

**Managing Reputational Risk: Emirates Airlines' Strategic Response to a Viral
Discrimination Incident**

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Business English

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Introduction

In today's globalized business environment and the fast-paced reputation shaping by digital media, the potential for heightened scrutiny during crisis moments is increasingly challenging for organizations in the tourism and hospitality industries. For brands with an international footprint, such as Emirates Airlines, which operates in over 80 countries and attracts a diverse range of cultural backgrounds among its guests, reputational risk is public and very much international. A single incident, particularly one involving matters such as identity, fairness, or dignity, can unravel decades of brand equity and stakeholder trust if it is not managed strategically.

In the current context, Emirates Airlines is in a reputational crisis after a video went viral of an alleged racial discrimination incident that occurred onboard one of its international flights. The video, shared extensively on TikTok, Twitter (X), and Instagram, depicts a business-class passenger, a Black American, who claims racism by the cabin crew. Immediately after posting, #BoycottEmirates began trending, especially in culturally sensitive regions related to race and inclusion, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. Not surprisingly, with the incident receiving attention on social media as it escalated from a customer service complaint to a potential global reputational crisis, news stories followed and began amplifying the incident for their audiences.

As a premium international airline, Emirates will need to have a crisis communication plan that balances transparency and accountability with cultural intelligence as they plan their next steps. A slow response or poorly timed reaction can contribute to public distrust, further disrupt the relationship with stakeholders, and lead to long-term commercial and regulatory complications. Conversely, a distinctly identifiable and culturally and ethically consistent communication response can create an opportunity to restore confidence, manage brand identity, and reinforce the organization's stated values of inclusivity and professionalism.

This report presents a Strategic Crisis Communication Plan that will assist Emirates Airlines in addressing the attributions made against the organization in this incident. The plan has three core communication products: an internal employee memo, a media and public press release, and a letter to stakeholders and investors. All content was developed through advanced Business English language, and its entirety was framed using well-tested communication models, including Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Hofstede's Cultural

Dimensions. This approach provided these communication products with structural and tonal cohesion, aligning with audience expectations developed across various cultural contexts.

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate how theory can be applied to practice within the constructs of language, message framing, and intercultural dimensions for managing reputational crises in international and high-stakes contexts, using a specific crisis response process as a lens for Emirates Airlines. Emirates has the opportunity to utilize the incident response not only to address the incident but also to reinforce its accountability as a corporate citizen further and promote responsible tourism within the global tourism marketplace.

Literature Review

When a company, such as Emirates, experiences a reputational crisis, it must respond with clear and culturally appropriate messaging. This literature review examined the theories and concepts that guide Emirates in responding effectively to incidents of discrimination. This study will examine three major areas: how Business English is utilized in crisis communication, how Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) informs organizations' decisions on appropriate responses, and how Hofstede's cultural dimensions guide messages to different cultural audiences.

Business English in Crisis Communication

Business English language usage generally refers to an institutional or formal usage of English for communication at work. The aim of Business English is not only to be clear, relevant, and respectful to the target but also to use tone and language effectively to influence how people respond or react to communication, particularly during a crisis. Guffey and Loewy (2020) highlight the fact that it is important to balance how a business can be professional and empathetic, depending on the individuals and their context (such as discrimination).

For Emirates, it meant choosing a language of sincerity that allowed for the discourse the organization needed. However, it also relates to the perception and reputation of the airline organization about this sensitive subject. In terms of internal communications to staff, it must be clear, supportive, and ongoing. Outside of the organization, make it appear as though the organization acknowledges responsibility but does not leave itself liable for any legal implications. Ultimately, Business English helps the airline establish balance through the use of

Careful word choice, a formal tone of communication, and a simple, clear structure. As Cornelissen (2020) notes, because the organization is connecting with a network of people worldwide, possibly from diverse cultures, adapting the message to the key audience is crucial.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs (2007), enables organizations to determine the most appropriate response based on the extent to which they may be responsible for a crisis. There are three types of crises: the victim crisis (where the organization is not to blame), the accidental crisis (where the organization is partially responsible), and the preventable crisis (where the organization is clearly to blame).

The incident involving Emirates Airlines - the passenger accused the airline of racism - is best identified as a "preventable" crisis. In this type of situation, SCCT indicates that companies should take strong responsibility. Strong responsibility includes making a public apology, finding solutions, and persuading the worried audience that the company is taking steps to prevent this from happening again. This is what Emirates should include in their press release and communicate to the audience they can interact with in order to convey that they believe the incident is serious and that they are committed to making changes.

