



Crisis Communications & Response

United Airlines and 9/11

One of our principals was a member of a select, 40-person crisis-response team at United Airlines on September 11, 2001.

As a member of the response team, she participated in senior executive scenario media training, represented corporate communications in quarterly mock company-wide response drills and participated in the development of an in-depth communications crisis manual for use and implementation by United Airlines public relations representatives and agencies throughout the world.

"September 11, 2001, was one of those moments in which history splits, and we define the world as 'before' and 'after.'" – NYT Editorial Board (September 12, 2001).

Communication Challenges:

- United's communications response to 9/11 managed the needs and confidentiality requirements of a vast and interconnected set of stakeholders: the FBI, the NTSB, the CIA, the FAA, the White House, U.S. Congress, United employees, the victims' families, foreign embassies, international media, and the 250,000 customers who were stranded while the nation's commercial airspace closed for three days.
- In the hours and days following the attacks, United had to manage the re-opening of 93 airports across North America while aggressively communicating with its customers regarding new airport security procedures and re-booking procedures for 250,000 customers who had been stranded in the wake of the shutdown.
- United also managed international media interest on issues such as skyrocketing war risk insurance premiums, the immediate need for congressional action to stabilize the industry, preserving vital air services, and the events' devastating impact on an industry sector that accounts for more than 10% of the GDP.
- United, of course, immediately had to manage media speculation that it was on the verge of Chapter 11 reorganization in the weeks following the attacks.