the number of casualties is not stated. It is continuously expressed that Spanair and SAS are doing everything they can to assist the authorities at this difficult time.

In the subsequent press releases SAS and Spanair express their condolences to the friends and families of the victims and inform about the extensive support the airline was offering them. It is mentioned that Spanair has deployed all possible resources from the moment that the accident was known and that they have cooperated closely with involved authorities (SAS, 2008b). Ten days after the accident a press release is published that clarifies the situation leading up to the accident. It was stated that the crew was considering changing aircraft but that the mechanical problems on the current airplane was fixed and therefore there was no need for a change of aircraft. This was according to Spanair completely correct procedures in this situation (SAS, 2008c). The same day another press release was published regarding a letter written by "Spanair employees" criticizing how the airline handled the accident that had been published in two daily newspapers and also sent to the Spanish president. Spanair stated that this was not an official document from the airline and described in the press release how well they have worked together with authorities since the accident occurred (SAS, 2008d). On March 31st 2009 Spanair is sold for € 1(SAS, 2010a).

SAS

On the night of the disaster Björn Algren who was the manager for SAS Europe, Middle East and Africa at the time held a press conference. *Dagens Nyheter (10 October 2001, p.6)* reported and cited this press conference. The information given was very restricted as the rescue operation was still under way. He could not confirm the number of victims although it seemed that nobody had survived the accident. He did however say that the victims' relatives and friends were being flown down to Linate, and that those who wanted to could be flown down at any time. SAS stated that they believed that it was an accident, however they could not comment on the possible causes of the accident.

SAS published five press releases within 24 hours of the accident. The first press release informs with regret that an accident has occurred, and states the number of passengers and

crew members on board. A media contact number is given and SAS announces they are doing everything they can to help the passengers and Italian authorities. It is stated that a next-of-kin telephone number will be released later during the day (SAS, 2001a). The second press release publishes the next-of-kin telephone numbers and also informs that there will be a press conference held at SAS headquarters during the day (SAS, 2001b).

After the first press conference of the day another press release announces that there will be a second conference later during the evening. It is now stated that casualties have occurred but the number still needs to be confirmed. SAS also informs that they have teams of specially trained personnel making their way to Milan to assist in any way possible. In this third press release the age of the aircraft is revealed, the number of flight hours it has travelled and also the date of the last major maintenance check are announced. The message ends with the announcement that more information will be announced as it is made available. Helpline telephone numbers are given for all Scandinavian countries (SAS, 2001c).

It is after the second press conference on the day of the accident that it is announced that there is no hope for survivors. Here it is also announced that SAS is flying down next-of-kin to Linate airport and that SAS president and CEO, Jörgen Lindegaard will be on the flight as well. It is also announced that USD 25 000 per passenger will be paid to next-of-kin regardless of the cause of the accident. A notification that passenger lists will be published as soon as all next-of-kin have been notified is also made (SAS, 2001d).

Later during the day of the accident the passenger and crew list is published by SAS. The names of all passengers and crew are listed and SAS regrets to have published this list before all relatives were informed but felt they had to since the list had already reached the media. Together with the names of the crew members there is information about how long they had been employed by SAS and how many flight hours they each had (SAS, 2001e).

The subsequent press releases concern nationality distribution of passengers and the statement that a silent minute will be held to honor the victims as well as memorial services in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Italy. There are strict journalist instructions for the memorial service in Italy and special press allowances are required in order to attend the service. SAS expresses their deepest sympathy for the victims and takes an active part in the investigation of the accident. (SAS, 2001f).

4.3 Communication after the Crisis – Annual Reports
Air France

In the Air France-KLM annual report from 2009/2010 much attention is given to the accident of flight AF447. Jean-Cyril Spinetta, Chairman of the board of directors opens the report with a letter to the stakeholders. Much focus is on the financial crisis, but the letter ends by bringing up the one year anniversary of the AF 447 tragedy.

