

## Review Article

# Navigating Turbulence: Communication Strategies in Crisis Management By Indian Airlines

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## I N F O

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## A B S T R A C T

In the ever-evolving aviation industry, effective crisis management is pivotal for maintaining public trust and ensuring operational stability. This study examines crisis management strategies employed by Indian airlines—Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet—through a case study approach, with a focus on their public relations (PR) tactics executed for specific incidents. By exploring real-life crises faced by these airlines, the research evaluates their responses, the PR strategies employed, and the effectiveness of these strategies in restoring their reputations. The findings reveal the critical role of timely and transparent communication in mitigating reputational damage and highlight the importance of proactive management. Additionally, the paper provides insights into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the airlines' PR practices. This study not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge on crisis communication and organisational image management but also offers practical insights for aviation professionals and public relations practitioners. Stress is laid on enhancing crisis response mechanisms, emphasising the importance of persuasive communication and public relations in the aviation sector.

**Keywords:** Crisis Management, Public Relations, Indian Airlines, Media Strategies, Organisational Image, Aviation Sector, Swot Analysis

## Introduction

Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication process that organisations use to build mutually beneficial relationships with their publics. The essence of PR lies in disseminating information on behalf of a company or individual to shape public opinion. It encompasses a wide range of activities aimed at creating and maintaining a favourable image of an organisation among its stakeholders. PR with external publics is particularly crucial in industries where the public image is highly influential, such as the

aviation sector. This study focuses on crisis management by Indian airlines, analysing how they employ PR strategies to navigate crises and maintain their reputations.

The aviation industry is inherently prone to crises due to its complex operations and high safety standards. Crises in this sector can range from technical malfunctions and accidents to customer service failures and public relations blunders. Effective crisis management is essential for mitigating the negative impacts of these events and restoring public trust. Indian airlines, like their global counterparts, have faced

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numerous crises over the years, necessitating robust PR strategies to manage these situations.

### Background of the Study

Over the past decade, the civil aviation sector in India has emerged as one of the fastest-growing industries in the country. This growth is driven by increasing demand for air travel, economic development, and the rise of low-cost carriers. However, the sector has also faced significant challenges, including operational disruptions, regulatory hurdles, and intense competition. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, leading to unprecedented disruptions in air travel and financial strain on airlines.

Despite these challenges, the Indian aviation industry has shown resilience and adaptability. Air traffic movement in the first quarter of FY 2022-23 witnessed a significant increase compared to the previous year, indicating a strong recovery. The industry's growth trajectory necessitates the need for effective crisis management strategies to sustain this momentum and ensure long-term viability.

### Public Relations and Crisis Management in the Aviation Sector

Public relations play a pivotal role in the aviation sector, particularly in managing crises. PR professionals in this industry are responsible for maintaining media relations, disseminating information, and shaping public perception during crises. They collaborate closely with marketing, communications, and advertising departments to craft messages that reassure stakeholders and mitigate damage to the airline's reputation.

The PR strategies employed by airlines during crises can significantly influence public perception and organisational outcomes. These strategies include releasing timely press statements, engaging with media outlets, leveraging social media platforms, and conducting interviews to provide accurate information and address concerns. The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the nature and severity of the crisis, the airline's previous reputation, and the responsiveness of its communication efforts.

### Indian Airlines - Cases

This study focuses on three major Indian airlines: Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet. These airlines have been selected due to their prominence in the Indian aviation market and their varied experiences with crises. Each airline has faced unique challenges in the last one year and employed different PR strategies to manage these situations.

#### Air India

Air India, the national carrier of India, has a storied history dating back to 1932 when it was founded as Tata Airlines

by J.R.D. Tata. Over the years, Air India has undergone several transformations, including nationalisation and multiple attempts at privatisation. The airline has faced numerous crises, ranging from financial difficulties and operational inefficiencies to customer service issues and safety concerns.

