

MEDIA RELATIONS AT A MAJOR AVIATION ACCIDENT

Airlines and the NTSB

If an airline experiences a major accident, that company will be confronted with many public relations challenges. This document has been prepared by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to help the airline public relations staff understand the Board's philosophy and procedures in the hours and days immediately following a major airline accident, and specifically to provide companies with guidance about parameters established by Safety Board procedures that an affected air carrier, as a party to the investigation, has agreed to follow.

The Safety Board understands and appreciates the multiple public affairs responsibilities that the air carrier faces when a major accident occurs. It is the policy of the Safety Board to work cooperatively with the public relations representatives of the affected carrier both as the air carrier and the NTSB are responding to the scene and at the scene of the accident, itself. However, it should be understood that the NTSB public affairs staff are few and until such time as a routine working relationship is established on scene it would benefit the carrier's representatives to seek out Safety Board public affairs staff for information, guidance and coordination.

Congress created the National Transportation Safety Board in 1967, charging it with, among other things, investigating all civil aviation accidents in the United States. In addition to determining probable cause, the Board issues safety recommendations in an effort to prevent future accidents. The Safety Board is an independent agency, not part of the Department of Transportation, and has no organizational connection to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

For more than 30 years the Board has conducted investigations under a party system, using experts from other agencies and organizations to provide expertise it does not or may not possess. By legislation, the FAA has the right to be a party to the investigation. All other parties are selected by the NTSB based on the Board's needs for that particular investigation. Generally some or all of the following groups will be parties to an investigation: the airline; the aircraft manufacturer; the engine manufacturer; unions representing the airline's pilots, flight attendants, machinists and dispatchers; the airport authority; the National

Air Traffic Controllers Association; and local crash/fire/rescue authorities. Additional parties may be added as needed.

Upon being notified of a major accident, the Board dispatches a “Go-Team” from Washington. The closest NTSB regional office will immediately respond to control the scene until the Go-Team arrives. The team conducts an on-site investigation typically lasting anywhere from 4 to 10 days (some, notably ValuJet flight 592 and TWA flight 800, have lasted a substantially longer period of time). Sometimes there is a public hearing held near the accident location (usually about 6 months later), and the Board’s final report is typically issued 12 to 24 months after the accident. Parties will be afforded the opportunity to provide the Safety Board with their findings, conclusions, and analysis of the events of the accident, although they will not participate in developing NTSB’s analysis or probable cause. Throughout this period, press and public interest can be relentless. It is important to know what areas of inquiry are appropriately answered by the airline, and which are to be answered by the Safety Board. A more detailed account follows.

The First Few Hours

The Board is almost always initially notified of a major aviation accident by the FAA’s Operations Center in Washington. An evaluation is quickly made to determine the level of NTSB response. Sometimes, an accident can be handled by one of the Board’s regional or field offices (list attached), but for most major airline accidents (both Part 121 and Part 135), a full Go-Team is assembled. The team usually travels to the accident on a government aircraft, but occasionally flies commercial transportation.

Representatives of the Board’s Public Affairs Office always accompany the Go-Team. This office has an answering machine that during non-duty (evening and weekend) hours gives the home telephone number of the public affairs officer (PAO) on call. Therefore, someone can often be reached in an emergency.

Safety Board family support personnel also travel to the accident scene. They facilitate and integrate the resources of the federal government and other organizations to support the activities and efforts of the local and state government and the airline to meet the needs of victims and their families.

Airline Public Affairs Response

When an air carrier has been involved in an accident, we encourage one of its public relations representatives to call the NTSB’s Public Affairs Office at (202) 314-6100. If the office is closed, the answering machine during the evening and on weekends will have the name and home number of the PAO on call; this individual will likely be the Board’s primary press officer at the scene. A

Safety Board PAO will attempt to contact a public relations representative from the airline in those initial hours after an accident.

The Go-Team

The Go-Team could consist of as many as a dozen or more NTSB investigators. The Investigator-in-Charge (IIC), a career employee of the Safety Board, manages the investigation. The investigative team is made up of NTSB investigators who are experts in various disciplines. Each of these investigators serves as a group chairman with representatives from the appropriate parties, including the airline, assigned to his or her group. Typically, groups are formed on scene in all or some of the following disciplines: Structures, Systems, Powerplants, Operations, Air Traffic Control, Weather, Survival Factors, Human Performance, Aircraft Performance and Witness Interviews. Flight Data Recorder (FDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) groups work out of NTSB headquarters in Washington.