"We have just commemorated the first anniversary of the tragic loss of flight AF447 which has left us all deeply scarred. The absence of any clearly identified explanation led Air France to review its organization." (Air France, 2010 p.3)

The report continues with an interview with Pierre-Henri Gourgeon, CEO which is titled "Safety, Air France's over-riding priority". The interview begins by stating that the accident still remains in everyone's memory and continues by describing all the efforts Air France is making to improve safety and declares that it is the over-riding priority for Air France but of course also for the rest of the airline industry. Focus is placed on the numerous safety initiatives, including safety cooperation programs between pilots and management and their very own Independent Safety Review that Air France has developed in order to manage the safety of all Air France flights (Air France, 2010 p.4).

Spanair

In 2008 Spanair was wholly owned by the SAS Group and therefore was a part of the SAS annual report. The accident is mentioned by Mats Johansson, CEO, in the President's Comments in the beginning of the report;

"However, the event that made the deepest impression on the Group was the tragic accident affecting Spanair in Madrid on August 20. 154 persons lost their lives."

He continues to say that the loss of human lives is the worst thing imaginable for an airline company, and that Spanair received invaluable support from the SAS Group when dealing with the disaster (SAS, 2008, p.6).

The Spanair accident is also mentioned in the chapter concerning Flight Safety where it is stated that the accident is still under investigation and that it is important that these kinds of events must be prevented from occurring. Further it is stated that SAS is working towards living up to the new European Union safety requirements of 2009 (SAS, 2008, p.20). In the chapter of the report dedicated to Spanair as an individually branded airline the accident is

mentioned as an important event of 2008. It is also stated that SAS sold their majority stake in Spanair during 2009 and now remain a minority stakeholder with 19.9% (SAS, 2008, p.43).

SAS

The SAS Group annual report for 2001 begins with a message from Jörgen Lindegaard, President and CEO, stating that this was the worst disaster in the airline's history. He continues,

"The powerlessness and dismay we feel about this disaster will affect SAS for a long time and can only fulfill a constructive purpose if efforts to improve flight safety are further increased in the industry as a whole" (SAS,2001, preface).

Also in the chapter of "President's comments" Lindegaard comments on the disaster and states that the memory of the tragedy will rest in the group for a very long time. Information of the disaster is also found in the section concerning flight safety within SAS Airline. Information about the disaster and the economic compensation given to next-of-kin is given in a box at the bottom of the page. It also states that the cause of the accident is still under investigation and that compensation plans will be finalized when the inquiries are concluded. (SAS 2001, p. 31).

4.4 Communication Today Through the Airline Website
Air France

As a direct result of the AF 447 accident, which according to the airline itself raised questions about their legitimacy, Air France created the Independent Safety Review program in December 2009. The group consists of eight highly qualified members from France and Great Britain who are in possession of either extensive practical or systematic experience. The team works to further develop internal procedures such as decision making processes and operating modes in order to present proposals that will act as drivers in the airlines continuous process of safety development (Air France, 2010a).

Air France has today a wholly owned subsidiary called Air France Consulting which educates in a large variety of subjects, including safety and maintenance management, crisis management and security crisis management. The company also focuses on extensive research and development in order to be able to offer up to date expertise in the field of

commercial aviation. The crisis management course commits to educate actors in the field on how to prepare for a crisis and how to deal with it most efficiently (Air France Consulting, 2010).

At Air France's corporate homepage there is still today attention paid to the AF 447 disaster. Access to press information is easily found and an organized compilation of press releases regarding this accident can be downloaded. At the start page there is a button labeled "AF 447 Rio-Paris CDG Updated June 10" in the press area. This accident occurred more than a year ago but information is still very easy to access (Air France, 2010d).

Spanair

There is no specific information on the Spanair website regarding their work with safety issues at this time (Spanair, 2010).

SAS

There is no specific information on the SAS website regarding their work with safety issues at this time (SAS Group, 2010).