In response to these crises, Air India has employed a range of PR strategies. For instance, during operational disruptions, the airline has issued timely press releases to inform passengers about the status of flights and the measures being taken to address the issues. Additionally, Air India has used social media platforms to engage with passengers, provide real-time updates, and address grievances.

#### IndiGo

IndiGo, a low-cost carrier founded in 2006 by Rahul Bhatia and Rakesh Gangwal, has quickly become the largest airline in India by passenger volume. IndiGo's success can be attributed to its efficient operations, competitive pricing, and strong customer focus. However, the airline has not been immune to crises, facing incidents related to customer service, safety, and operational disruptions.

IndiGo's PR strategies during crises have emphasised transparency and responsiveness. The airline has been proactive in issuing statements, conducting media briefings, and using social media to communicate with passengers. For example, during a technical glitch that led to flight cancellations, IndiGo promptly informed passengers about the issue, provided alternative arrangements, and offered compensation, thereby mitigating negative publicity.

#### SpiceJet

SpiceJet, another prominent low-cost carrier in India, was established in 1984 and rebranded in 2004 under the leadership of Ajay Singh. SpiceJet has faced its share of crises, including financial troubles, safety incidents, and customer service complaints. Despite these challenges, the airline has managed to maintain a strong market presence through effective crisis management and PR strategies.

SpiceJet's approach to crisis management has involved a combination of press releases, media engagements, and social media interactions. The airline has focused on providing accurate and timely information to passengers, addressing their concerns, and demonstrating a commitment to resolving issues. This approach has helped SpiceJet maintain its reputation and customer loyalty.

The primary aim of this research is to examine the PR strategies used by Indian airlines to manage crises and restore their reputations. The study seeks answer to questions like: What is the significance of PR in the aviation sector? What role does PR play in crisis management for

Indian airlines? What PR strategies have been employed by Indian airlines to handle various crises? How effective are these PR strategies in resolving crises and restoring the airline's image? What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the PR strategies used by Indian airlines?

### Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the broader understanding of crisis management in the aviation sector and its implications for PR practices. By analysing the PR strategies of Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet, the study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of different communication approaches during crises. These insights can inform PR practitioners, airline executives, and policymakers on best practices for managing crises and maintaining public trust. By examining the experiences of Indian airlines, the study underscores the importance of timely, transparent, and effective communication in mitigating the impact of crises and maintaining a positive organisational image.

### Review of Literature

By exploring a range of academic sources and case studies, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of PR in handling crises within the aviation industry.

### Role of Public Relations in Business Organisations

Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics. It involves disseminating information to shape public perception and maintain a positive image. In the aviation sector, PR is crucial for managing the brand image, especially during crises. PR professionals collaborate with marketing, communications, and advertising departments to ensure cohesive messaging across all platforms.

### Crisis Management in the Aviation Industry

Airlines frequently face crises that can severely impact their reputation and customer trust. Effective crisis management involves prompt and transparent communication to mitigate negative publicity. PR strategies play a vital role in this process by ensuring that accurate information reaches stakeholders, thereby helping to restore the airline's image post-crisis.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Crisis Communication

- **Organisational Image Management Theory:** This theory posits that maintaining a positive image among stakeholders is essential for an organisation's success. According to Moffitt (1994), an organisation's image comprises the shared meanings, attitudes, knowledge, and opinions of its stakeholders. Effective image

management involves developing, sustaining, and repairing the organisation's image through strategic communications.

- **Crisis Communication Theory:** This theory focuses on the strategies used to communicate during a crisis. It highlights the importance of timely, transparent, and consistent messaging to manage public perception and maintain trust. Research in the 1980s indicated that the magnitude of crises has increased, necessitating robust communication strategies to handle them effectively.

