

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PT. GARUDA TBK INDONESIA IN MAINTAINING CORPORATE IMAGE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Article Info	Abstract
Received : 25/03/23 Revised : 09/04/23 Accepted: 15/04/23	A crisis can be called a public relations crisis if the crisis results in damage to the image of the company or organization in the public eye. The rise of coverage in the mass media regarding news about air transportation services will have an impact on the public who will judge the image of a company. The purpose of this study is to find out how the role of public relations in maintaining the image of PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk; To understand the crisis that occurred at PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk. This study uses a qualitative methodology using the theory of Timothy Coombs (2006) Situational Crisis Communication Theory . The results of this study are that Garuda Indonesia's debt is very large due to changes in the recognition of obligations where the operational lease (aircraft lease) was previously recorded as an opex so debt besides that there is no good communication with stakeholders in this case creditors or investors. The conclusion of this study is the inability to manage the crisis that caused this airline to experience multiple losses due to the series of crises that followed. If only Garuda Indonesia could manage its finances properly and communication between divisions/departments was well established, this could be minimized. Going forward, Garuda Indonesia's management needs to properly improve their internal and external communications, especially when facing a crisis related to investor relations.

Keywords: : Public Relations, Corporate Image, Corporate Crisis, Garuda Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

In every company or government agency, as in today's era, it certainly requires a division that deals with many parties, both external and internal parties, such as the *public relations division*. This division is known to the wider community as the part that accommodates opinions from the wider community whose goal is to progress and build public trust in companies or government agencies. *Public relations* has a very important role in establishing relations with the public, both with the company's or organization's internal *public and with external publics* .

Communication within the organization is an important tool in preventing and overcoming conflicts that occur (Swarnawati, 2022). *Public relations* not only has activities to convey information to the public but also as a means of information within the company or organization. *Public relations* requires a place to describe the contents of its roles and functions to build a positive image of the company, establish harmonious relations with the public and resolve crises that occur. Almost all companies have experienced a crisis. Crisis is unpredictable, its presence is not expected. Not all crises that occur are *public relations crises*. A crisis can be called a *public relations* crisis if the crisis results in damage to the image of the company or organization in the public eye. The rise of coverage in the mass media regarding news about air transportation services will have an impact on the public who will judge the image of a company. Corporate image is very influential on the success of the company. What determines a positive or negative image depends on public opinion. Image *is* an impression, feeling, image from the public of the company, an impression that is deliberately created from an object, person or organization.



Figure 1. Garuda Indonesia's revenue and profit/loss
Source: databoks, 2021

The crisis experienced by an airline company must often be heard. Such as plane crashes, cancellations of plane departures en masse and others. The role of *public relations* is very influential in society and can even be relied upon to influence and control public thinking. In the era of globalization, the field of public relations will play a very important role. Companies that do not take advantage of this field will be left behind because they do not master the acquisition and dissemination of information. When a company experiences a crisis, what is really needed in that situation is *public relations*. If *public relations* cannot carry out its duties, namely as a bridge between the company and its public, then the company's image will be considered not good in the eyes of the public.

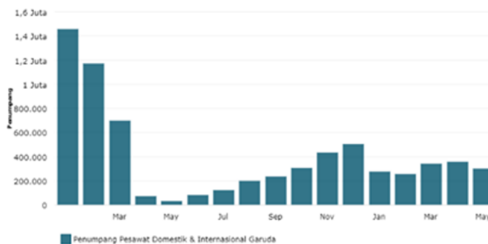


Figure 2. Number of Passengers on Garuda Indonesia Flights (January 2020-May 2021)
Source: databoks, 2021

Related to the crisis that occurred at PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a financial crisis due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which resulted in low passenger flights. The crisis will surely also have an impact on the image of PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk, which is known as a state-owned airline. During such a crisis, it can be a challenge for the company's *public relations* to deal with problems and use the role of *public relations*, namely to maintain a positive public image of a company experiencing a crisis. The author raises the case of the financial crisis because the aviation sector has been badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic so that it clearly has an impact on the image of the airline services company PT Garuda Indonesia, which is known as a state-owned airline in Indonesia. The author chose this title to find out the extent of the role of *public relations* in maintaining the image of PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk when facing the crisis during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this study is to find out how the role of *public relations* in maintaining the image of PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk; To understand the crisis that occurred at PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk; To know the role of *public relations* PT. Garuda Tbk Indonesia in maintaining the company's image during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Public Relations