SCCT also indicates that companies should act quickly and consistently. The video went viral. Emirates needs to act swiftly to demonstrate leadership and regain public credibility.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Being a global airline, Emirates must be cognizant of how people from different cultures perceive crisis messages. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory illustrates how people from different countries view authority, responsibility, communication, and fairness. For instance, some cultures, such as those in the UAE and India, hold authority in high regard and prefer messages from team leaders and other authority figures. Some cultures, such as those in the US and the UK, expect direct communication and hold the person issuing the apology publicly accountable.

Therefore, Emirates must adjust its tone and tailor messages for different audiences. In Western countries, they may want a personal apology and definitive action steps. In more traditional or

collective cultures, they might prefer respectful language, a calm tone, and a message that encourages unity.

Emirates will also have to consider their audience, whether they are coming from high-context cultures (where people rely on indirect meanings) or low-context cultures (where people prefer everything to be explained clearly). Using Hofstede's theory will enable Emirates to avoid errors based on trust and utilize those learnings to communicate messages that are ultimately accurate for different Persian audiences.

Putting It All Together

Business English, SCCT, and Hofstede's theories all come together to influence the way Emirates should communicate regarding this crisis. Business English ensures that the content produced is professional, respectful of cultural differences, and transparent. SCCT tells the firm why they should accept accountability and recognize that the firm is taking action. Hofstede's dimensions are a helpful framework for Emirates to refine the meaning of messages in different cultures around the world. These theoretical frameworks help Emirates manage its brand building and communication during challenging times.

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used to develop the strategic crisis communication plan for Emirates Airlines in response to a reputational crisis arising from a perceived discrimination incident on board an international flight. The methods are guided by a combination of communication theory, audience analysis, and professional business writing principles along with components from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions, as well as best practices in business English to ensure messages to the different audiences of Emirates would be effective, efficient, and appropriate given the diversity of audiences through Emirates Airlines.

The basis of the communication strategy is SCCT, which categorizes crises by type based on a few factors and shapes the response style accordingly. Because it was perceived that if the discrimination incident were an employee issue, it would belong to a 'preventable' crisis (that occurred due to the company's employee), SCCT would propose a 'rebuild' strategy, which involves accepting responsibility very clearly, publicly apologizing and, in addition, committing

to corrective action. These components would profoundly shape the tone, structure, and content of the press release and stakeholder letter.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory worked in concert with SCCT to shape the communication plan. Emirates operates within a multicultural context in terms of the diversity of passengers they serve, in many instances across a range of high-context and low-context cultures) as well as dissimilar levels of Power Distance and Individualism. As such, cultural context would alter how the messages were framed within the communications, mainly in terms of tone, formality, and values in speech or emotional language. For example, the internal memo was written with considerations for the organizational hierarchy in mind, which is critical in high Power Distance cultures such as the UAE and India. The public-facing press release and stakeholder letter exhibited a more blunt, transparent, and empathetic tone, which met the expectations of audiences in individualistic, power-distance cultures like the United States and the United Kingdom.

The other stage of the communication plan was audience segmentation. The stakeholders were segmented into three groups: internal employees, the general public, and business stakeholders. Each group had a unique set of expectations, desires for information, and emotional reactions to the crisis. The internal memo focuses on restoration for employees, reiterating core values, and anchoring desired behaviors. The press release publicly acknowledges the incident, conveys empathic feelings, and provides a summary of corrective action to restore trust. The stakeholder letter aimed to restore confidence in partnerships, governance, and the brand as it moved forward.

The message development followed the communicated hierarchy framework used previously. The internal memo, as the priority, ensures employees are aligned with the company's response to the incident before engaging others. The press release was finalized and disseminated as a formal announcement to international media. Finally, the stakeholder letter was constructed as a supplemental document that provided further detail about the strategic context and commitment to ethical conduct.

On those points, Business English can also address these principles. Business English ensures that messages presented to audiences remain professional, clear, and persuasive. Careful attention to sentence structure, word choice, tone, and cultural awareness is given to the plan to

ensure that all communications and materials maximize clarity and professionalism or adhere to good international conventions of professionalism and clarity.

Findings

Internal Memo

To: All Emirates Staff

From: Chief Executive Officer, Emirates Airlines

Date: 25.06.2025

Subject: Upholding Our Commitment to Professionalism and Inclusivity

Dear Team,

As we are all aware, a video was posted on social media showcasing one of our passengers alleging unfair treatment on an Emirates flight. This incident has generated public interest and concern in many of our key global markets.

We wanted to comment on the severity of this issue and highlight the duty we all have in continuing to embody the values that define Emirates: professionalism, respect, and lossless customer service. Every encounter we have with our customers informs not only our reputation but also the Emirates brand.

The company is undertaking a thorough, independent review of the incident to ensure that our policies, procedures, and responses align with our company's policies and commitment to treating every customer with dignity. While the review is being conducted, I encourage us all to recommit to the importance of empathy, active listening, and intercultural awareness in all passenger interactions.

