

Brightline must act quickly to avert brand damage, experts say

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Proponents hope Brightline's sleek, fast-moving trains can coax affluent South Floridians out of their cars and onto mass transit.

But the train service's launch has been marred by grisly headlines. Brightline trains struck and killed two pedestrians in just a few days, and the latest accident drew national news coverage and Congressional criticism.

Experts in crisis communications say Brightline must move deftly to keep the deaths from shaping the nascent company's public image.

"They have to quickly, quickly, quickly communicate what their safety procedures are, because these incidents could define their brand forever," said John David, a publicist who runs David PR Group in Miami. "This is an all-hands-on-deck situation."

In the latest accident, a Brightline train hit Jeffrey King, 51, as he was cycling home Wednesday after a shift as a dishwasher at a barbecue restaurant in Boynton Beach. Police said King tried to beat the train after the crossing gates had closed.

While there's no indication that Brightline did anything wrong, the fatalities still could prove problematic for Brightline's expansion plans. Opponents will argue that the rail service simply can't operate safely in a densely populated urban area, David said.

"If I'm not happy about this train going through my backyard, this is the first thing I'm going to say: It's not safe," David said.

The deaths also could hamper Brightline's plans to raise hundreds of millions of dollars to extend the service to Orlando, said Randal O'Toole, an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute and a critic of Brightline.

“If they’re killing two people a week, I wouldn’t touch them if I were a venture capitalist,” O’Toole said. “It’s going to be harder for them to finance it.”

How the rough start affects Brightline’s brand depends on whether the rail service can avoid more accidents.

“If they can run for six months or a year with no more fatalities, they’ll probably get over it,” O’Toole said.

For that to happen, Brightline should embark on an aggressive campaign of public education, said Mike Paul, head of New York public relations firm Reputation Doctor.

“You have the attention of a crisis,” Paul said. “Have a press conference, go to a cross walk and show how to do it properly.”

Paul said Brightline’s task is similar to the one Paul himself is waging to teach his young son how to safely cross busy streets.

“It has to become a habit — not just hearing it once or twice,” Paul said.

While Brightline’s shiny new trains have traveled with many empty seats so far, the rail service looms large in South Florida’s ambitions. For instance, Brightline is part of South Florida’s pitch for Amazon’s second headquarters.

“Of course, they have some serious kinks to work out, but I am certain they will work it out,” said Kelly Smallridge, head of the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County. “They didn’t invest this amount of money to put forth anything less than first-class.”

Before Brightline launched, economic developers embraced the new train service as a selling point. Rather than make a white-knuckle commute of an unpredictable length on Interstate 95, the thinking goes, workers can easily travel between the region’s three downtowns.

Even supporters admit that the pedestrian fatalities pose a setback.

“There has to be brand damage,” said Barry O’Brien, a downtown West Palm Beach resident who calls himself “a huge supporter” of Brightline. “It is a real challenge. But it’s like going through a red light and getting mad at the person who hit you. People want to blame the train.”