CLIENT ALERTS & INSIGHTS

Crisis in Real Time: How Companies Win (and Lose) the First Hours

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Authors: Kate Watson Moss, Samantha Roth Bender

Featured Practices: Crisis Management & Strategic Response, Defamation Litigation, Litigation

Key Takeaways

- A company's response in the first hours of a public relations crisis can have as much impact on its reputation as the underlying event itself. Recent high-profile events demonstrate that organizations that respond quickly and communicate transparently are better positioned to regain control of the narrative.
- In today's always-on media environment, delays or attempts to minimize an issue can quickly fuel speculation and magnify reputational, legal and business risks. Stakeholders increasingly expect visible leadership and meaningful action when a crisis unfolds.
- Companies should ensure they have a crisis response plan in place before an issue arises, including designated spokespersons, communication protocols and coordination between legal, executive and communications teams. A credible, people-focused response can help protect both reputation and business interests when the unexpected occurs.

No public relations director wants their company at the center of a media crisis, yet unexpected crises occur every day despite thorough media training. There are also legal considerations that need to be considered by a company navigating a PR crisis. This article examines two recent public relations crises, focusing on what each company did well and where their responses could improve.

Coldplay Kiss Cam

Astronomer CEO Andy Byron and Chief People Officer Kristin Cabot went viral at a Coldplay concert on July 15, 2025, when the Gillette Stadium kiss cam captured them appearing affectionate. They ducked out of view after noticing the camera, prompting Coldplay's front man, Chris Martin, to joke: "Either they're having an affair or they're just very shy."

Social media quickly filled with AI-generated videos and fake statements attributed to Byron, Cabot and Astronomer. Astronomer waited more than 48 hours to publish a statement, which deliberately avoided the words "affair" and "Coldplay," perhaps wanting to avoid negative search results. Around

the same time, Astronomer placed Byron on leave and opened a board investigation; Byron resigned on July 19. Cabot resigned days later and Astronomer co-founder Pete DeJoy became interim CEO.

Around 10 days later, Astronomer released a video featuring Gwyneth Paltrow-who as Chris Martin's ex-wife had herself been through a public "uncoupling" with Coldplay's lead singer-as a "temporary spokesperson." She traded on the recent scandal and then promoted the company's product and upcoming conference.

Paltrow's video was largely viewed as a positive PR move. By posting and promoting the video, Astronomer was able to reclaim the narrative rather than leaving a vacuum for others to fill-a strategy that crisis-management analysts have described as a potential positive playbook move for CEOs. Additionally, the video met the audience where the story lived-social media-and used the attention to explain what Astronomer *actually* does. Reframing the controversy as an educational moment helped associate the company's viral name with its product, rather than the incident itself. Finally, the company acted decisively on leadership accountability and debunked the fake statements circulating online. By taking meaningful, public steps, Astronomer showed its partners and customers that it was not going to sweep the incident under the rug.

Still, Astronomer's delayed response was a weakness. In the days that followed the incident, Astronomer's lack of response only led to greater speculation, adding fuel to the media fire. Careful wording matters, but a multi-day delay opens the door to allowing the internet to define the narrative. Humor in a crisis can also be risky. Ultimately the video was a net positive for the company, but not all attempts at humor resonate. Additionally, this is not a public relations crisis playbook that can be easily replicated. Astronomer's success was driven in large part by a unique set of circumstances that may not be present in future crises. Nevertheless, companies facing similar crises should prioritize speed, transparency and respect for those affected, while exercising caution when incorporating humor into their response.

American Airlines: The Flight 5342 Mid-Air Collision

On January 29, 2025, American Eagle Flight 5342 collided with a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter on final approach to Reagan National Airport and fell into the Potomac River. All 67 passengers died, making it the deadliest U.S. aviation crash since 2001. The collision occurred in tightly controlled airspace, and in response to the collision, the National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) quickly focused on helicopter traffic patterns and air-traffic-control procedures around DCA.

In the wake of the tragedy, American Airlines CEO Robert Isom took the lead immediately: he issued a video statement, traveled to Washington, joined an overnight press conference and met with victims' families and staff the morning after the collision. His messaging centered on the families impacted by the collision; the airline quickly created a family helpline and response webpage. American Airlines also activated its CARE Team, deploying more than 200 people to support families with travel and funeral arrangements, as well as returning crew members' bodies to their home base with ceremony.

The speed with which American Airlines team responded to the crisis made a significant difference in the media. Isom was front and center within hours, demonstrating visible leadership in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. His support was substantive: care teams, funeral and travel

assistance, and dignified treatment of the crew sent a powerful message to families and employees. The airline also cooperated with the NTSB and used reliable, widely accessible channels to keep families and the public informed. By quickly engaging with the relevant stakeholders, American Airlines was able to stabilize its public image in the aftermath of the tragedy.

That said, American Airline did draw criticism for subtly ascribing blame for the collision. Isom's second video described the event as a "heartbreaking accident" in which "a military helicopter collided with American Eagle Flight 5342"-a flight that was operated by PSA Airlines. By signaling that the event was an unpreventable "accident" and emphasizing the role of other parties, American Airlines risked minimizing the airline's role in the collision. In a subsequent statement, Isom also thanked the President and the Secretary of Transportation for their leadership, which risked politicizing the tragedy and led some to argue that American Airlines was attempting to curry favor with regulators. Even so, these criticisms were minor and the overwhelming perception was that American Airlines acted quickly and appropriately in response to the tragedy.

Across these two cases, speed and sincerity led to net positive results for Astronomer and American Airlines. Companies that take swift action and lead with human, credible responses recover more quickly from public incidents and crises. When a single clip or campaign can define or damage a brand overnight, how a company responds in the first hours matters as much as what went wrong. Companies that are able to respond quickly to a crisis while also acting in a way that minimizes the risk of blowback or litigation are the ones who come out of PR crises with their reputations unscathed.

Benesch's Crisis Management and Strategic Response team provides clients with comprehensive and proactive representation that minimizes legal exposure, protects business interests and preserves reputations.

With contribution from William Andrews III, a summer associate at Benesch from University of Maryland School of Law.