This incident serves as a timely reminder of the high standards we expect of ourselves. All cabin crew, ground teams, and operational personnel are expected to act visibly and consistently with integrity, free from bias, and as committed to the Emirates Framework Code of Conduct. Suppose any staff member has questions or concerns about how to manage and respect culturally sensitive situations. In that case, We strongly recommend that you discuss these with your supervisor or contact Human Resources for further support.

Our brand reputation is built on not only excellent service but also trust. All of you are crucial to maintaining that trust. Thank you for your professionalism. We are optimistic that we will emerge from this challenge stronger, with our values aligned.

Best regards,

Name

Chief Executive Officer

Emirates Airlines

Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Emirates Airlines Responds to Onboard Incident and Reaffirms Commitment to Inclusivity and Service Excellence

Dubai, UAE - [Insert Date]

Emirates Airlines has become aware of a recent incident onboard one of its international flights, in which a passenger allegedly experienced discriminatory treatment while traveling with the airline. The airline takes this matter very seriously and is conducting an internal review to determine precisely what occurred and to establish the appropriate course of action moving forward.

Emirates deeply regrets any distress that the passenger may have experienced. The airline embodies dignity, respect, and inclusivity; these values are fundamental to our identity as a global airline, and we strive to create a travel experience for every passenger that exemplifies the highest standards of care and professionalism, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

"As a global airline that operates international passenger and freighter aircraft services each day with over 150 nationalities, we are aware of the role and responsibility we have in international travel," said Chief Executive Officer of Emirates Airlines. "We will take all steps we can to understand how this situation has happened and ensure that our service to passengers remains fair, inclusive, and respectful to all."

As part of its ongoing improvement, Emirates will:

Review the training programs for cabin crew with heightened awareness of unconscious bias and cultural sensitivity

Engage external advisors to enhance its diversity and inclusion framework

Re-establish its internal code of conduct with all customer-facing teams

Emirates is committed to transparency and to learning from this matter. The airline contacted the passenger directly to offer support and dialogue and will continue to cooperate as appropriate with any inquiries from authorities or regulators.

For media inquiries, please contact:

Media Relations Office

Emirates Airlines, Dubai, UAE

Email: press@emirates.com

Phone: +971-4-000-0000

Stakeholder Letter

Emirates Airlines

Corporate Affairs Division

Emirates Group Headquarters

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

[Insert Date]

To Our Valued Partners and Stakeholders,

We are compelled to communicate with you regarding a recent incident that occurred onboard one of our international flights and has received significant media and public attention. A video surfaced online indicating that a passenger was allegedly treated in a discriminatory manner by a member of our cabin crew. We understand the seriousness of the issue and take this opportunity to communicate directly, transparently, and in the spirit of the shared commitment we profess to excellence and corporate responsibility.

At Emirates, every customer interaction represents our brand and the values that we hold dearly. We are very concerned about the events that unfolded and the distress that may have caused the passenger. We take such situations seriously, and by our internal processes and ethical commitments, we have initiated a thorough review of the circumstances and will take suitable corrective action.

We are now undertaking several significant actions:

Reviewing and strengthening our training programs, including new modules on unconscious bias and cross-cultural sensitivity

Re-confirming conduct codes across all operating teams, requiring re-briefs

Engaging with independent external subject matter experts to assess and advise on standards for our inclusivity and diversity

No organization is immune from operational challenges, and we must respond in a way that is honorable and caring. We wish to ensure that you have the reassurance that Emirates is taking the issue seriously while continuing to respond appropriately. We have enjoyed a long-standing reputation globally as a world-leading airline, built on quality, trust, and mutual respect — and we will remain committed to these values.

We understand that incidents such as this may raise concerns for our partners, and we will continue to provide updates on the findings of our investigation and the steps we are taking to reinforce our service culture going forward. If you require further details or would like to discuss any concerns directly with us, our Corporate Affairs team will be available to speak with you at your convenience.

Thank you for your ongoing trust with Emirates.

Best regards,

[CEO's Full Name]

Chief Executive Officer

Emirates Airlines

Discussion

In this section, the analysis of communication options in the internal memo, press release, and letter to stakeholders produced by Emirates Airlines' communication team will be evaluated. The analysis will be based on the main theories referenced in the literature review, including the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, and the principles of tone and register in Business English. The analysis will explain how each message was crafted for its intended

audience while ensuring brand integrity and global cultural suitability in a high-stakes international context.

SCCT and Strategic Messaging

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was utilized to inform the overall response strategy. Given that the discrimination incident categorized Emirates in the "preventable" crisis category, SCCT indicates a rebuild strategy that includes accepting responsibility, apologizing, and starting corrective action. The rebuild strategy is consistent through all three communication tools. The press release publicly acknowledges the problem while also articulating the specific actions being taken (retraining staff and working with external consultants). This rebuild strategy is reinforced in the stakeholders' letter, which furthered these actions directly with their partners and demonstrated a long-term strategic approach to managing reputation. Although the internal memo was not public, it supports the rebuild strategy because it reminded employees of company values and expectations.