### Crisis Management by Indian Airlines

- **Air India:** Air India, one of India's leading airlines, has faced several crises in recent years. Incidents such as the "pee gate" and finding insects in in-flight meals have attracted significant media attention. Air India's response strategies often include public apologies and corrective actions to reassure passengers of their commitment to quality and hygiene.
- **IndiGo:** As a low-cost carrier, IndiGo has also encountered crises that threaten its reputation. Effective crisis management in such cases involves acknowledging the issue, offering sincere apologies, and taking visible corrective measures to prevent future occurrences.
- **SpiceJet:** SpiceJet has similarly dealt with crises by employing PR strategies that focus on transparent communication and prompt resolution of passenger complaints. By addressing issues head-on and keeping stakeholders informed, SpiceJet aims to maintain its credibility and customer trust.

### PR Strategies

- **Ingratiation:** This strategy involves attempts to gain favour with the public by showing concern and empathy during a crisis. It often includes public apologies and assurances of corrective actions.
- **Mortification:** This strategy entails accepting responsibility for the crisis and expressing remorse. It is a critical approach for restoring trust and demonstrating accountability.
- **Defensive Response:** Some airlines adopt a defensive stance, attempting to downplay the severity of the crisis or shift blame. While this may offer short-term relief, it can harm the airline's reputation in the long term if stakeholders perceive the response as insincere.

### Media Utilised in Crisis Communication

Airlines use various media platforms to disseminate their crisis communication messages. Social media, press releases, and official websites are commonly used to reach a broad audience quickly. The choice of media can significantly impact the effectiveness of the communication strategy. For instance, timely updates on social media can

help manage public perception and prevent misinformation from spreading.

The literature indicates that effective crisis management in the aviation industry hinges on the strategic use of PR to communicate transparently and promptly with stakeholders. By understanding and applying theories of organisational image management and crisis communication, airlines can better navigate crises and maintain their reputation. The case studies of Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet illustrate the practical application of these theories and highlight the importance of tailored PR strategies in crisis situations.

## Objectives of The Study

- **To Evaluate the Effectiveness of Public Relations Strategies in Crisis Management by Indian Airlines:** This objective is chosen to analyse how well Indian airlines like Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet use PR strategies to handle crises. By assessing the effectiveness of these strategies, the study aims to identify best practices and areas for improvement, contributing to the broader knowledge of crisis management in the aviation sector.
- **To Identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) in the PR Approaches of Indian Airlines:** This objective aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the PR strategies used by the airlines, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses while identifying potential opportunities and threats. This will help airlines refine their PR strategies, ensuring better preparedness and response in future crises.

## Research Methodology

- **Research Design:** A qualitative case study approach was chosen to provide an in-depth analysis of crisis management by Indian airlines. This design allows for a detailed examination of specific incidents and PR strategies employed by Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet.
- **Research Tools:** Content analysis was used as the primary research tool to analyse press releases, social media posts, and news articles related to the crises faced by the airlines. This method helps in understanding the communication strategies and their effectiveness in managing public perception.
- **Sampling Methods:** Purposive sampling was employed to select specific crises involving the three airlines. This method ensures that the chosen cases are relevant and provide rich insights into the PR strategies and their outcomes, enabling a focused and detailed analysis.

## Results

### Part I: Analysis of Crisis Communication Strategies

#### Air India

Air India has faced several crises that have put its reputation at risk. Three significant incidents include the “pee gate”

case, a woman finding a stone in her meal, and a business class passenger discovering an insect in his food.

#### Crisis Case 1

**Pee Gate Case:** On November 26, 2022, a 34 year old male passenger urinated on a female co-passenger in a business class seat during a New York-Delhi flight. The incident came to light after the victim’s complaint went viral on social media and mainstream media picked up the story. Air India faced criticism for its delayed response and inadequate handling of the situation.

Shankar Mishra was arrested from Bengaluru by Delhi Police on January 7 and was bailed on January 31 by Delhi’s Patiala House Court. Mishra claimed the woman urinated on herself due to a medical condition.

**Type of Crisis:** Passenger Misconduct.

#### Strategies Employed

- Initially, Air India’s response was defensive, with attempts to conceal the incident.
- The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) criticised Air India for its lack of enforcement.
- Later, Air India’s CEO and Tata Sons’ Chairman issued public apologies, emphasising passenger safety and dignity.