The definition quoted from Harlow in (Nova, 2009: 35) states, " *Public Relations* is a distinctive management function that helps establish and maintain two-way lines of communication, mutual

understanding, acceptance and cooperation between organizations and their communities helps management to always be informed and responding to public opinion, defines and emphasizes management's responsibility in serving the public interest, helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serves as an early warning system to help anticipate crises, and uses sound and ethical research and communication as its main tools”.

The concept of *public relations* according to Rumanti (2002: 32) "Basically *public relations* is an effort to create a harmonious relationship between an organization or company and its publics, internal or external through a reciprocal process, as well as creating public opinion as an effect, which is very useful as input for the organization /company concerned." Based on the description above, it can be understood that *public relations* is an attempt to create a harmonious relationship between an organization and the public. This effort is carried out through a reciprocal process whose effect can create public opinion, so that it is useful as input for the organization concerned. According to the authors of this definition implies that *public relations* is a form of communication specialization that can foster a sense of mutual understanding. So that cooperation is formed between the company and all interested public. In connection with the definition above, the writer can conclude that the public is expected to be able to cooperate with companies to understand everything related to the public interest. The public can also assist management in building and maintaining the company's image and can anticipate the possibility of a crisis. Associated with the problem in this study, *Public Relations* is a management function of PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk which is able to overcome its public when it is experiencing a crisis.

Public relations who act as expert advisors are able to provide solutions from a crisis that occurs. PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk, which was experiencing a crisis at that time, immediately carried out its role in solving problems related to the public. The public at such times definitely needs the role of *public relations* because it is considered a trusted source in providing information about the company. Without the expertise of *public relations* companies will find it difficult to reach the public. *Public relations* that are able to find solutions when there are problems, the company's image will remain good in the eyes of the public.

Then the role of *public relations* as an intermediary between the company and its public. The company's *public relations* seeks to become a mediator or intermediary between the company and its public. At PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk *public relations* is the company's liaison when conveying information to the public. The information that will be provided to the public is an official notification from the company. When *public relations* conveys information, there will be a reciprocal reaction from the public, public reactions can be either positive or negative reactions. *Public relations* must be able to overcome positive and negative reactions so that both parties can clearly understand.

An airline company must have experienced a crisis, such as PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk. The role of *public relations* is needed in overcoming the current crisis. Although not working alone, *public relations* is the image of a company, meaning that what will be said and done by *public relations* about the company is a picture of the company. That's why teamwork is needed so that problems can be smoothly resolved and the crisis incident will not have an impact on the company's image.

The role of *public relations* in this field is usually emphasized in journalistic communication, the meaning is regarding the ability to write, edit, produce audio-visual, graphics and produce messages used in implementing *public relations programs*. Some examples are; writing *press releases, features, newsletters*, developing organizational web content, and handling media contacts. This role prioritizes the interests of the public to receive information, and also maintains good relations with the media.

Crisis

The word crisis comes from the Greek word crisis, which means "decision" (Nova, 2009: 54). Crisis is a critical period that is almost certainly experienced by all companies (Kusumastuti, 2009: 153).

Quoting the opinion of Seth Oyer, Ph.D , *Public Relations Journal Vol. 4, No. 3, Summer 2010*, "Crises occur for a myriad of reasons but all of them potentially threaten the trust shared between an organization and its publics. Even when an organization is properly planned for an unexpected crisis,

the effects on public trust are still vague at best. Progress has been made, however, in distinguishing different types of crises. Coombs & Holladay (2002) identified three crisis attribution clusters helpful in explicating crisis types: accident clusters, intentional clusters, and victim clusters.” (2010, p 2)

According to the author, a crisis is an event that cannot be predicted beforehand, because it comes suddenly. This crisis can have both positive and negative impacts on the company, such as the financial crisis experienced by Garuda Indonesia which can generate various opinions from the public which results in a bad corporate image. Based on the statement above, the researcher is interested in knowing and analyzing the crisis communication response carried out by PT Garuda Indonesia using *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)*.