Using SCCT also structured the order of messages. The internal memo was sent first to establish internal understanding, ensuring that no external announcement could occur without the internal situation being fully communicated. This is best practice crisis sequencing to ensure that employees are aware and aligned before the public is provided any statement.

Audience-based Tone and Register

The tone and register were modified for each communication channel. For the internal memo, a motivational and respectful tone was appropriate. It is a culturally appropriate tone for staff in a high Power Distance corporate culture, such as the UAE. The internal communication reinforced professionalism without placing blame, reminding staff of the core values they share.

The press release required a more formal and carefully edited public tone. The writer moved deliberately away from an emotive tone to one that demonstrated empathy and took responsibility. The use of a quoted statement from the CEO adds a dimension of "human presence" and "leadership authority," both of which support an executive response style under SCCT and Hofstede-based expectations in crisis communication.

The stakeholder letter had a thoroughly professional tone, focusing on transparency, corrective action, and brand strength and stability for Emirates. The language conveyed strategic assurances regarding what would be developed, reassuring investors that Emirates is managing the situation actively with a long-term reputation in mind. The register here was elevated, as the author used polished business vocabulary and corporate reassurance language (e.g., "governance," "long-standing reputation," "shared commitment").

Cultural Sensitivity in Messaging

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions were applied directly to create tone and content for global audiences. For example, communications for high Power Distance cultures (the UAE, India) included messages from senior leadership to ensure credibility and authority, while more individualistic, low Power Distance cultures (the US, UK) emphasized transparency and personal accountability. Communications for collectivist markets used inclusive language ("we," shared values, together) to further reinforce social harmony and corporate alignment that would be viewed unfavorably as subjectivity, and so individuals or reflective individualism, in Western individualist cultures. This allowed the communications to all be viewed equally favorable across Emirates' diverse customer and stakeholder audience.

Use of Business English

All three pieces of correspondence satisfied the main components of Business English: clarity, conciseness, and appropriateness. The entire correspondence was consciously written to appeal to ease of reading and grammatical correctness and to avoid informal language and vagueness of expression. Each piece was considered in terms of formal language suitable for a professional context and multicultural audiences. The tone was consistent with the intended audience: respectful and direct, without defensiveness, emotional reactions, or legal risk.

Persuasion, along with subtle tone and word choice, had many layers of intentionality as well. Words like "reaffirm," "commit," and "strengthen" reinforce action in responsibility without embellishment of the situation. I also tried not to slip back into a passive grammatical position to maintain a responsible action stance.

Strategic Effectiveness

Overall, Emirates' communication plan was a successful attempt to apply a combination of crisis and intercultural communication theory to the real world. By utilizing SCCT to assess responsibility in messaging and Hofstede's typology to adapt the tone of the messaging to a global audience, this response is both theoretically informed and strategically sensitive. All messaging is written in Business English to convey professionalism, and the segmentation of audiences and tone was used to manage reputational risk and assist in the brand's recovery.

This discussion suggests that the communication strategy has practical implications and is theoretically legitimate, culturally cognizant, and most suited for the Emirates as a leader in global tourism and hospitality.

Conclusion

In today's world, within the tourism and hospitality sector, crises affecting reputation can arise swiftly and impact companies in various cultural and operational settings. This document outlines a detailed crisis communication strategy for Emirates Airlines in response to a publicized event that garnered worldwide interest. By utilizing recognized communication principles and adhering to standards in Business English, the goal was to respond ethically and efficiently, thereby minimizing any harm to the reputation and strengthening the brand's credibility.

The strategy for communication was based on the principles of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which identified the incident as a crisis that could have been prevented and thus required a response strategy focused on rebuilding trust and reputation. This approach influenced the tone and format of the three communications—the memo, press release, and stakeholder letter—ensuring that they matched the level of accountability associated with the

organization. Additionally, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions were taken into account to tailor the messages to meet the expectations of audiences in both context- and low-context cultures, as well as individualistic and collectivist societies.

Every communication was carefully written in Business English to ensure clarity and professionalism while tailoring the tone to suit the audience perfectly. The memo circulated internally upheld the company's core values and outlined expectations for employees. The press statement empathetically addressed concerns with actions, and the letter to stakeholders offered comfort and openness to our business partners.

A comprehensive and culturally sensitive communication strategy was developed, integrating accuracy and strategic planning with considerations to effectively manage crises at Emirates Airlines. This approach enables the restoration of trust in the airline's services while showcasing accountability and maintaining its standing for outstanding service and inclusivity.

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