#### Analysis

- The initial defensive strategy was ineffective, leading to public outrage and negative media coverage.
- The subsequent proactive response by top management helped mitigate some damage but was too late to fully restore trust.

#### Crisis Case 2

**Stone in Meal:** In early January 2023, a woman journalist found a stone in her in-flight meal on an Air India flight. The issue was brought to public attention through social media and gained widespread media coverage, raising concerns about the airline’s food safety standards.

On January 8, Sarvapriya Sangwan tweeted that she found a stone in her meal that was served to her inflight from Delhi to Kathmandu. Two pictures of the food with a stone in it were also posted by her. She wrote: “You don’t need resources and money to ensure stone-free food Air India (@airindia). This is what I received in my food served on flight AI 215 today. Crewmember Ms. Jadon was informed. This kind of negligence is unacceptable. #airIndia” flight.

**Type of Crisis:** Food Safety

#### Crisis response strategies used

#### Strategies Employed

- Air India responded quickly with an accommodative strategy.

- They issued an apology and promised corrective action, addressing the issue after it went viral on social media.

### Analysis

The quick and accommodative response was more effective, showing Air India's commitment to addressing passenger concerns promptly.

### Crisis Case 3

**Insect in Food:** In another incident, a business class passenger found an insect in his meal, highlighting persistent issues with food quality on Air India flights.

**Type of Crisis:** Customer Service Failure.

### Strategies Employed

Similar to the stone incident, Air India responded with an apology and assured future corrective measures.

### Analysis

The strategy mirrored the stone incident, demonstrating consistency in handling similar crises.

### Learnings from these Cases

- Air India's defensive approach in the initial stages of a crisis often exacerbates the situation.
- Quick, sincere apologies and assurances of corrective action are more effective in mitigating reputational damage.
- Proactive communication from top management can help restore some level of trust and credibility.

### IndiGo

IndiGo, another major Indian airline, has also encountered significant crises, including manhandling a passenger, denying boarding to a specially-abled child, and an incident involving a political figure opening an emergency exit.

### Crisis Case 1

**Manhandling a Passenger:** In November 2017, a video surfaced showing IndiGo staff manhandling a passenger on the tarmac at Delhi airport. The video quickly went viral on social media, followed by extensive media coverage, leading to public outrage and a formal apology from the airline.

**Type of Crisis:** Staff Misconduct.

### Strategies Employed

- IndiGo's response was slow, issuing an apology only after the video went viral.
- They adopted an accommodative strategy, apologising and promising to rectify staff behaviour.

### Analysis

- The delayed response was a major flaw, causing significant reputational harm.
- The eventual apology was necessary but did not fully address the public's concerns about staff conduct.

### Crisis Case 2

**Denying Boarding to a Specially-abled Child:** On May 7, 2022, IndiGo was fined by the DGCA for denying boarding to a specially-abled child at Ranchi airport. The incident gained significant media attention, prompting discussions on the airline's treatment of differently-abled passengers and leading to regulatory penalties.

**Type of Crisis:** Discrimination.

### Strategies Employed

IndiGo responded quickly with an accommodative approach, apologising and taking steps to prevent future occurrences.

### Analysis

- The quick and sincere response helped mitigate some of the negative impact.
- It showed IndiGo's willingness to learn from its previous experiences and improve its policies.

### Crisis Case 3

**Emergency Exit Incident:** Tejasvi Surya, a BJP MP, allegedly opened the emergency exit door of an IndiGo aircraft before take-off, causing a safety concern.

**Type of Crisis:** Operational Disruption.

### Strategies Employed

IndiGo managed the situation by ensuring no passengers were harmed and that safety protocols were followed. The response included a statement from the airline, clarifying the incident.

### Analysis

By addressing the safety concerns promptly, IndiGo managed to control the narrative and prevent widespread panic.