In addition to the investigative teams, the NTSB group is also made up of support teams covering public affairs and family affairs. Press officers are dispatched to accompany Go-Teams, sometimes with a Board Member who serves as principal spokesperson. The IIC can also fulfill that responsibility. Safety Board legal officers may also provide support.

There are five Members of the National Transportation Safety Board, nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate to serve five-year non-concurrent terms. The Members serve on Go-Teams on a rotating basis and accompany the teams to serve as principal spokespersons for the investigation while on scene. It is the five Board Members who, under law, will eventually analyze the factual information collected by the investigators to determine probable cause and issue safety recommendations.

If the aircraft was operated by a foreign carrier or is manufactured outside the United States, the foreign government authority will also be present in accordance with international agreement.

At the Accident Scene

The Safety Board immediately establishes a command post as close to the accident scene as possible, most often in a hotel. Press telephones are installed and those numbers are publicized as soon as they are known.

Once the Go-Team arrives on scene, the Board holds an organizational meeting during which parties are designated and the investigative groups are defined. Every evening, a progress meeting will be held. Public relations representatives from the parties, attorneys and news media are not permitted in

these meetings. The airline's party representative (known as the coordinator) should brief public relations staff on the progress of the investigation, but PR representatives should not hesitate to arrange to meet with NTSB PAOs on-scene on a regular basis. The initial meeting should be held as soon after the Go Team's arrival as possible.

It is during the organizational meeting that the parties agree to follow the Board's procedures, part of which affects airline PR staff. The IIC's standard prepared opening statement contains the following paragraph:

"The Safety Board will disseminate to the public all information regarding the accident [investigation], either through our Board Member, public affairs officer, or me. We will hold regular briefings to the press. Please refrain from discussing the accident [investigation] in public, or giving information about it to the press. Any violation of this request will be considered a serious infraction of Board rules."

This rule protects everyone. Typically, the NTSB conducts press briefings during the day and at night following the progress meeting. Only factual information – that all the parties have heard – is released. The NTSB does not speculate or give out unverified information. With all parties deferring to the Board to release information on the investigation, the team speaks in a coordinated, consistent and orderly manner. Through this procedure, competition for "spin" is thus minimized, and the maximum opportunity for coordination and cooperation among the parties is maintained.

The Board has no objection if the airline sends a public relations representative to the accident site. In fact, because there are many questions the press asks that we cannot or will not comment upon (see below), we encourage carriers to send public relations staff to the scene, keeping in mind the rules of participation. If the airline does send press representatives to the scene, we encourage that person to make contact as soon as possible with the NTSB PAO so that formal communication lines are established. It is the goal of the NTSB not to "blind side" anyone and to work cooperatively with the air carrier within the established guidelines. This is facilitated by regular discussions during the on-scene phase.

Access to the accident site is controlled by the NTSB. At a time deemed appropriate by the IIC, the press is usually escorted to a site close to the wreckage, either in total or represented by a pool. Under recent federal laws for protecting people from bloodborne pathogens, it has become increasingly more difficult to allow the press access to the accident site immediately.

What a carrier can do

The Safety Board is cognizant of the increasing pressures all of us are subjected to because of the changed nature of our news media. We do not wish to prevent an airline from assuring its customers, employees and the general public of their concern for the victims and their commitment to aviation safety.

We intend to give airline spokespersons latitude to meet the press and disseminate information, provided that such information does not interfere with the goals of our investigation and does not damage the integrity of the party process. Therefore, an airline should stay away from any judgments about the significance of issues, and nothing that is released should suggest that another party (or other entity) may have played a role in causing the accident. Remember, one benefit of our procedures is to prevent a party from offending – inadvertently or otherwise – another party and provoking a reaction in kind.

