

COM 511 Group Project

Toyota Sudden Acceleration Recall

Oct. 15, 2025

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Crisis Overview

The quality of Toyota cars and the company's safety history were called into question on Aug. 28, 2009, when a California Highway Patrol Officer, his wife, daughter and brother-in-law were killed due to the sudden and uncontrolled acceleration of the 2009 Lexus ES350 they were in. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, the sudden acceleration complaints began as early as 2002 but were believed to have been resolved in 2007, when Toyota claimed these incidents were caused by floormats jamming the accelerator. In response, Toyota recalled 55,000 all-weather floormats for the 2007 and 2008 model year Camry and Lexus ES350.

The U.S Department of Transportation states that, following the crash, the NHTSA contacted Toyota, telling them the floormat recall was insufficient and Toyota needs to address possible defects in pedal design and floormats, leading Toyota to tell NHTSA it will recall the pedals. By October, Toyota recalled 3.8 million vehicles in the United States, with that number growing to more than 5 million by Jan. 2010, due to the pedals possibly having a defect that makes them stick. On Jan. 25, the NHTSA instructed Toyota to stop selling vehicles with acknowledged defects, forcing the company to discontinue sales of eight models, including the Camry and Corolla sedans.

Issues have been brewing for nearly seven years and were turned into a crisis due to Toyota's poor handling of these issues. The organization's lack of clarity and accountability created a media storm, putting the issue in the public eye and ultimately leading the NHTSA to handle the case with a heightened level of rigidity. The lack of transparency on Toyota's end, paired with the media's attention, led people to develop their own theories about the issues, with the prevailing one being that Toyota was hiding an electrical issue that caused sudden acceleration. While this was ultimately disproven, it didn't stop the rumors or the erosion of trust they caused.

Key messages

After reviewing the press releases on Toyota's website from the beginning stages of the crisis, several key messages arose and are outlined below:

1. Toyota takes public safety seriously and upholds its vehicles are among the safest on the road.
2. An issue with the floormats potentially jamming the accelerator has been identified, and recalls are being issued, but confirms that no defect exists in which the driver's floor mat is compatible with the vehicle and properly secured.
3. There is no vehicle-based cause for these unintended accelerations.

Once the issue with the pedal had been identified, a new key message was developed, as seen below:

4. An issue with the pedal sticking has been identified but is believed to be rare and recalls are in effect.

Response procedures

Initial

The initial response from Toyota in this crisis left much to be desired and ultimately caused them greater issues down the road. The crash that killed the California Highway Patrol Officer occurred on Aug. 28, but the first press release wasn't put out until nearly three weeks later, on Sept. 14. The press release indicates initial investigations show the crash was caused by floormats, but assured customers that Toyota vehicles are still among the safest on the road. On Sept. 25, the NHTSA met with Toyota to inform them that its previous floormat recall was insufficient, leading Toyota to announce a recall of the gas pedals according to a timeline published by the U.S. Department of Transportation. Conflicting information began to emerge when spokesman John Hanson told NBC News, "We don't know what the actual cause was of that accident other than preliminary reports that have been published, so it's impossible for us to comment on that particular incident," on Sept. 29, days after the press release and recall announcement had already been made. The president of the company, Akio Toyoda, spoke for the first time about the issue on Oct. 2, following up his condolences to the family with his sadness about the recall and a recent California plant closure, making the message seem insincere and cold. On Oct. 5, Toyota recalled 3.8 million vehicles for pedal entrapment, sending a letter to affected customers that instructed them to remove driver's side floormats.

The press releases and statements not only downplayed the issue but also released conflicting information, leading the public to lose confidence in Toyota's handling of the issue. Toyota also failed to take accountability, despite these issues having existed for many years before the catalyst of this crisis. Toyota's failure to engage with its publics, answer questions and foster two-way communication only furthered public belief that the company was hiding something and intentionally failing to be transparent.

Continuing

Many of the continued responses failed in the public eye, especially as recalls continued, government agencies got involved and suits were filed against Toyota. The U.S. Department of Transportation detailed how the NHTSA continued to be involved in the process, meeting with executives in December 2009 to remind them that they are obligated under U.S. law to find and report defects promptly. A month later, Toyota reports to the NHTSA that its CTS-brand pedals possibly have a dangerous sticking defect that could contribute to sudden acceleration, despite having known this information since September 2009. On Jan. 21, a recall affecting 2.3 million vehicles was announced. Six days later, the recall was expanded to include an additional 1.1 million vehicles, further highlighting the unpreparedness of the company to the public by amending yet another recall.

These amendments, lack of accountability, insufficient communication and continued lack of transparency caused the public to speculate that there was an electronic issue causing sudden acceleration and Toyota was intentionally covering it up.