### Learnings from these Cases

- Timely responses are crucial in managing public perception.
- Accommodative strategies with sincere apologies and corrective actions are effective in restoring trust.
- Clear communication during safety-related incidents helps maintain passenger confidence.

### SpiceJet

SpiceJet has also faced its share of crises, including stranding passengers on an aerobridge, leaving passengers behind, and a passenger death due to turbulence.

### Crisis Case 1

**Stranded Passengers at Delhi Airport:** In July 2022, SpiceJet passengers were stranded at Delhi airport after being locked in an aerobridge for hours due to a technical glitch. The incident, captured and shared on social media, drew media attention and highlighted the airline's operational challenges.

**Type of Crisis:** Service Disruption.

## Strategies Employed

SpiceJet's response was slow and defensive, denying allegations against their ground staff.

### Analysis

The defensive strategy failed to address passenger grievances effectively, leading to negative publicity.

### Crisis Case 2

**Passenger Lock-In Incident:** In a separate incident in June 2022, passengers were left locked inside an aircraft for hours without proper ventilation or communication. The situation was reported by the media, underscoring the airline's need to improve its crisis management protocols. A Kochi-bound SpiceJet flight left 40 passengers stranded near the runway, causing inconvenience and safety concerns.

**Type of Crisis:** Technical Failure.

### Strategies Employed

The airline did not initially clarify the incident, only issuing an apology after public outcry.

### Analysis

The lack of initial communication worsened the situation, with the delayed apology appearing insincere.

### Crisis Case 3

**Passenger Death due to Turbulence:** A passenger died after being injured during turbulence, raising questions about the airline's handling of in-flight emergencies.

**Type of Crisis:** Operational Mismanagement

### Strategies Employed

SpiceJet expressed condolences and emphasised adherence to safety protocols but faced criticism for their emergency response.

### Analysis

While expressing condolences was appropriate, the airline's overall crisis management strategy appeared insufficient in addressing safety concerns.

### Learnings from these Cases

- Defensive and delayed responses are counterproductive, damaging the airline's reputation further.
- Immediate, transparent communication is crucial in crisis management.
- Acknowledging and addressing safety concerns promptly can help maintain passenger trust.

### Overall Learnings

- The case studies highlight the importance of timely, sincere, and transparent communication in crisis management.
- Defensive strategies often backfire, while accommodative approaches with clear corrective actions are more effective.

- Airlines need to prioritise passenger safety and dignity, ensuring that top management actively participates in crisis communication to restore and maintain public trust.

By analysing these cases, it is evident that strategic PR management plays a critical role in handling crises effectively, ensuring minimal reputational damage and maintaining customer confidence.

## Part 2: Swot Analysis

This SWOT analysis outlines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats faced by Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet, based on their recent crises and management strategies.

### Air India

#### Strengths

- **Reputation and Legacy:** As the national airline, Air India has a longstanding reputation and is associated with national pride.
- **Extensive Network:** Air India's extensive international and domestic routes offer a broad customer base.

#### Weaknesses

- **Slow Response Time:** In crises such as the "pee gate" incident, Air India's response was delayed, affecting public perception negatively.
- **Operational Inefficiencies:** Repeated incidents involving food safety and in-flight services highlight operational weaknesses.

#### Opportunities

- **Privatisation:** The acquisition by Tata Sons provides an opportunity to overhaul management and operational practices.
- **Expanding Market:** With the growing aviation market in India, there's potential for Air India to regain its competitive edge through strategic improvements.

#### Threats

- **Public Backlash:** Negative publicity from poorly managed incidents can lead to a loss of customer trust.
- **Intense Competition:** The presence of efficient low-cost carriers like IndiGo poses a significant threat.

### IndiGo

#### Strengths

- **Efficient Operations:** IndiGo is known for its punctuality and efficient operations, making it the largest carrier in India by passenger numbers.
- **Strong Brand:** The airline has a strong brand reputation for reliability and cost-effectiveness.

