Mini-Case: Alaska Airlines and the Good and Bad News Web Sites

After the 2000 crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261, Alaska Airlines was one of the first major companies to put its own bad news on its website within an hour of the crash. The story was placed on the employee site because several persons on the flight were nonrevenue passengers, primarily employees. However, Alaska had to battle fraudulent sites also.

Two fraudulent websites were created to solicit donations for the families of passengers and crew. The webmaster of the first rogue site used the Alaska Airlines logo to masquerade his or her site as an official Alaska Airlines page. Visitors who downloaded the fake contribution form unleashed a computer virus that allowed outsiders access to information on their computers.

Company executives were tipped off to the rogue site by an e-mail message. Needless to say, the company, still in shock over the tragedy, was doubly shocked. Company spokesperson Brian Petro said, “We just couldn’t understand. It was unimaginable someone would do something like that” (Stiffler, 2000, p. A10). Alaska Airlines contacted the rogue site’s Internet provider and asked that the site be removed. The ISP, Costa Rica-based Freehomepages.com, complied.

A second rogue site asked for Social Security numbers of Alaska Airlines employees under the guise of donating to co-workers. The site was also purged. It is not known how many Internet users fell prey to the fraud. Alaska Airlines also issued two news releases about the fraudulent sites. The releases warned the public that the sites were fraudulent and vicious and revealed information about the official site, www.alaskaair.com, and fund-raising efforts.