Admittedly, this is not a matter that lends itself to plain black and white assessments or rules. There is some factual information that is obviously related to the investigation that nevertheless can be released without compromising the integrity of the investigation or damaging the party system. For example, the date the aircraft was purchased is a fact we will need for our investigation, yet its revelation by you in the hours after the accident will not harm the investigation in any way and is therefore not prohibited under our regulations. Similarly, the release of the last date of major inspection or a description of the airline's inspection program would be permitted, but a statement like "This aircraft has no maintenance issues relevant to this accident" would clearly be prohibited because it calls for a judgment that is not the carrier's to make; that matter will be a subject of the investigation.

Information readily available to the public in the FAA data base may be released by the airline without first presenting it to the NTSB.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of what an airline may say following an accident and what it may not. There is no way all situations can be foreseen, but this list should provide a carrier with enough guidance that, combined with common sense and a commitment to our shared goal of promoting aviation safety, spokespersons should have a good idea of what is an appropriate post-accident response.

What can be said

In considering what would be appropriate to say, a carrier can start off with the concept that anything that could have been said the day before the accident can be said the day of the accident and thereafter. However, even this needs to be carefully considered. In general, after giving the information to the NTSB, the airline should feel free to discuss the aircraft's registration number and history, and the pilots' training and work history, in general terms. Here are things that can definitely be discussed in a post-crash press conference:

The aircraft:

- Registration and serial numbers;
- Dates of manufacture and acquisition;
- Cabin configuration and cargo capacity;
- Systems aboard the aircraft (however, this could be troublesome as questions could easily lead a spokesperson to speculate on how these systems could have been used);
- When it last underwent a major inspection and its general inspection schedule;
- Whether it is fly-by-wire or not;
- How many of these aircraft are in the airline's fleet; and
- Manifest information like numbers of passengers aboard (in-lap infants if known) and cargo listed on the manifest.

The crew:

- Their names (and personal information like their ages);
- How long they've been employed by the carrier;
- What aircraft they're type-rated for;
- Where they were on their trip (the 2nd day of the 3-day trip, for example); and
- What previous legs they flew that day and how long they'd been on duty.
- (All of this information should be given by your company to the NTSB first under any circumstances.)

The accident:

- When the airline was notified of the accident and how it responded, both with family matters and in providing support and cooperation to the NTSB in its investigation; and
- Only general circumstances of the accident should be discussed; for example, it was raining, the flight was on time or 30 minutes late, etc.

The company:

- In general terms, factual information about your corporate philosophy and structure, and practices on training, maintenance and operations;
- Company size, number of employees;
- History (including previous accidents);
- Business alliances; and
- Size and makeup of aircraft fleet.

Family assistance: Virtually anything connected with this is well within the carrier's purview for post-accident press conferences at any time. An airline should feel free to discuss its family disaster plan and publicize its toll free number. Carriers are strongly encouraged to keep the media informed about the

carrier's progress in contacting family members of the passengers and crew involved in the accident. For example, let the media know that 24 families of the 120 passengers have been contacted. An hour later, the airline could report that 52 families have been contacted. Such reports should continue until all passengers' families have been contacted.

What the airline shouldn't say

The aircraft:

- Characterizations of what is in the maintenance records or any other characterization that calls for a judgment or implies involvement or non-involvement in the accident;
- Any speculation about the possible role the plane's components might have played; or
- Any discussion of wreckage patterns or aircraft breakup.

The crew:

- Actions of the crew leading up to the accident;
- Any relationship between crew training and the accident; or
- Any speculation about what the crew might have done or not done during the accident sequence or to prevent the accident.
- While there's nothing wrong with saying the captain is a good pilot (why else would you employ him or her?), stay away from statements that suggest the unlikelihood of the crew doing something wrong, or that implicitly or explicitly point fingers at others.

The accident:

- Descriptions of the plane's "final moments;"
- What the investigation will focus on or how it will be structured;
- Descriptions about wreckage path or suppositions about break-up sequence;
- Announcements about finding flight recorders and how they will be handled;
- Descriptions of airport equipment and capabilities;
- Speculation on the role elements like the weather or air traffic control might have played in the accident; or
- No judgments about what the issues in the investigation are going to be and nothing that implicitly or explicitly points the finger at another potential party to the investigation.