The SCCT formulated by W. Timothy Coombs is a combination of attribution theory. SCCT has three basic models or elements namely; crisis situations, communication systems that harmonize crisis situations, and appropriate crisis management strategies. That is, a company must first recognize a crisis situation and then determine actions in responding to the crisis through communication using the right handling strategy (Kennardy, 2017). *Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT)* is commonly used to explain public reactions to crisis situations and reputations that occur in a company, organization or agency.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was initiated by Timothy W. Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay since 1995. This SCCT theory can be used to explain public reactions to a crisis and crisis strategies (*crisis response*) made by *Public Relations practitioners*. SCCT anticipates public reactions to crises that can threaten the reputation of the organization ((Purworini, D., Kuswarno, E., Hadisiwi, P., & Rakhmat, 2017).

Coombs concluded that the attribution of responsibility for the crisis was at a very low level in the victim cluster. SCCT translates attribution theory into the language of crisis communication as a theoretical basis (Coombs, 2006). The important thing in this theory is the emphasis on efforts to protect the public and stakeholders from loss and damage rather than protecting the reputation of the organization (Kriyantono, 2015). Coombs said that there is a three-stage approach or "*Three-staged Approach*" in crisis communication, namely *PreCrisis* (before the crisis), *Crisis Event* (when the crisis occurs), and *Post Crisis* (after the crisis).

Corporate Image

Image is a reflection of the identity of a company. The identity of a company is the actual manifestation of the reality of the company, such as the good name of the company. In other words, the image is the organization as seen from the point of view of the public (Argenti, 2010: 78).

Referring to the opinion of Ruslan (2008: 76) a company that is experiencing a "crisis of trust" from the public or the general public will have a negative impact on its image. In fact, there will be a decrease in the image to the lowest point (*lost of image*). In the experience of PR/PR practice in the field, once the public's image and trust has been disturbed or experienced a crisis, the PR/PR official will face quite heavy risks.

According to the author, image is a view or an assessment of a company, seen from the point of view of public opinion. Assessments given by the public can be in the form of positive or negative ratings. Companies experiencing a crisis will definitely have a negative impact or the public will negatively evaluate the company's image. The public is very influential in evaluating a company's image.

At PT Garuda Indonesia Tbk as an airline company whose shares are partly owned by a State-Owned Enterprise (BUMN) which is responsible for the company's image and also the image of the country in the public eye. Crisis incidents do not want to happen, but crisis incidents are unintentional and unpredictable.

2. METHOD

The research methodology used in this study is by using a qualitative methodology where the data is in the form of statements or statements. In collecting data, it is needed from several sources. The data sources used are secondary data from books, the internet and research journals

Qualitative research aims to explain the phenomenon in depth through deep data collection. In qualitative research, the emphasis is on the depth (quality) of the data, not the amount (quantity of data). The type of research used in this research is descriptive-qualitative. Another feature of the qualitative descriptive method is that it focuses on observation and natural setting. The researcher uses the theory from Timothy Coombs (2006) Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Overview of PT. Garuda Indonesia Tbk.

Garuda Indonesia – Indonesia's flag carrier airline – currently serves more than 90 destinations worldwide and various exotic locations in Indonesia. With a total of 600 flights per day, Garuda Indonesia provides the best service through the concept of "Garuda Indonesia Experience" which puts forward "Indonesian Hospitality" - Indonesian hospitality and cultural richness.

Garuda Indonesia group operates a total fleet of 202 aircraft with an average fleet age of under five years. Garuda Indonesia as the main brand currently operates 144 aircraft, while Citilink operates 58 fleets.

Through a sustainable transformation program. Garuda Indonesia managed to record a number of international recognitions including the achievement as *"The World's Best Economy Class"* from the *TripAdvisor Travelers Choice Awards*, *"Five Star Airline / 5-Star Airline"* since 2014, *"Top 10 World's Best Airline"* *Skytrax 2017*, *The World's Best Cabin Crew* for five consecutive years since 2014.

