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# Crisis of the Week: Safety, Oversight Questions Dog Uber After Self-Driving Car Death

By

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Apr 12, 2018 12:18 pm ET

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Video from ABC-15 shows investigators at the scene of a fatal accident involving a self-driving Uber car in Tempe, Ariz., on March 19, 2018. PHOTO: ABC-15/ASSOCIATED PRESS

**This is a weekly commentary by external experts.**

Uber Technologies Inc. [suspended its driverless vehicle program](#) last month, two days after a woman in Arizona [was killed by a self-driving car](#). It was the first known fatality involving an autonomous vehicle. A few days later, Tesla Inc. [reported a fatality](#) in an accident involving one of its semi-autonomous vehicles in Mountain View, Calif. The deaths [could hamper efforts](#) to reduce regulations to help speed up the development of driverless vehicles.

Uber [sent out a tweet](#) the day its March 18 accident occurred, saying: “Our hearts go out to the victim’s family. We’re fully cooperating with @TempePolice and local authorities as they investigate this incident.” Uber Chief Executive Dara Khosrowshahi [said in a tweet](#) that same day: “Some incredibly sad news out of Arizona. We’re thinking of the victim’s family as we work with local law enforcement to understand what happened.”

A company spokesman reiterated Uber’s condolences to The Wall Street Journal a day after the accident: “Our hearts go out to the victim’s family. We are fully cooperating with local authorities in their investigation of this incident.” The test driver in the self-driving car was [a convicted felon](#). Uber told the WSJ the driver fell within the company’s standard background-check requirements. The driver couldn’t be reached at the time.

Three crisis-management experts review Uber’s response.

**Jennifer Vickery, chief executive, National Strategies Public Relations:** “The initial responses from Uber and Mr. Khosrowshahi over Twitter were on-point but expected; they seem to follow the formulaic model of stating their concern was from the heart and how they’re cooperating fully. From my experience, I would have urged Uber to add more of its concern and overall gravity of the situation to the tweet before sending.

“This case is quite extraordinary in that the details are so transparent and available for mass consumption. The video released showing both the internal and external view of the autonomous vehicle...is graphic and can affect the public. Also, a video like this is susceptible to be shared and can become even more prominent. The video portion of the crisis itself requires particular communication, more than what we currently see from Uber.

“Even though it may appear from law enforcement’s perspective the Uber vehicle is not at fault, there still is criticism over the driver looking down while the car is in motion. Uber has not put out a statement about this yet, nor the fact the backup driver was a convicted felon. The driver’s background of being a felon does not influence the makeup of the situation but it should affect how they communicate

regarding the big picture of this tragedy. Uber is facing the need to explain that part of the equation.”

**Ira Kalb, assistant professor of clinical marketing at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business:** “When he took the helm of Uber, Mr. Khosrowshahi said his priority was to repair the brand. Forward progress on this effort stalled when an Uber self-driving car hit and killed a woman.

“Uber tweeted a statement of condolence upon learning of the death. Later the same day Mr. Khosrowshahi tweeted a nearly identical statement. The content and juxtaposition of these statements [could] raise questions about Uber’s sincerity and authenticity. More importantly, none of Uber’s comments address the safety of its driverless cars. This is a real problem for Uber since it has called its self-driving investment ‘existential.’

“Even though the accident still is under investigation, Uber would be better served if it follows proven crisis-management protocols, including admitting some responsibility and apologizing for the safety operator [looking down] and for the car operating [above the speed limit]. It should put the accident in perspective by sharing the number and percentage of driverless car trips that have been taken with no incident, comparing this to driver accident statistics. It needs to propose a solution that would make the market feel more comfortable riding in driverless Ubers.”

**Dale Weiss, senior vice president, CommCore Consulting Group:** “Every good [crisis communications] plan has a checklist containing probable scenarios with prepared templates; this enables a constant flow of releasable information. Uber was quick to tweet out an initial statement offering condolences to the victim’s family and promising to cooperate in the investigation. The first box was checked: that care and concern is almost a knee-jerk reaction.

“However, the 24/7 news cycle needs much more. Knowing there would be a public release of the accident video and [information about] the background of the operator, what else should be in Uber’s crisis plan checklist?

“Here are a few options: details of operator training in the driverless program; operator selection process; top-line information of the safety technology used in the driverless-car program; and government certifications obtained for the program. Also: the number of trips completed; number of passengers; and total miles driven. This checklist can allow the company to offer a cadence of proactive outbound information as the investigation unfolds.”

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