4.5 Media Coverage in Sweden
Air France

Media's interest in the AF 447 crash was very big at the time of the accident; in Sweden the media coverage was extensive. Newspaper articles regarding the event are of very informative character, and many personal stories are described. Practical information is given in terms of finding wreckage parts and bodies. Many articles are about the different theories about the cause of the crash, which to this day is not 100% established (Forsberg, 2009). There is no direct critique towards Air France in these articles, the articles focus on informing about the efforts that Air France were making, for example that the friends and families of the passengers who were waiting at Charles de Gaulle Airport were directly taken into a separate room away from the press and were offered psychological help when it was confirmed that the plane would not arrive (Strandberg, 2009). Svenska Dagbladet published a timeline of what happened during the first 24 hours starting when the airplane left Rio de Janeiro, and it is revealed that Air France classified the situation as critical two hours before the flight was scheduled to land in Paris and started preparing a crisis plan. The airplane was announced to be missing 25 minutes after it should have arrived (TT&BBC, 2009).

Spanair

Swedish media paid much attention to the Spanair crash. At the time of the accident the airline was a subsidiary of the SAS Group and therefore had a direct connection to Sweden. The largest daily newspapers report on the tragedy of the accident and personal reports and interviews with family and friends. The articles focus on the fact that this was an accident of mechanical nature and that there seemed to be a negative atmosphere within the company due to overworked crew members and many technical incidents at the time of the accident, and especially incidents involving the particular aircraft that crashed in Madrid (TT, 2008). Much room is given to the discussion of why the airplane took off after it was expressed by airline officials that they were planning on changing the airplane due to technical problems. This was something that was denied by the airline until audio proof was given in form of telecommunication between the airline and the airport officials which was reported by *Dagens Nyheter (30 August, 2008).*

Five days after the accident it was reported that Spanair had lost one third of its market value. SAS who owned the airline at the time commented that customers tend to return eventually and compared the situation to the SAS Linate airport crash in Milan (TT-Ritzau, 2008).

SAS

The SAS crash at Linate airport in Milan is the airline's worst disaster to date. The media in Sweden reported on the accident thoroughly at the time of the accident and kept publishing news articles concerning the cause of the accident and the punishment of those responsible. It was soon discovered that SAS probably did not bear the responsibility for the accident; it became clear that there had been a misunderstanding between air traffic control and the private jet that was to blame (Hellberg, 2001).

In an article in Dagens Nyheter the day after the crash it is described how the relatives and friends of the victims were taken care of by SAS. They were flown to Milan by an airplane chartered by the airline. Upon arrival where they were met by a team of 72 people consisting of doctors, psychiatrist and priests. It was said by the leader of the SAS crisis team that being at the scene of the accident can help in the mourning process, and that their most important task is to be fellow humans in this situation and do what they can now but also in the future. She also gives a promise of the opportunity to contact them in the future for further help. The CEO of SAS was at the scene and accompanied relatives of the victims to the airplane

wreckage and offered support. It was also stated that the airline was ready to offer support regardless of the economic cost, and that each relative would receive a custom-made support plan from the airline (Nandorf, 2001a).

Crisis centers were established in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Helsinki and London. Two days after the accident SAS had flown down three planes with staff and investigators as well as two planes with family and friends of the victims as reported by *Dagens Nyheter (10 October, 2001, p.6).*

5. Analysis

When a crisis occurs, companies have to respond quickly in order to minimize damage done to stakeholders as a result of the crisis event, in order to minimize the negative effect on the firm's reputation and legitimacy (Hale et al., 2005; Stephens et al., 2005; Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2002).

In the case of airplane crashes, passengers and crewmembers can become victims of potentially fatal physical harm and possibly severe emotional trauma. The investigated events were all severe, with only 18 survivors in Spanair's case and all passengers and crewmembers perishing in the Air France and SAS cases. In the SAS case, there were also fatalities in the private plane the flight hit and the hangar it crashed into. Unfortunately, there was not much that could be done to minimize the harm to these victims when these accidents actually occurred, as the events, in all three cases, both developed very rapidly and were of such a nature that little could be done to improve the circumstances surrounding them.

