Boeing Takes Out Full-Page Ads Before CEO Testifies

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Ahead of two days of congressional testimony from Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg, Boeing has taken out full-page ads in several newspapers. It's among the first steps the airline manufacturer has taken to regain the public's trust after its jet, the Boeing 737 Max 8, crashed twice within the year, killing 346 people and leading to the longest grounding in the history of the Federal Aviation Administration.

The ads, which ran in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times, USAToday, The Seattle Times and The Chicago Tribune, pay tribute to Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 and Lion Air Flight 610, which crashed in March 2019 and exactly a year ago today, respectively.

But what's missing from the copy: an actual apology.

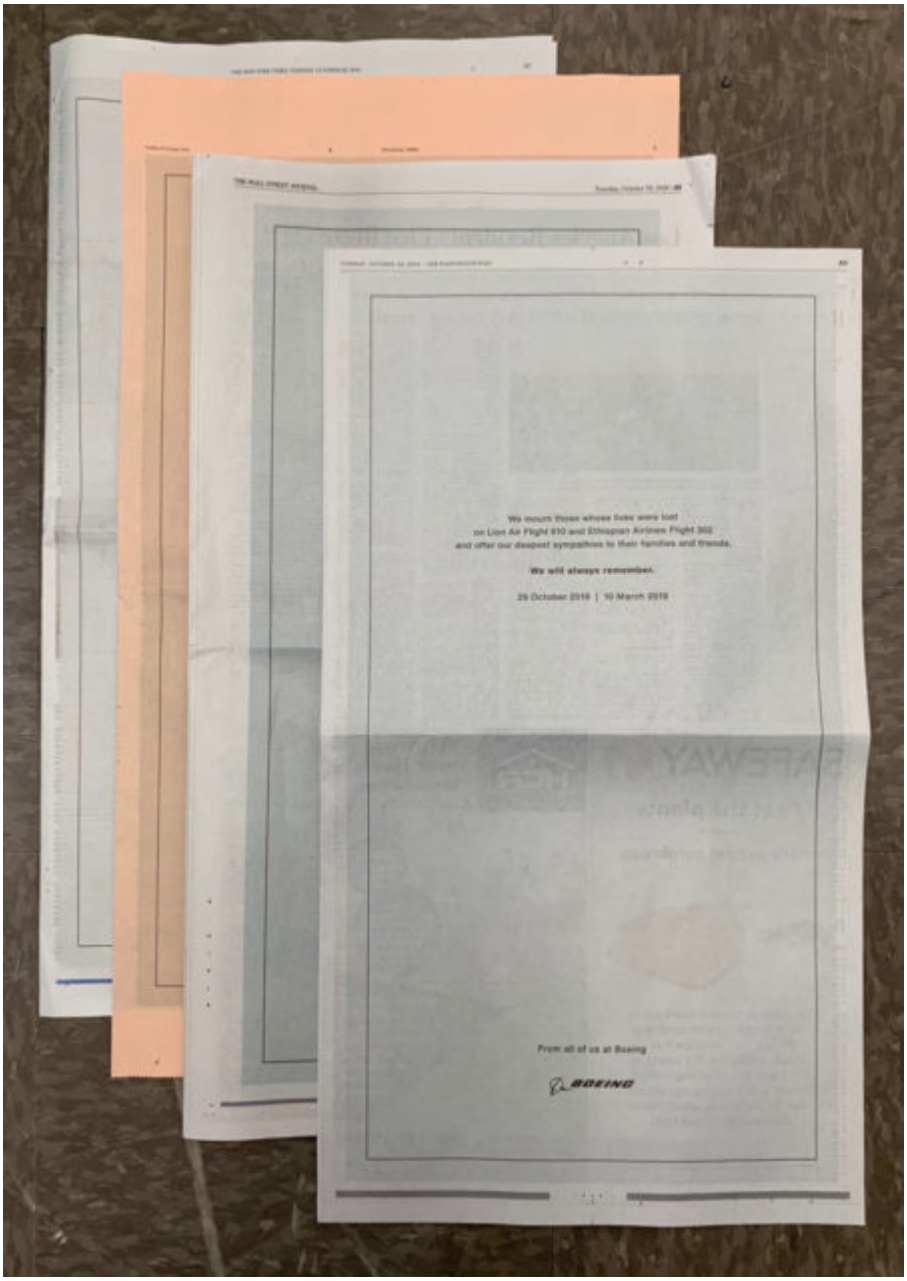
"We mourn those whose lives were lost on Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 and offer our deepest sympathies to their families and friends. We will always remember," the ad reads. At the bottom of the ad, it said: "From all of us at Boeing."

Crisis communications experts say the ad rings hollow, hinting that this is a PR stunt aimed at "elites"—financial, political and societal—and not the people affected by the crashes.

"It doesn't sit well with me. This is anything but an apology," said Brett Snyder, an aviation expert. "It's unlikely that any of the friends or families of the victims care about The Wall Street Journal. And if they do read it, they don't care that Boeing took out an ad."

Of course, the avoidance of apology could just be a corporate strategy. Words and framing matter, experts say.

“An apology is legally admissible in court as negligence,” said Eric Denzenhall, a crisis communications expert. “This was a good idea. It was not grandstanding. It was not self-congratulatory. It deprives those who have said otherwise of the opportunity to say the company doesn’t care.”



The Wall Street Journal’s rate sheet shows a full-page ad on A5 costs $277,200. A full-page ad on page 5 of The Financial Times is $210,025, according to the paper’s rate card. It’s roughly $80,000 for a full-page ad in The Washington Post and

$75,000-$150,000 for a full-page ad in The New York Times, depending on the category, client and day of the week, said sources familiar with those papers' advertising rates.

Full-page ads in just those newspapers represent more than $600,000 for one day of advertising, to a very specific audience.

In a statement to Adweek, Boeing said the ads "reflect our deep regret for the loss of life in both accidents. We'll always remember those who lost their lives, and we want to reassure airlines, their crews and the public that, with the work we've done, the Max will be among the safest airplanes ever to fly. They also help share information on our current progress and will direct audiences to an expanded set of information online."

Initiative, Boeing's media-buying agency, did not respond to a request for comment.

"This [message] isn't targeted at families; it's targeted at the people who buy airplanes or working for the airlines," said Snyder.

It's "investors and elites," according to Denzenhall. "To sit and try to educate millions of consumers about safety is a fool's errand. All it would do is scare the heck out of them. The best way to manage a crisis well is to speak to key audiences. It's not consumers. It's an elite audience of opinion leaders and investors."

Boeing also ran a two-page statement from Muilenburg in Indonesian newspapers, in English on one side and Indonesian on the other.

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