

Crisis Management: Eyjafjallajokull Eruption

Mt. Eyjafjallajokull eruption in Iceland wreaked havoc on Europe's air transport system and threatened to turn off the steady number of foreign tourists expected to visit Iceland in 2010. Tourism stakeholders in Iceland, alarmed by twenty percent drop in visitor numbers in April and May compared to the previous year, got together and pooled their efforts in a joint marketing campaign named Inspired by Iceland.

The eruption claimed no lives and no homes were destroyed. A column of extremely fine grain ash rose high up in the sky where wind picked it up and blew it out to sea. Eventually the ash reached Britain and Ireland, mainland Europe and Scandinavia and airports in those areas were temporarily shut for passenger safety reasons.

A distinction must be made between two separate eruptions in and around Mt. Eyjafjallajokull in 2010. The first one took place on the Fimmvorduhals Pass and the second one which produced the ash took place under the icecap near the top of Mt. Eyjafjallajokull.



Fimmvorduhals Pass Eruption

On 20 March 2010 a volcanic fissure opened on Fimmvorduhals Pass (1,100 m) between Eyjafjallajokull and Myrdalsjokull glaciers. Although geologists had been monitoring the area for a while prior to the eruption there had been no clear indication of an imminent eruption.

Standard precautionary acts included the immediate closure of airports. Some 800 people living in the vicinity of the mountain were summoned to leave their homes for the night for safety reasons. In hindsight those precautionary measures were unnecessary but made it into the news worldwide thus raising an alarm amongst individuals and school groups about to visit the country. As a result many postponed their visit to Iceland until fall while others gave up on the idea of visiting all together.

It is a bit ironic that at the same time as foreign visitors cancelled their trip to Iceland many locals and some brave foreign visitors flocked to the eruption to see it in action at close quarters. It was a great spectacle to see the red hot lava with a yellow glow spout from one, and sometimes two, fissures before it flowed slowly down the hill in a northerly direction.

In one place the lava poured over the edge of a deep gorge and spread half way down like the ribs of a fan turned upside down. People watched this phenomenon in awe from a natural viewing platform on the opposite site, listening to the crumbling sound of the molten lava crushing down and felt its heat on their face and body.



As many as 5.000 people visited the eruption in a single day using various modes of transport to get there. Although most used modified SUVs some actually walked while others used a snowmobile, a mountain bike or a helicopter to experience the sight.

Mt. Eyjafjallajokull Eruption

A second eruption started on 14 April below the icecap of Mt. Eyjafjallajokull and ended rather unceremoniously around the middle of May. This eruption was triggered by the first eruption and was the one that proved catastrophic for aviation in Europe and tourism at large. The composition of the magma in the second eruption was much more explosive than in the first eruption. Further, meltwater from the glacier came into contact with the magma and caused even more violent explosions. This combination produced 10 km high column of very fine ash above the mountain.

People's perception of the magnitude of the eruption and its effect on Iceland and its people was greatly exaggerated by the media. Indeed, if it had not been for the media, people in Reykjavik, just over an hour's drive away from the mountain, would have remained oblivious to its existence. All four international airports remained operational throughout the eruption with the exception that two had to be closed for about five days in total. The eruption had no effect or little effect on air travel between Iceland and the Americas.

Inspired by Iceland Marketing Campaign

The Ministry of Tourism, Industry and Energy in co-operation with Icelandair and Iceland Express airlines, Reykjavik city, the Export Council and the Iceland Tour Operators' Association launched an ambitious marketing campaign named Inspired by Iceland. The campaign which cost US\$ 6 million ran from mid-May through mid-July 2010 and was supposed to convey the message that it was safe to travel to Iceland. The campaign included a fresh internet approach using community based websites

such as Facebook and Twitter and reached about 2 million people, press trips for travel journalists, website advertising banners in several countries etc.

Although it is quite difficult to assess the campaign's actual success it is a fact that in the period January to November there was only 1.5 percent decline in the number of visitors in 2010 compared to the same period in the previous year. A much less drop than feared. Those responsible for the campaign are happy with its success. It was even nominated in two categories for the European Excellence Award 2010 – an award for best corporate communication and public relations in Europe. It was nominated in the best campaign in the Nordic countries as well as best crisis management campaign categories.

Icelanders were encouraged to take part in the campaign by sending a message to foreign friends abroad and contribute videos. Perhaps more important than the concrete success or failure of the campaign is the new found collectiveness of diverse groups of stakeholders in tourism – ranging from the general public to the government, local authority, travel agents, tour operators, restaurants and transport companies.

Lessons Learnt

A memorandum from stakeholder's close-up meeting reiterates positive aspects gained from the campaign. Tourism stakeholders worked together united with the one goal in mind to minimize the negative economic effect of the two eruptions by attracting more tourists. Locally the campaign brought attention to the importance of the tourism industry which until now has been seen as a marginal industry by the public and policy makers.

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