## Weaknesses

- **Customer Service Issues:** Incidents such as the manhandling of a passenger and denial of boarding to a disabled child indicate gaps in customer service.
- **Reactive Crisis Management:** Slow responses to crises can harm the brand's image, as seen in their delayed apology for the passenger manhandling incident.

## Opportunities

- **Technological Integration:** Implementing advanced technology for better customer service and crisis management can enhance their operations.
- **Expansion:** Continued expansion into international markets can drive growth.

## Threats

- **Regulatory Fines:** Penalties from regulatory bodies, such as fines for mishandling disabled passengers, can affect profitability and reputation.
- **Economic Fluctuations:** Economic downturns can reduce the disposable income of travelers, impacting revenue.

## SpiceJet

### Strengths

- **Cost-Effectiveness:** As a budget airline, SpiceJet attracts cost-conscious travelers, which is a significant market segment in India.
- **Innovative Services:** SpiceJet has been known for innovative services and promotional strategies.

### Weaknesses

- **Crisis Management:** Poor handling of incidents, such as passengers stranded without information, shows deficiencies in crisis management.
- **Service Reliability:** Instances of passengers being stranded highlight operational reliability issues.

### Opportunities

- **Service Improvement:** Investing in better customer service and staff training can improve passenger experience and loyalty.
- **Market Growth:** The expanding aviation market in India offers opportunities for increasing market share.

### Threats

- **Negative Publicity:** Frequent negative incidents can tarnish the brand's image and deter potential customers.
- **Regulatory Scrutiny:** Ongoing issues and incidents may attract stricter regulations and scrutiny from aviation authorities.

## Discussion

### Implications of the Learning from the Study

The analysis of crisis management strategies employed by Indian airlines reveals several key implications. First, timely and transparent communication is crucial in mitigating the negative impact of crises. Defensive responses tend to exacerbate the situation, while accommodative strategies that involve sincere apologies and corrective actions are more effective. This underscores the importance of having a proactive crisis management plan that includes clear communication protocols.

The study also highlights the need for airlines to prioritize passenger safety and dignity. Incidents like the "pee gate" and the denial of boarding to a specially abled child illustrate the importance of sensitivity and empathy in crisis management. Airlines must ensure that their staff is trained to handle crises with compassion and professionalism.

### Reference to the Literature in this Field

The findings of this study align with existing literature on crisis communication and organisational image management. According to Organisational Image Management Theory, maintaining a positive image among stakeholders is critical for an organisation's success (Moffitt, 1994). The study's results reinforce this theory, showing that effective crisis management strategies can help restore an airline's image post-crisis.

Crisis Communication Theory also emphasises the importance of timely, transparent, and consistent messaging during a crisis (Coombs, 2007). The analysis of Air India, IndiGo, and SpiceJet demonstrates that airlines which adhere to these principles are more successful in managing public perception and maintaining trust.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could explore the role of social media in crisis management by Indian airlines. Social media has become a powerful tool for real-time communication and can significantly influence public perception during a crisis. Investigating how airlines can leverage social media platforms more effectively could provide valuable insights for improving crisis communication strategies.

Another area for future research is the impact of cultural factors on crisis management. Understanding how cultural differences affect stakeholder expectations and responses to crises could help airlines tailor their communication strategies to different markets.

Finally, a comparative study of crisis management strategies employed by airlines in different regions or countries could provide a broader perspective on best practices and common pitfalls. This could help identify universal principles of effective crisis management while also highlighting region-specific considerations.

## Conclusion

The study of crisis management strategies by Indian airlines highlights the critical role of timely and transparent communication in mitigating reputational damage. Defensive responses often worsen the situation, while sincere apologies and corrective actions help restore trust. The findings align with existing theories on organisational image management and crisis communication, emphasising the importance of strategic PR management. Future research should explore the role of social media, cultural factors, and comparative analyses to further enhance crisis management practices in the aviation industry.

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