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Crisis of the Week: Amtrak in Safety Spotlight After Derailment

By

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Cars from an Amtrak train lay spilled onto Interstate 5 below alongside smashed vehicles as some train cars remain on the tracks above Monday, Dec. 18, 2017, in DuPont, Wash. PHOTO: ELAINE THOMPSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

This is a weekly commentary by external experts.

Risk & Compliance Journal this week examines the Dec. 19 derailment of a high-speed Amtrak train. Three people were killed and dozens were injured as the train veered off a tight curve onto a highway south of Seattle en route to Portland, Ore. The train was [was traveling 80 miles per hour](#) in a 30-mile-per-hour zone. The curve where the incident occurred was slated for elimination in the rail's final plans but the move was scrapped due to [budget constraints](#).

Amtrak issued several statements, each with varying information. The [first](#) advised of “an incident” that caused “some injuries.” A [second statement](#) issued 75 minutes after the first one confirmed the derailment and offered a telephone number for concerned individuals to call. A [third statement](#) later that day detailed [service](#) disruptions. Amtrak the next day [said](#) it was “deeply saddened by the loss of life and injuries” and was fully cooperating with investigators. Chief Executive Richard Anderson held a news conference the second day, calling the crash a “[wake-up call](#).”

Three crisis communications experts break down Amtrak's response.

Ira Kalb, assistant professor of clinical marketing, USC Marshall School of Business: “Amtrak made a series of statements that gave the appearance it was withholding information. First, calling the derailment ‘an incident that caused some injuries’ minimized the gravity of the situation and compromised the organization’s credibility. Quickly following this statement with increasing evidence of more serious injury and death further eroded public trust and undermined the effectiveness of subsequent statements.

“Mr. Anderson calling the crash a ‘wake up call’ that is ‘not acceptable’ is likely to increase public concerns, since some may wonder why Amtrak was not already awakened by previous derailments that caused serious injuries and death. His statement raised questions about Amtrak’s resolve for protecting passengers and employees from harm. Instead, he should reassure the public Amtrak is being straightforward and is on the right track.

“A more effective approach would be for Amtrak to employ proven crisis-management protocols by quickly admitting the facts that are known about the accident, assuring the public the derailment is being fully investigated by independent experts and delineating positive steps that are being taken to avoid a reoccurrence. Rather than saying ‘we are huge supporters of positive train control,’ Mr. Anderson should explain how Amtrak is expediting implementation of ‘positive train control’ to avoid human errors and put safeguards in place to prohibit trains from taking sharp 30-mile-per-hour curves at 80 miles per hour.”

Mike Paul, president, Reputation Doctor: “I give Amtrak a grade of ‘C’ for its communications. I believe Mr. Anderson’s statements to date have been very incomplete, not empathetic enough and, at times, insensitive to the many victims. Amtrak’s initial statement saying the crash was an ‘incident’ with ‘some injuries’ was very unwise and smelled of statements prepared by attorneys, versus ones written in conjunction with a top crisis and public relations expert. Three passengers died, over 100 were injured [but] the initial statement proved to be a huge understatement.

“After talking with Amtrak’s president, the governor of Washington said Amtrak will pay for all victims injured and would pay for all damage done as a result of the crash. That statement was much louder than any statement from Amtrak itself on the subject of compensation. Again, [it seems communications] clearly were led by legal advice, [not] in conjunction with crisis and public relations help. Although Amtrak later showed some empathy, in my opinion it was not enough. Proper tone and attitude in communications is important; public statements filled with legalese may help in a court of law but often backfire in the court of public opinion.

“No victim wants to be part of a ‘wake-up call’ to get the attention of Amtrak to be safe for all. This statement from Mr. Anderson was highly insensitive. NTSB’s investigation will last throughout 2018 and into 2019. Long investigations and government oversight usually means more concern for brand and reputation damage among key stakeholders.”

Melissa Agnes, president and co-founder, Agnes + Day: “One of the communication difficulties with managing these types of crises is they are fast-reported on and the news is fast-spread—yet confirming necessary facts in order to communicate

effectively and accurately is not such a fast process. Organizations need to balance the need for timeliness and accuracy in the initial hours and days of managing the crisis.

Amtrak took on this challenge better than many.

“Its initial communications on the day of the derailment were timely and as informative as it could be at that point in time. It confirmed facts about the incident as well as provided customers with information regarding service suspension. However, its communications were dry and lacked a necessary compassionate tone. The second day was different. [With] more confirmed facts to communicate, Amtrak did so with more human emotion—both in its written communications as well as with Mr. Anderson’s verbal communications and updates.

“Mr. Anderson was clear to communicate the organization prioritizes railway safety and that it will ‘continue to improve and enforce the safety culture at Amtrak.’ Moving forward, one of the risks Amtrak faces is a loss of stakeholder trust in the safety of its services. To mitigate this risk, once the investigation is finalized, part of Amtrak’s post-crisis strategy needs to include real action toward—and communicated demonstrations of—its stated commitment to safety and preventing any reoccurrences.”

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