

What to Do When the Media Starts Asking Post-Accident Questions

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Like it or not, an accident at your air show is news. And, following an accident, you can expect to hear from news professionals. In many cases, how you work with those news professionals will have more impact on coverage of the accident than the accident itself.

Most shows designate a single individual as their spokesperson. In addition to ensuring that a consistent and accurate message comes from the air show management, this allows the show to designate an appropriate person: someone who can think on their feet, someone familiar with the big picture issues that might be impacted by any response to the press, someone who recognizes the importance of establishing a strong and honest relationship with the press.

Here are few possible answers to some of the most common post accident questions. Your answers will depend on the specific circumstances of your accident, but it's important to consider likely scenarios ahead of time...and that include your likely answers to the press's inquiries.

Q: Why are there so many accidents at air shows?

A: Any fatal accident is a tragedy and this accident is no exception, but the fact is that air show accidents are relatively infrequent. Because they are often dramatic and nearly always captured on videotape, the accidents receive widespread publicity. But, in fact, there are typically less than three or four air shows accidents per year in North America.

Q: Isn't it just a matter of time before somebody from the audience is involved in an air show accident?

A: No. Because of the rules and regulations I place in the United States and Canada, it is highly unlikely that spectators will ever be involved in an air show accident. Since current regulations were put into effect in 1952, there has never been a spectator fatality in an North American air show accident. That's a safety record that is the envy of the entire motor sports industry.

Q: What safeguards are in place to protect spectators?

A: Spectator safety at air shows depend on four elements of a very effective safety program.

First, every pilot performing aerobatics at a U.S. or Canadian air show must be evaluated each year by a certified aerobatics evaluator.

Second, air show performers – both civilian and military – are prohibited from performing maneuvers that direct the energy of their aircraft toward the area in which the spectators are sitting.

Third, the industry and regulatory authorities strictly enforce minimum set-back distances that were developed to ensure that, in the event of an accident, pieces of the aircraft will not end up in the spectator area.

Finally, there is an invisible aerobatic box in which all aerobatic must be flown. Regulations prohibit any body but necessary personnel from being in that box. If the box falls on top on a road, then the road must be closed during the air show. If an office building is within the box, then the building must be vacated during the show.

Q: Shouldn't somebody do something to stop these air show pilots from killing themselves?

A: There are a number of safeguards in place to ensure that air show pilots are qualified and experienced, but, despite there rules and the close attention paid to safety issues, accidents sometimes happen. Accidents happen in car racing. Accidents happen in thoroughbred horse racing. Accidents happen in high school football games. And accidents happen in the air show business. The pilots who perform air shows understand the inherent risks of air show flying. They do everything they can to minimize that danger.

Q: Why did the Crash/Fire/Rescue

A: (The answer to this question will, of course, depend on whether or not the CFR personnel did take a long time to respond, but here's one answer that assumes they responded promptly.) In an accident situation like the one we had today, it's not unusual for people to perceive the response time as being longer than it actually was. But, based on our initial investigation, it appears that the emergency response was timely and professional.

Q: Was there anything the show organizers could have done differently to avoid this accident?

A: (The answer to this question will also vary based on the specific circumstances of the accident, but, assuming that systems played part in the accident, here's one possible response.) Each year, with or without an accident, we review our safety procedures, our emergency response plan to make adjustments, additions and changes. And, following this accident, we will go through that process again. But, based on what we know right now, we wouldn't change a thing in our safety or emergency response plan. Our systems and our people appear to have performed exactly as they were supposed to perform.

Q: Why did show organizers decide to continue the show? Or why did show organizers decide to cancel the rest of the show?

A: Show management net immediately following the accident and. As part of the pre-arranged process, we discussed the relative advantages and disadvantages of continuing the show. After close consultation with regulatory officials and the performers, we made a decision to go ahead with (or cancel) the remainder of the show. Individual decisions on whether or not to perform were left with the

individual pilots, along with the show management's assurances that we recognized this as a highly personal and emotional decision that each performer should make on their own.

Q: How many air show accidents are there each year?

A: As you would expect, this varies considerably. Each year, there are approximately 450 air shows in North America. Experts estimate that, at those 450 shows, air show pilots fly 10,000 individual performances. Of those, a very, very small number experience some sort of problem. In some years, the industry has had one or two accidents, in other years there might be three, four or five. In the last ten years, the North American air show industry has had only one year in which we had more than five accidents, the last two years have been accident free.

Q: What government organization is responsible for air show regulations?

A: The Federal Aviation Administration (in the U.S) or Transport Canada (in Canada) develops and enforces air show regulations in their respective countries. There is a representative for the agencies on site at the show today.

Q: Will you hold the show again next year?

A: It's too early to answer that question. Show management will be meeting on a number of issues during the coming days and weeks. Among the issues we will discuss will be the future of the show.