Beginning in February, the NHTSA launched an official probe into the timeliness and scope of the pedal entrapment and pedal sticking recalls. In the same month, Toyota executives were called to testify before Congress. While CEO Akio Toyoda took full responsibility for the safety issues, he was called out by the media for evading several questions. Congress' stated accusations about deception regarding the companies' forthcomingness, and the timeline of issue discovery was also called into question.

In February, Toyota began ramping up its PR efforts, with the President of Toyota U.S.A., Jim Lentz, issuing a public letter apology, an apology video and a video of him visiting a dealership to talk about the issues with the pedals. During this month, Toyota released 10 videos relating to the issue, including videos on customer perspectives on the recall, information on floormat entrapment, procedures for stopping if the pedal sticks and highlighting braking safety features. This marked a shift in the company's approach, and this sharing of information began to help deter the negative press and misinformation that had been running rampant.

By March, and at the request of Congress, the DOT announced two studies into unintended acceleration, one of which looked at possible electronic causes for acceleration.

Post crisis

Response procedures began looking up as Toyota started planning how to recover from fines, profit loss and extreme skepticism from once loyal customers. The company opened lines of communication to stakeholders, both internal and external, and began adopting a message of accountability, which was a drastic change from its previous messages of denial and deflection. These new lines of communication included hotlines, social media forms, dealership feedback forms and internal feedback forms. These not only helped Toyota understand its communication failures but also showed stakeholders a newfound commitment to customer service.

Toyota also continued posting videos about its organization, holding the company accountable and keeping customers informed about the efforts they were taking to move forward. Many of these videos included customers or employees, allowing the issue to be humanized in a way it hadn't been previously. Facebook was leveraged to help disperse these messages.

New key messages were developed during this phase, taking on a new tone. These messages included acknowledgement of its mistakes, a reassertion that there were no electronic errors, new efforts to better work with regulatory agencies and advertisement of the various initiatives Toyota undertook to fix its previous mistakes.

Crisis results

By the end of the crisis, Toyota had reached an agreement with the Department of Justice in 2014 and agreed to pay a \$1.2 billion penalty, which was the largest of its kind ever given to an automotive company. Part of the settlement includes assigning Toyota as an independent monitor to keep an eye on its safety-related policies, practices and procedures. Toyota was also forced to admit it had misled the public and government regulators about the safety issues in its cars. Toyota also settled a \$1.1 billion class-action lawsuit in 2017, paid \$48.8 million in civil penalties, paid \$29 million in a multistate lawsuit and settled a \$25.5 million lawsuit brought against them by investors. There were also over 500 personal suits settled by Toyota regarding sudden acceleration incidents.

Toyota's profits also took a hit, as it was reported that Toyota had a 16 percent drop in January U.S. sales, and its U.S. sales dropped below 100,000 for the first time in more than a decade. Its market shares also fell to the lowest it had been since January 2006, and it was reported that for the 2009 fiscal year, Toyota suffered a \$4.41 billion loss, the worst loss in company history and the first loss in 60 years.

The investigation into possible electronic causes for the acceleration concluded after 10 months, and it found nothing to substantiate any of the claims made. Unfortunately, much of the damage has already been done.

Despite the failed crisis response, Toyota made significant efforts to regain the trust of its stakeholders, taking the actions described below:

- Took accountability as a company and moved away from denial.
- Formed the North American Quality Task Force to ensure adherence to the government rules and regulations placed on them and to rebuild trust with the public.
- Launched marketing and ad campaigns that highlighted the brand's commitment to safety, quality and customer service.
- Formed a North American Quality Advisory Panel comprised of six independent safety and quality experts to advise the company on quality and safety issues.
- Updated quality control measures.
- Established a Special Committee for Global Quality led by CEO Akio Toyoda that will review the company's operations.
- Established the new position of Regional Product Safety Executive and gave North American operations more autonomy regarding safety issues.
- Established an Automotive Center of Quality Excellence with top engineers to strengthen quality control in the U.S.
- Made brake-override systems standard on all new models sold in North America by the end of 2010.

Proposed crisis plan

Team

- Crisis communication leader
- Spokesperson
- PR Specialist
- Internal communications manager
- Legal advisor
- Social media manager
- IT Specialist
- Human resources
- Customer service specialist

- Quality control expert
- Government affairs manager
- General manager of investor relations for Toyota North America

Stakeholders

Internal

- Employees
- Shareholders
- Executives
- Investors

External

- Customers
- Government agencies, such as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- Suppliers, such as the pedal supplier, CTS Corporation
- Media

Communication channels

Internal

- Face-to-face meetings
- Toyota's intranet
- Employee hotline
- Investor relations hotline
- Email
- Instant messaging platforms

Face-to-face meetings with the executive board, biweekly meetings for investors and shareholders and as-needed meetings for employees led by management will be held to facilitate the flow of information and ensure stakeholders feel updated and supported.