The events were not likely to cause further physical harm to those not affected by the original victims, had little impact on the environment and property, besides Linate airport, and there was nearly nothing that could be done for the victims of the accidents. As a result, these stakeholders had less prominence in the communication from the firms than the kin of the victims and the general public. The kin of the victims suffered emotional trauma from their bereavement and thus caused them harm, and the general public had to be convinced of the safety of the rest of the airline's operations. These stakeholders thus become salient stakeholders for all three firms in the aftermath of the crises, as did the media.

The salience of the victims' kin is a good example of how crises can cause organizations to come into contact with groups that would not otherwise be considered stakeholders (Quarantelli, 1988; Aquier et al., 2008). Normally, they would only considered to be a stakeholder if they were part of another stakeholder group, such as shareholders or customers, but as someone harmed by the loss of their friend or relative, their claims and demands on the company gains legitimacy in the eyes of society, and often in the eyes of the law as well. Additionally, the company must meet the demands of the victims' kin quickly or be considered uncaring and illegitimate (Alpaslan et al.; 2009), giving the firms a sense of urgency regarding these claims.

Showing concern for the victims of a crisis as well as the friends and relatives of those victims is considered to be an important part of crisis communication (Martin & Boynton, 2005), and a firm that did not do so would likely be perceived as illegitimate by its stakeholders. Hence, it is not surprising that all three firms stated emphatically that they were feeling sympathy towards the victims and sharing their grief. This is something that all the airlines we have analyzed communicated directly in the first press release and continued to be expressed in every release of press material. Something that was also communicated thoroughly, especially by SAS and Air France, was how much the airlines were doing to help the friends and family of the victims and also how well they were cooperating with involved authorities.

These statements are also supported by the actions the firms undertook. All three firms brought in psychologists, qualified caretakers and similar specialists that could give aid and counseling to the kin of the victims shortly after the accidents occurred. Air France altered the look of their website to give it a more somber appearance, which is a gesture that fits well with the expression of sympathy for the relatives of the victims. All three companies had representatives that attended memorial services for the victims of their crises, showing concern for their families and sympathy for their grief. Air France and SAS asked the press to not bother the kin of the victims after the events, which may have been due to concern for their privacy, but which may also have been due to a desire to minimize possibly negative media exposure from interviews with the relatives of the victims.

As the general public constitutes the potential customers of these passenger air travel firms, they have to regain their positive attitude towards the firms; by being reassured that the firms are taking corrective action to prevent the accidents from happening again or that the firms did not have responsibility for the events that led to the crisis. The demand for this reassurance is also considered to be legitimate by society. If the firms lose customers as a result of the crisis, they lose revenue and may not survive. As such, the general public had power and legitimacy following these crises.

Stakeholders, especially those as closely associated with the event as the friends and relatives of the victims, desire information about the extent and causes of the crisis in order to reduce the uncertainty regarding how to evaluate the event and how to attribute blame for it occurring (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Since all three firms provided toll-free telephone numbers for the relatives of the victims and released information about the event as it came in to the company,

this demand can be seen as a legitimate one, especially since Air France explicitly stated that this was the case. However, since stakeholders evaluate how responsible the company is for the crisis and how well it was handled, there is an incentive for the firms to not release any information that could reflect negatively on the firm (Wester, 2009), so that stakeholders will not consider it to be illegitimate. This could explain why Spanair denied that officials let flight 5022 take off despite considering replacing it due to its technical problems until audio recordings of this were presented and further denial was made impossible.

