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Headline: Commentary: Airlines should communicate with empathy when flight delays occur

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SINGAPORE: Flight delays are every passenger's nightmare. I think most travellers like myself can attest that delays disrupt plans and often result in long, meaningless waiting around in airport terminals.

There is little wonder emotions run high during such circumstances, as was the case in a recent flight delay in Bangkok where Scoot passengers were stranded for 24 hours. A lack of information on the flight's status left stranded passengers with no immediate recourse. Not surprisingly, many aired their frustration on social media.

With smartphones providing easy access to Facebook or Twitter, such frustration, unfounded or otherwise, can be shared at lightning speed, which inevitably draws reputational risks for airlines. Long after the unhappy episode is over, remnants of the unfortunate incident will continue to thrive in cyberspace.

BEAR IN MIND PASSENGERS' EMOTIONS, BE PREPARED TO RESPOND

Corporate mishaps like flight delays cannot be avoided in today's unpredictable business environment. Given the global nature of air travel and the expansion of the travel industry in recent decades, airlines should expect to be confronted by unanticipated events every day. What sets apart a top airline from others in such incidents is a well-executed contingency plan, one that exercises proactive public engagement.

In cases of flight delays, airlines need to bear in mind passengers' emotions upon receiving news of a delay. It is only when airlines can empathise with the anxieties behind the emotionally charged responses of travellers that they are able to reduce the reputational damage from the delay. Mitigating measures will flow from this logic.

When news of Singapore Airlines (SIA) flight SQ006's crash in Taipei first emerged in November 2000, SIA's then-CEO Cheong Choong Kong sprung into action to take charge of various media conferences and personally travelled to Taiwan within hours of the crash.

Knowing how much grief families of the passengers who died on that crash would have felt, he also did not quibble about who should shoulder the blame, even as facts were unclear. "They are our pilots, it was our aircraft, and the aircraft should not have been on that runway. We accept full responsibility," he said in response to a reporter's question on whether he thought SIA pilots had been misled onto the wrong runway, which was the cause of the crash.

Although this is an extreme example, because it involved passenger deaths and casualties, there are lessons on how to manage delays when tensions are high and information is unclear that airlines should glean from this. Enduring images of SIA's top management showing empathy and acknowledging the pain of family members won the airline high accolades and allowed SIA's reputation to recover quickly from the accident.

DON'T WAIT AROUND IN SILENCE

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With no standard procedure to follow, it is all too common for airlines to freeze communications when chaos hit to try to get ahead of the curve and figure out what has gone wrong. While airlines may try to play safe and withhold information until details behind a delay are clear, unhappy travellers, whose lives are being disrupted, will demand for immediate information and action.

In silence or with a holding reply, as was the case when Scoot passengers were stuck in Bangkok for 24 hours, the airline inevitably creates a vacuum that is at risk of filling up with misinformation or rumours. This in turn may fuel greater unhappiness among affected passengers.

DON'T LEAVE PASSENGERS TO WONDER ABOUT THEIR FATE

In managing the situation as passengers wait, airlines cannot leave passengers to grapple in the dark and wonder about their fate. Airlines must give them the accountability and information that they seek, and let passengers know when updates will be forthcoming.

There should be constant updates and genuine offers to address the inconveniences caused. Employees at the frontline should be empowered to make sensible decisions to provide passengers with food, a resting place or compensation, as they attempt to pacify angry and often very tired crowds who either have anxious family members waiting to see them, or bosses or investors to placate.

HAVE SOMEONE SENIOR REPRESENT

The presence of a senior executive would lend credibility and calm in these situations, but this seemed lacking in the Bangkok case. Having someone senior take charge of the situation can demonstrate seriousness and resolve in ending the delay, after trust is initially shaken.

The world witnessed, for example, how quickly AirAsia Group CEO Tony Fernandes took charge when QZ8501 crashed into the Java Sea in December 2014, killing all 155 passengers and seven crew on board. The charismatic leader was applauded for taking charge at a time when emotions were high and speculations were rife. His use of tweets enabled him to control the message, express regrets and provide updates on recovery efforts.

Now, no one expects a CEO to come out for a flight delay as the situation develops but I think many will appreciate the CEO talking about it after the incident blows over.

Updates from the station master or the pilot during the wait will therefore be key. People are generally reasonable creatures. Many are aware that organisations can be hit by unanticipated events but need assurance from those in power. Passengers are no different when it comes to air travel.

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In today's ever-changing media landscape, airlines' corporate reputations are increasingly subjected to greater vulnerability and volatility. How they respond to incidents that challenge the patience of their passengers will determine whether they survive with their reputation intact.

Airlines should not wait to be hit by a crisis before they realise that they need to be prepared for flight delays. In these instances, having a well-oiled contingency plan that demonstrates empathy to respond and communicate decisively goes a long way to preserving goodwill and public trust.

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