For employees, Toyota will make use of its intranet, supplying them with up-to-date information such as company announcements, press releases, briefings from weekly executive meetings, memos and a section for FAQs.

Two-way communication is a vital part of crisis communication, which is why we will be establishing two separate hotlines. One will be led by HR for employees who have questions, concerns, or information regarding the crisis. The other hotline will be established by investor relations and answer questions or concerns for investors and stakeholders.

Email will be used to provide company-wide updates as well as updates catered to our individual internal audiences. These would include memos, meeting briefings, statements from leadership and other company updates.

Executives and managers will use instant messaging platforms for all urgent matters that can't wait to be addressed during meetings or via email. This increases the flow of information and allows for issues to be addressed as early as possible, allowing Toyota to drive the narrative.

External

- Twitter
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Toyota's website/press room
- Press conference
- Email
- Phone
- Face-to-face meetings
- Customer hotline

For customers, we will leverage social media, allowing for two-way communication. Twitter will be used for updates, recalls and the sharing of videos and letters issued by leadership. This platform will also be used to respond directly to customer concerns and questions. Facebook, like Twitter, will be used to push out videos, key messages and other updates and recalls. However, this platform will also feature direct video clips of the president, customers and employees due to its community-based nature. Finally, YouTube will be used to host the videos put out by Toyota during the crisis. These videos will include statements from leadership, features of employees and engineers, information about the issues and safety responses in the event one does encounter an issue related to the recalls.

The Toyota website will also be used as a helpful resource for the media and customers. Our home page will feature the most recent recall information and statement from the company or leadership. Links to the company's YouTube page and other social media platforms will also be available here. For the media, Toyota will continue to use its press room, holding all our recall information, press releases, updates, infographics and statements from leadership in a manner that is easily accessible.

The media will receive press releases via email as they become available and will be able to call Toyota's PR specialist. An initial press conference with our spokesperson will be held, with follow-up conferences as new and important information comes up, particularly regarding investigation results.

Face-to-face meetings will also take place, namely with government agencies, such as the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Toyota intends to work closely with the NHTSA to ensure it is compliant with all regulations and fully participates in any investigations. Weekly meetings will be held to uphold this, and other mediums such as instant messaging and email will be used in the event of more urgent communication.

These meetings will also occur with Toyota's suppliers, namely CTS Corporations, and will be as needed and supplemented with email and instant messaging communication.

Similar to internal communications, a hotline will be set up for customers to call regarding information about the recalls. There will also be feedback forms available on social media and Toyota's website, allowing the company to gather data on the handling of the crisis and better address customer concerns.

Key messages

We recommend that Toyota prioritize the following key messages.

- a. We are aware of an incident involving one of our vehicles that led to the death of four individuals. We extend our deepest condolences to their families and, while the cause of the accident is not yet known, we are committed to working with all appropriate agencies to determine this and will update you all as information becomes available.

- b. At Toyota, the safety and well-being of our customers is our top priority. An issue has been identified with the acceleration pedal that in rare instances can cause it to temporarily stick or become entrapped by floor mats. Because of this, and out of an abundance of caution, Toyota will be issuing a recall of all affected vehicles.
- c. Toyota believes in continuous improvement and is committed to strengthening our internal quality and safety checks and procedures. We are implementing a full review of our internal processes and will be creating a panel comprised of six independent safety and quality experts to advise the company on quality and safety issues going forward.
- d. We are here to serve you, and we want to hear from you. We encourage customers to fill out our feedback forms, which will help our newly implemented Swift Market Analysis Response Team understand what steps we can take to improve our company.

Response procedures

Initial

- The team's initial step will be to gather as much information as is currently available and brief for all crisis team members, ensuring everyone is on the same page.
- The next step will be to create an initial holding statement, which will be drafted by the PR specialist and legal advisor, acknowledging the accident, sending condolences to the family and informing the public that the cause of the accident is unknown, but an investigation is underway.
- This initial statement will be sent to all stakeholders via an email memo and will be posted on Facebook and Twitter.
- The social media manager and PR specialist will monitor social media and news for sentiment, ensuring questions are being answered and no misinformation is being spread.
- An initial press conference will be called and will be led by the company spokesperson, emphasizing our first key message.
- Information gathering will continue with the team's quality control expert and government affairs manager, with the focus being on two things: the previous floor mat recalls and pedal issues and working with law enforcement and government agencies to get updates about the crash.
- Internally, Toyota's executives, chief quality officer and the chief engineers would meet to review the 2007 recalls and begin inspecting the

pedals to ensure none had defects relating to sudden acceleration that weren't uncovered during the first investigation.