This also highlights the importance of matching the firm's communication to stakeholders' expectations regarding the crisis situation, as per Coombs and Holladay's Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The damage a crisis can do to an organization's reputation is dependent on crisis responsibility, response message strategies and intensifiers such as severity and earlier performance history. Attributed crisis responsibility depends primarily on the type of the crisis and the circumstances surrounding it, with stakeholders attributing more responsibility to intentional type events compared to accident cluster and more so compared to victim cluster type events (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Firms can limit the damage done to their reputation through their communication to stakeholders. Stakeholders expect communication that accommodates the needs of victims and their kin depending on attributed responsibility. Further, stakeholders expect more accommodating communication and admitting responsibility following severe crises like the three investigated above. As a result, stakeholders will likely expect message strategies like apologies, sympathy, offers to compensate victims and their kin, and making promises to take corrective action for events of this nature (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs, 2004).

In Air France's case, while the circumstances that led up to the event in question are still uncertain, the crisis was most likely not caused intentionally or by human error, making it a victim or accident cluster event. The Spanair accident can be said to be due to human error, and can thus be classified as part of the intentional cluster of crisis types while the Linate event can be placed in the victim cluster. The media reports on Spanair's safety track record with flight 5022 and other flights illustrate the impact of earlier performance history. This may have had an effect on Spanair's reputation. While all three firms made promises to improve safety procedures, they did not communicate this until a significant period after the crisis, in their annual reports. The firms offered sympathy and compensation towards the victims and their kin. Spanair denied that they considered replacing the flight that crashed,

which is not consistent with taking responsibility for the event. This might have had a negative effect on the firm's reputation, which could explain the financial consequences Spanair experienced after the crisis.

Press releases are a good source of first-hand information from the airlines, and publishing frequently and thoroughly can be considered to be highly appreciated by the different stakeholders eager for information (Martin & Boynton, 2005). Looking at press release publications, Air France is the airline that has communicated the most. 25 press releases are found on the Air France website, comparing to 16 for the Spanair accident by Spanair/SAS, and 10 press releases for the SAS accident. The fact that Air France published so many press releases could be due to the fact that the accident was and still is today a mystery. Looking at the tone of the press releases from the different airlines, they all have a few things in common. The tone of the press releases can be described as being somber and regretful, and when the accident is announced the first time all airlines use the words "regrets to confirm" that the accident has taken place.

Since a perception of safety is so important for the legitimacy of airlines, all three companies had to try to restore their image in this respect after the crises. We can see this in the firms' communication during the crisis response process and for a significant time afterwards. Both SAS and Air France boosted their safety image in their first few press releases by giving specific information about the age of the aircraft involved in the accident, the number of hours it had flown and when the airplane had last undergone a major mechanical check. Information about the experience of the crew measured in flight hours was shared along with how long they had been employed by the airline. Spanair did not communicate this information and as it turned out Spanair was also the airline which received the most critique from the media concerning flight safety.

Similarities and differences in how the companies tried to restore their image of being safe can be found when looking at the annual reports from the year of the accidents. SAS and Air France communicate the accident clearly and thoroughly as the most important event of the year and express continuous condolences and expressions of sadness over what has happened. In the report from Air France it is stated that the fact that there is still no clear explanation to the accident led the airline to review the whole organization. There is also a very clear connection between the accident and new safety routines and systems, such as the creation of

the Independent Safety Review. SAS follows a similar approach in their annual report stating that the accident can only fulfill a constructive purpose if it can improve the safety of the airline industry in the future. At the time of Spanair's accident they were a part of the SAS Group and therefore were part of their annual report. The accident did not get as much attention as the SAS and Air France accident got in their reports, but perhaps this was natural due to the fact that it was a subsidiary at the time. This type of communication can be seen as an important part in the airlines' work to build up an image of safety. Presenting information about the accident together with efforts to increase safety can be assumed to increase the company's legitimacy.

Air France is the only airline of the three we have analyzed that communicates safety information on their website today. The information presented describes how the company continuously works to develop their safety procedures, for example with the Independent Safety Review that was created as a result of the AF447 accident. This type of information on the website can be assumed to give the airline a serious image that not only states that safety is the number one priority, but actually shows that it is.