In addition, in 2017, Garuda Indonesia also won the "5 Star" title from the *Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX)*, a non-profit association for improving the experience of airline passengers based in New York, United States.

The vision of Garuda Indonesia is to become a reliable airline by offering quality services to the world's people using Indonesian hospitality. Meanwhile, Garuda Indonesia's mission is as an airline company that carries the flag of the Indonesian nation which promotes Indonesia to the world in order to support national economic development by providing professional services.

B. Corporate Culture of PT Garuda Indonesia

The corporate values referred to as "FLYHI" (*efficient & effective, loyalty, customer centricity, Honesty & openness, Integrity*) :

- a. *Efficient & effective*: PT. Garuda Indonesia always carries out its duties in a thorough, precise and accurate manner in the shortest possible time with the most efficient energy and cost possible without sacrificing quality. This is based on the belief that PT. Garuda Indonesia strives to ensure customers receive quality service.
- b. *Loyalty*: PT. Garuda Indonesia can carry out every task delegated to it with full dedication, responsibility and discipline. This is based on the belief that PT Garuda Indonesia strives to ensure the consistency of the quality of services provided to customers.
- c. *Customer centricity*: PT Garuda Indonesia personnel are always attentive, ready to help and serve. This is based on the belief that PT Garuda Indonesia seeks to place customers as the center of attention.
- d. *Honesty & openness*: PT Garuda Indonesia personnel must be honest, sincere and sincere in carrying out all their activities and carry out clear and transparent two-way communication with due observance of the precautionary principle, while maintaining confidentiality. This is based on the belief that PT Garuda Indonesia strives to ensure the safety and comfort of its customers.
- e. *Integrity*: PT Garuda Indonesia personnel must maintain dignity and avoid themselves from disgraceful actions that could damage the image of the profession and the company. This is based on the belief that PT Garuda Indonesia strives to ensure that its services and relationships with customers run legally and morally clean.

C. Cycle of Issues and Crises

Coombs said that there is a three-stage approach or *"Three-staged Approach"* in crisis communication (Kriyantono, 2015), namely:

a. PreCrisis (before the crisis)

At this stage, *Public Relations* must be proactive in monitoring its environment to identify and reduce potential crises. The message that must be conveyed in this phase is to inject information to *stakeholders* regarding potential crises that may occur in order to reduce negative reactions and negative media coverage.

"Garuda's main problem in the past was because *leasing* (aircraft rental) exceeded reasonable costs and there were too many types of aircraft, for example there were Boeing 737, Boeing 777, Airbus A320, A330, ATR, and Bombardier, this has efficiency problems, plus routes those that fly a lot are not profitable," said Kartika at the Commission IV DPR RI Work Meeting (Raker), this Thursday (3/6/2021).

"This was conveyed by the Minister (BUMN Minister Erick Thohir). Actually, in that country, before Covid-19 Garuda was profitable, but abroad it was a loss, this is an old disease, but after Covid-19, there is a new problem, namely changes in the recognition of obligations in where the operational lease (aircraft lease) was previously recorded as opex to become debt," he added.

b. Crisis Event (when a crisis occurs)

This phase is the toughest phase in crisis communication because how and what is communicated by the company will greatly determine the results that will be obtained by the company, especially the company's image.

The difficult economic conditions had a major impact on the performance of PT Garuda Indonesia (Persero) Tbk, where in 2020 the number of Garuda passengers Indonesia for domestic flights reached 4.54 million passengers, a decrease of 70.52% when compared to the number of passengers in 2019 which amounted to 15.40 million passengers. Likewise with international flights in 2020 which reached 0.77 million passengers, a decrease of 81.89% compared to the number of passengers in 2019 which amounted to 4.27 million passengers. Meanwhile, Citilink had a total of 5.49 million passengers in 2020, a decrease of 55.05% compared to the number of passengers in 2019 of 12.22 million passengers. Overall the Garuda Indonesia Group flew 10.81 million passengers in 2020, a decrease of 66.11% when compared to the number of passengers in 2019 of 31.89 million passengers. The decrease in the number of passengers was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which forced the Company to make adjustments to flight capacity. However, the Company has made efforts to increase the number of passengers in 2020 by reaching 33.89% of passengers before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The biggest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Company is a significant reduction in demand for air transport services, where a decrease in the number of passengers has occurred since December 2019 and significantly affected financial performance. In 2020, the Company managed to record operating income in 2020 of USD 1.49 billion, a decrease of 67.36% compared to 2019 of USD 4.57 billion. The decrease in operating income was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which was significantly felt in the 2nd quarter of 2020 when a movement restriction policy was implemented and also regional restrictions/lockdowns in several countries as part of efforts to prevent the spread of the pandemic. However, the Company has further been able to reduce losses since domestic transportation was allowed to optimize its operations since the 3rd quarter of 2020. The Company has strived for operating income to reach the level of 33.38% of operating income before the COVID-19 pandemic.