Family Assistance: Avoid commenting on areas that the medical examiner or coroner should officially address. Such areas include:

- Identification procedures and length of time it may take to complete all positive identifications;
- The search and recovery process; and

- Condition of recovered remains.
- It is also important to let the medical examiner or coroner officially release the names of the fatalities that have been positively identified. Once this information is released by the medical examiner/coroner, the carrier is free to discuss this with the media.

While the Safety Board does not officially prohibit parties from providing spokespersons on morning or evening news and interview programs, as the investigation progresses it generally will be less and less appropriate for an airline to do so.

Family Assistance: The airline and the NTSB

At all times following an accident – both on-scene and in the months that follow – public discussion by the airline about what it is doing in the area of family affairs is appropriate.

Immediately after it is known that an accident has occurred, the involved airline starts the process of notifying families of the passengers and crew. It is the airline's prerogative to determine how often and in what manner it wishes to brief the public on its efforts to support the survivors and the families of those involved.

While the airline will always be the primary source of public information on these matters, the Safety Board's family assistance officer will probably be asked to disseminate information on the Board's interaction with the airline and other supporting organizations, the medical examiner and the families.

After the On-Scene Investigation

When the Board shuts down its on-scene press activity the press officers return to Washington and issue any information from there. Several days after that, the investigators themselves come home.

There are a few significant milestones during the course of the investigation. First, several months after the accident, when we have verified the contents of the certified transcript of the air traffic control communications, we will authorize the FAA to release the recorded ATC communications and transcript to the public. These are not to be confused with the CVR tape, the audio portion of which is never authorized to be released to the public by the NTSB. The original CVR tape is always returned to the airline. The transcript is released by the NTSB when it opens the public docket – months after the accident.

In an effort to collect additional information from sworn witnesses, the Board sometimes holds a public hearing (or, less often, staff-conducted depositions). The hearing is typically held near the accident location, usually

around six to eight months after the accident. The factual reports from the various investigative groups, as well as the transcript of the pertinent portions of the CVR, are released on the first day of the hearing. If no hearing is held, those documents are released in a public docket from the Board's Washington headquarters, again about six months after the accident.

Toward the end of the process, parties have an opportunity to submit to the Board (and provide to all other parties) their proposed conclusions, findings of probable cause and safety recommendations. There are no restrictions on public release of these documents, although traditionally parties have tended not to discuss them until the time of the Board meeting.

Eventually, the Board Members discuss and vote upon a final report on the investigation – the draft of which is prepared by NTSB staff – in a public “Sunshine” meeting (so named after the Government in the Sunshine Act). The final report is the vehicle through which the Board determines the probable cause of the accident and announces its safety recommendations (although recommendations can be issued at any time during the investigation). An abstract of the conclusions, probable cause and safety recommendations is issued within an hour of the end of the meeting and placed on the Board's website. The full report will appear on the website some weeks after the meeting, with printed copies available a few weeks after that.

During all of these post-accident-scene events, an airline will be asked by the media to comment on the information released. As a party to the investigation, the carrier cannot speculate as to the cause of the accident or offer analysis of the factual information. Keep in mind at all times the guidance in our regulations, Part 831.13, Chapter 49 of the Code of Federal Regulations, “Flow and dissemination of accident or incident information”:

All information concerning the accident or incident obtained by any person or organization participating in the investigation shall be passed to the IIC through appropriate channels before being provided to any individual outside the investigation...[N]o information concerning the accident or incident may be released to any person not a party representative to the investigation...before initial release by the Safety Board without prior consultation and approval of the IIC.

Accidents Overseas

Under international treaty obligations, the Safety Board provides the U.S. Accredited Representative to accidents occurring in foreign territories involving aircraft of U.S. design, manufacture, registration, or operator, or having major U.S. made components. The airline's participation in these investigations will be under the NTSB accredited representative and will function as a technical advisor. Only the investigating nation may release information on the findings of

the investigation. Therefore, the Safety Board refers inquiries to that country's investigating agency, and an airline would be required to do the same.

Summary

The NTSB was established in 1967. Since that time, we've investigated more than 110,000 aviation accidents. We are a public agency, doing the public's business. Our release-of-information procedures have worked well for decades. We hope an airline never needs the information in this document, but please do not hesitate to contact us if more assistance is needed.

(Please also refer to "A Note to Journalists", found on the Board's web site – www.ntsb.gov – under News and Events)

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