Crises are usually highly visible in the media (Stephens et al., 2005; Nelkin, 1988) and media reports are typically the primary source of information regarding the crisis for those who are not directly affected by it. As a result, the media has a large influence on the formation of stakeholders' attitudes (Coombs, 2007; Nelkin, 1988), possibly for a long time. The media therefore becomes an important stakeholder following a crisis, having great power over the firms, who typically have to respond to any negative portrayal in the media quickly if they are to minimize the effect those portrayals will have.

Since media reports have such a large impact on the attitudes of other stakeholders, they can also serve as a way to gain insight into how other stakeholder groups perceive the crisis. Stakeholders' attribution of responsibility for the crisis is one of the largest factors influencing the effect on the organization's reputation and legitimacy (McDonald et al., 2010) and we can see traces of this effect in the media reporting regarding the events.

In the case of the accident at Linate Airport, the air traffic controllers can be considered to be responsible for the accident and in this case stakeholders felt sympathy for not only the victims but also the organization as the accident harmed the organization and was caused by an outside agent.

Looking at Spanair's accident however, the picture looks quite different. Media coverage of this accident showed that stakeholders questioned the safety procedures of the airline as a whole and therefore also their legitimacy. It was brought up that the airline had experienced many serious technical difficulties before this crash and the airline was also accused of lying about whether or not they were planning on changing the aircraft for the second take-off attempt. Letters supposedly written by Spanair employees criticizing the company and the way employees were treated circulated in the media and added to the negative picture of the airline that was described. It was also spread in the media that a relative to one of the victims accused the airline of murder due to unsatisfying safety procedures. These can be seen as examples of acts that could play a role in harming Spanair's legitimacy (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2002; Coombs, 2004). This damage to Spanair's legitimacy and reputation could very likely be what caused it to lose one third of its market value and be sold for a mere 1€ seven months after the crash. SAS commented on this event, comparing it to the earlier Linate crisis and saying that customers tend to return relatively quickly after an accident. However, this statement failed to take into account the differences in responsibility for the events.

6. Conclusion

Through this thesis we have attempted to answer our research question; *How did Air France, Spanair and SAS differ in the way they communicated and acted towards their stakeholders during and after the crisis following a fatal airline accident, and which actions have been taken to help restore the airline's reputation and legitimacy?*

After analyzing these three airlines we come to the conclusion that in many aspects, such as their procedures and order of actions during the first 24 hours after the accident they responded in similar ways. They followed similar steps in their actions and communications, such as giving press conferences on the day of the accident and publishing many press releases during the first hours of the crisis. This is however something that might be due to the fact that airlines always must be prepared for these kinds of events and they all have crisis plans and teams ready that spring into action when needed.

One important difference between the airlines is that Spanair communicated less information through the channels that we have analyzed compared to SAS and Air France. Spanair was also already experiencing bad press due to previous technical failures at the time of the accident. Adding the fact that Spanair lied about the events leading up to the accident did not help their situation. In comparison, Air France and SAS upheld a high level of transparency through the crisis situation, and also these airlines communicated a clear connection between the accidents and future improved safety procedures through their annual reports. Air France excelled compared to the other two as the only airline that communicate safety information on their website today, stating that their improved efforts were a direct result of the AF447 crash. Communicating how persistently the airline is working to improve flight safety is a clear strategy that especially Air France and SAS have used in their efforts to improve their legitimacy and reputation after their airline accidents.

While it was not the topic of our thesis, Air France's comment that stakeholders desired information and transparency and the negative effects of Spanair's lying during their crisis communication indicates that transparency is an important aspect during crisis management. As such, the limited information regarding what SAS and Spanair actually did to ensure the safety of their passengers is an area that can benefit from improvement. These points may warrant further investigation for crisis management researchers and practitioners.

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