These difficult conditions caused enormous losses, especially in the first half of 2020, but the Company has shown significant improvement in the second half of 2020 with much smaller operating losses than the previous semester. Even though operational improvements have been felt significantly in the 2nd semester, the net loss balance for the year still experienced a sharp decline compared to the previous year and was not as expected, where the Company recorded a net loss of (USD 2.48) billion. The significant decline in demand for air transport services also had an impact on the Company's market share in domestic flights. Under these conditions the financial and market aspects were only achieved by 21.00% of the target of 28.00%.

c. Post Crisis (after the crisis)

This phase is carried out when the crisis can be said to have been completed, this phase is based on the reaction given by existing stakeholders to the company's strategy.

Air cargo capacity has been increasing slowly but consistently, with significant progress achieved through July-2021 compared to 2020. For the period January-July 2021, the number of available cargo kilometers across the industry (Available Cargo Tonne Kilometers / ACTK) is still down by 12.4%, from the same interval in 2019. This is a paucity of international travel, especially for long-haul travel using space-limiting large aircraft, which represented around 60% of international air cargo capacity before the pandemic. Airlines however, use passenger aircraft to transport cargo and have significantly increased their special cargo capacity. The size of the global cargo fleet increased by around 12% from January 2021 to July 2021 compared to pre-crisis January-July 2019.

"Garuda can carry out mass restructuring with all *lenders, lessors* (aircraft tenants), and global sukuk holders, and also carry out *cost reduction*. The hope is that costs can decrease by 50% or more, so Garuda can *survive after the restructuring*," said Kartiko Wirjoatmodjo

Re-negotiation with *lessors* must be carried out, especially for *lessors* who have a relationship with corruption cases. For those who don't, renegotiation needs to be carried out taking into account the conditions due to the *Covid-19 pandemic* which has an impact on the world of aviation throughout the world.

D. Garuda Indonesia Situational Crisis Communication

Once the levels of crisis responsibility and reputational threat have been determined, the SCCT provides crisis managers with a theoretical foundation for their strategic crisis response. The SCCT checklist for responding to crises assumes that the organization has accepted some degree of responsibility for the crisis.

SCCT is used to measure corporate image during a crisis. In the case of Garuda Indonesia, which is a well-known airline company. PT Garuda Indonesia always provides a positive image in the eyes of its audience, especially to satisfy customers who are always loyal to fly using Garuda Indonesia flight services in unifying services and also the company's financial problems.

Apart from that, PT Garuda Indonesia always creates good relationships between internal parties, including always having good communication between employees and leaders, as well as mutual support between one unit and another in building Garuda Indonesia's image. While externally, Garuda Indonesia always maintains good relations with external parties and stakeholders, including Public Relations of Garuda Indonesia, which always cooperates with other companies. Apart from that, Garuda Indonesia's public relations team always maintains good relations with the press and also with the public, especially customers. Mission This is what PT. Garuda Indonesia in order to create a positive image in the eyes of the public, as the number one airline in Indonesia that is internationally competitive.

In this case, the crisis was due to public perception. Due to the inability to manage the first crisis through good public communication, the airline Garuda Indonesia received a negative perception from the public. Garuda Indonesia received lawsuits from its *lessor* because it had a very large debt to the *lessor*. Most of these debts are debts originating from aircraft *leasing expenses* which in previous years were presented incorrectly in their financial statements. As a result, the image and reputation of the company is bad.

