

# Boeing struggling with Mt. Everest PR challenge

9 May 2019, by John Biers



Boeing's global fleet of 737 MAX planes has been grounded since mid-March following two deadly crashes

No amount of public relations spin can repair the reputational hit from two deadly plane crashes. But Boeing may have further damaged itself with muddled communications that downplayed its responsibility in the disasters.

Chief Executive Dennis Muilenburg has insisted there was "no surprise or gap" in the design of the top-selling 737 MAX aircraft, even as the company works to correct issues and persuade regulators that a software update should be enough clear the planes to fly again.

The plane has been grounded worldwide since the March 10 crash of an Ethiopian Airlines flight plunged the company into crisis mode. It came on the heels of an October crash of a Lion Air flight in Indonesia, two accidents that claimed 346 lives.

"We own it," Muilenburg has said of the crisis.

But some aviation and public relations experts said the Boeing CEO has tried to walk back that buck-

stops-here sentiment by blaming the crashes on a "chain of events" with "no singular" cause.

"You can't follow one consistent train of thought on anything that's come out of Chicago," Jim Hall, former head of the National Transportation Safety Board, said of Boeing's leadership.

"I don't think they've been credible or responsible in the information they've provided," he said in an interview. "They certainly haven't been transparent."

And aviation expert Richard Aboulafia of the Teal Group said Boeing has been "a little bit more defensive than they need to be."

"They really need to stick with taking ownership."



Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg has been criticized for his handling of the Boeing 737 MAX crisis

But Boeing spokesman Gordon Johndroe said the company was restricted in how much it can divulge because of international protocol on crash investigations.

"As we've learned additional information, it's incumbent on us to be as transparent as possible," he said. "We know we have work to do to restore the trust of pilots and crews, international regulators and the traveling public."

### Shifting blame?

A common link in both accidents was the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System or MCAS, an automated flight handling program on the MAX that pointed the plane sharply downward based on a faulty sensor reading, hindering pilot control after takeoff, according to preliminary investigations.

Boeing has been working on what it calls a "software update" to the MCAS, which Muilenburg said will "break" a "common link" in both accidents.

Dennis Tajer, a pilot and spokesman for the Allied Pilots Association, said he has been encouraged by Boeing's drafts of the revamped system, which will ensure the MCAS is linked to two sensors instead of one and will no longer point full-nose down.

But he criticized Muilenburg's statement that the crashes resulted from a "chain of events."

"They were good when they said 'We own this,'" Tajer said. "When you say it's a chain of events, that's like a dog-whistle to us to blame the pilots."

Scott Hamilton, founder of Leeham Company, an aviation consultancy, also took issue with Boeing's characterizing of the MCAS problems.



Paul Njoroge, who lost his entire immediate family, at a press conference in Chicago, last month after his lawyers announced a lawsuit on behalf of the families of 10 Canadians who were killed in the tragic crash of an Ethiopian Airlines Max8 aircraft

"Using Boeing speak this is not a 'fix', this is an upgrade to make the system more robust," he said.

### Liability fears

"They won't even acknowledge that this is a fix. And they certainly won't acknowledge this was a design flaw" due to worries about liability and criminal probes stemming from the accidents.

Hamilton said the company was further damaged by a "drip drip" of [news stories](#) that have painted a confusing picture about how the MCAS was supposed to work, why Boeing didn't respond earlier to signs of problems, and what it told customers and regulators, as well as concerns over a cozy relationship with aviation regulators.

But Scott Farrell, leader of the brand reputation group at Golin, a public relations firm, said Boeing was facing a "classic tug of war between managing a crisis with an eye on the court of law versus the court of public opinion," he said.

Boeing has "swung too far to the court of law approach."

US airlines have said they expect to return the 737 MAX to service over the summer. Yet carriers may face difficulties with public confidence even after regulators clear it to fly again.

Nearly half of 1,700 fliers questioned in a recent survey said they would wait a year after the 737 MAX's return to fly the plane, according to Barclays.

Barclays downgraded Boeing and conducted the survey because it suspected public apprehension about the planes "could be worse this time than following past incidents given [social media](#) and fliers' ability to know the aircraft type in advance of booking."

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