Continuing

- At this phase, the cause of the accident would be revealed by the preliminary investigation, confirming that the accident was caused by an entrapped accelerator.
- An immediate recall of all vehicles with acceleration pedals from CTS Corporation will be issued.
- A press release outlining the investigations' findings, Toyota's commitment to customer safety and recall information will be drafted and sent to the media. The release will also acknowledge the defect in the pedal shape and the friction device.
- At the same time, this update will be sent to all stakeholders via the appropriate communication channels.
- A press conference will be held and will emphasize key messages two and three, which discuss Toyota's commitments to safety and continued improvement as a company regarding quality and safety checks.
- Additional information will be released as it becomes available.
- Stakeholder-specific messaging will be developed to address specific concerns, and Toyota would continue releasing updates if more information arose.
- At this time, leaders of Toyota U.S.A. will begin taking on an active role, issuing personal video statements, engaging with customers, visiting manufacturing plants and making it clear they take this issue seriously and are committed to engaging with stakeholders and ensuring this doesn't happen again.
- Videos will be posted on YouTube and will be shared via social media, Toyota's website and the media.

Monitoring and feedback

Monitoring and feedback during this crisis will focus on social media, media and public sentiment. For social media, the social media manager will oversee tracking the conversations related to the crisis online, looking for misinformation being spread and ensuring Toyota acts quickly to combat rumors. Social media monitoring will also help Toyota understand what questions customers are asking, allowing the company to release

the most relevant information. Alongside the social media manager, sentiment analysis tools such as Brandwatch will also be used.

The PR specialist will oversee media monitoring, ensuring the story we want to be told is being disseminated. This allows us to see the shape the story is taking, how people are responding to it and if we need to step in at any point to provide additional or clarifying information.

The customer service specialist will oversee monitoring public opinion as Toyota receives it from the customer hotline, feedback forms and dealership experiences. This will help us understand the direct struggles our customers are facing during this time, allowing us to provide the needed information and services to make their experience with the company great.

Post crisis

- Following the crisis, Toyota will continue to improve its quality, safety checks and procedures, implementing specialized teams and panels to ensure Toyota is using best practices and as much care as possible.
- Toyota's president will visit manufacturing plants, observe their practices, engage with employees and learn what they are doing to keep customers safe.
- Messaging and videos regarding these efforts will be posted on the company website, social media and sent to the press.
- The final key message will begin being used, highlighting our creation of the Swift Market Analysis Response Team and reaffirming our commitment to listening to our stakeholders.
- As part of this effort, Toyota will release feedback forms for employees, customers and dealerships to gather additional intel.
- A post-crisis evaluation will be undertaken, allowing the company to review the crisis and its responses, improving in any areas that were lacking.

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Appendix
Tweet of Toyota's initial holding statement



Toyota USA 
@Toyota

Follow



We have been informed of an incident involving one of our vehicles on August 28 We are actively working with local, state and federal law enforcement and regulatory agencies to launch an investigation and determine the cause of the incident to ensure all Toyota drivers are safe in the vehicles we produce.

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 176

 1.7K

 18



Initial press release



Clayton James Kuiper
spokesperson@toyota.corp
111-111-1111
Aug. 28, 2009

Immediate Release

Los Angeles, California (Aug. 28, 2009) - On Aug. 28, 2009, California Highway Patrol Officer Mark Saylor and three members of his family tragically lost their lives on a highway near San Diego California while driving a 2009 ES350 loaned to them by a local Lexus dealer.

Our deepest sympathies go out to the friends and family of Mark, Cleofe, Mahala, and Cleofe's brother, Chris Lastrella.

We are actively working with local, state and federal law enforcement and regulatory agencies to launch an investigation and determine the cause of the incident to ensure all Toyota Drivers are safe in the vehicles we produce.

Preliminary information from law enforcement investigators indicates that the cause may have been an all-weather floor mat from a different Lexus model which, if installed incorrectly in the ES350, could cause it to interfere with the accelerator pedal.

All-weather floor mats are installed by dealers or customers as an accessory item. Driver's floor mat interference with the accelerator pedal is possible in any vehicle make with any combination of floor mats when the floor mat is not properly secured or if it is not the factory-designed floor mat for the vehicle.

Toyota Motor Sales, USA, Inc. takes public safety very seriously and will fully cooperate with any investigation.

We are instructing all of our Lexus and Toyota dealers to immediately inspect their new, used, and loaner fleet vehicles and we urge all other automakers, dealers, vehicle owners, and the independent service and car wash industries to assure that any floor mat, whether factory or aftermarket, is correct for the vehicle and properly installed and secured.