The solution that must be done is to respond to this with various restructuring efforts, maximize cooperation with business partners to encourage increased revenue and launch promotional programs in the form of *Garuda Eco Lite*, *Garuda OnlineTravel Fair* and *ThankGod Its Friday* and various other promotional programs.

This research only found 3 out of 10 SCCT crisis response categories used by PT Garuda Indonesia, namely, *information, justification, compensation*

1. Information category

The company provides information regarding the crisis that occurred to the public.

By using *E-mail Blast "Corporate Information" Broadcast message via e-mail* to all employees of the Company containing information related to management messages, important announcements

including crisis situations, events, programs and achievements of the Company. In addition, there are several media that can be accessed by the public to obtain information about Garuda Indonesia, such as through the *Deployment Press Release*, the "News" Landing Page on the Garuda Indonesia website, social media accounts, and the *Inflight Magazine "Colors"*

Garuda Indonesia tends not to reject crises, but rather to face crises regarding the impacts that will arise in the future. PT Garuda Indonesia does not fight but tries to limit the responsibilities and consequences that may affect its reputation in the future.

2. *Justification* category

Justification is a corporate strategy by taking responsibility for minimizing the damage or destruction caused by a crisis. (Coombs, 2007). The indicator in this category is when the company shows by explaining its accountability efforts to resolve the crisis. (Coombs, 2007). The goal is that the impact of the crisis will not get worse and if the improvement efforts are successful the company's image can be saved.

Based on research findings in the news coverage, PT Garuda Indonesia took *justification measures* to resolve the crisis by means of debt restructuring by building constructive communication with creditors, *lessors* and related *stakeholders*, maximizing cooperation with business partners to encourage increased revenue and launching a promotional program in the form of *Garuda Eco Lite*, *Garuda OnlineTravel Fair* and *ThankGod Its Friday* and various other promotional programs.

In addition to the above efforts One of the efforts to accelerate the recovery of the Company's performance is the Optimization of Flight Routes & Networks by operating routes that contribute to profits with an initial focus on domestic routes and certain international flight routes with the aim of transporting cargo.

3. *Compensation* category

Compensation Is the sixth SCCT crisis response strategy. In this category, companies provide compensation as a form of responsibility (Coombs, 2007). This strategy is effectively used for companies with large categories. An indicator in the compensation category is that companies can offer money or gifts to employees (Coombs, 2007).

In this case, the form of compensation that PT Garuda Indonesia did was pay debts to various SOEs which were restructured to 22 years with an interest rate of 0.1 percent per year paid every six months (Long-term Bills with a present value of 19%), Garuda Indonesia through the Internal Portal "*Tell Us About Us*" Internal portal which is two-way communication and *E-mail Blast "Corporate Information" Broadcast message* offers a number of compensations to employees who take early retirement program this is done because of the company's financial condition by providing a number of rewards, Management also ensures that the company continues to carry out intensive communication with relevant stakeholders so that efforts to accelerate performance recovery run optimally

In this case, the most effective category for resolving the crisis is *Justification* because with the company's responsibility to minimize the damage or destruction caused by the crisis, the company's image can be saved. Re-negotiations with *lessors* must be carried out because if Garuda can negotiate mass restructuring with all global *lenders*, *lessors* and sukuk holders, and also carry out *cost reduction*, it is hoped that costs can decrease by 50% or more, then Garuda can *survive*. post-restructuring, Garuda also needs to reduce the type of fleet in order to be more efficient for crew training and aircraft maintenance.

4. CONCLUSION

The series of crises experienced by Garuda Indonesia show the airline's weak crisis management. If traced, the main problem experienced by Garuda Indonesia lies in Garuda Indonesia's poor communication with internal and external parties due to changes in the acknowledgment of obligations that were not informed, which caused Garuda Indonesia's debt to accumulate. The inability to manage the crisis caused this airline to experience multiple losses due to the series of crises that followed. If only Garuda Indonesia could manage its finances properly and communication between

divisions/departments was well established, this could be minimized. Going forward, Garuda Indonesia's management needs to properly improve their internal and external communications, especially when facing a crisis related to *investor relations*.

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