

Travel Destinations: How to Handle a Crisis

Tourism is prone to both natural and manmade disasters. Many of these disasters are related to the world of crime and terrorism; others are due to our lack of planning or our refusal to take weather conditions into account. These latter are often called “natural disasters” or “acts of God.” Neither term is accurate.

Most so-called natural disasters are fairly predictable. For example, if a tourism destination is located in a hurricane zone, then it ought to take precautions knowing that at some point a hurricane will strike. The same is true of centers located along beachfronts that face the potential for a tsunami or in seismic areas where earthquakes are prevalent.



In all cases, a good part of the catastrophe, loss of property and life comes from poor risk management and the willingness to deal with what is called an “acceptable risk”.

There can be no doubt that climatically the last years have not been easy ones for many people in the tourism industry. Places such as California have suffered from severe droughts, Jerusalem in Israel and much of the Middle East and the north Atlantic region has experienced harsher than normal winters, and places along the Asian Pacific have had to deal with major typhoons. Often due to short historical memory we tend to exaggerate the fact that the climate has been changing over millions of years

Often due to short historical metrological memory and poor planning due to weather issues word "bankruptcy" is heard with ever more frequency.

Tourism has suffered a number of plagues including the plague of terror, of crime, of high gasoline prices, of war, and of health hazards in the form of SARS and cruise line illnesses.

Crises often have three stages: (1) the pre-crisis stage when we develop crisis scenarios for the "just in case", (2) the actual crisis and (3) the recovery from the crisis stage. When the tourism industry has no recovery plan then we go from the crisis state to the catastrophe stage.

We may define a tourism catastrophe then as a crisis without recovery plan. It is important to understand that a catastrophe in tourism is something that exists on the macro rather than on the micro level. For example, a tourist death due to a typhoon is a personal catastrophe, and the person can never regain

his or her life.



On the macro level, however, the industry continues to live, and while the personal death is a crisis, it is not an industry catastrophe. Thus, if the third part of the crisis, the post-crisis stage is not handled correctly then it becomes a catastrophe.

While each crisis has its own uniqueness, there are general principles that apply to all tourism crises recovery plans. Here are a few ideas for your consideration.

Do not just throw money at a crisis. Often people deal with crises simply by spending money especially on equipment. Good equipment has its role, but equipment without the human touch will only lead to another crisis. Never forget that people solve crises and not machines.

Do not forget that the people working in tourism industry and their family members are also impacted by the crisis. Make sure that you not only take care of your employees but also their families. It is hard to ask someone to take care of visitors when their family is also in danger. First make sure that your employees are safe, then make sure that they do not need to worry about their families and only then can you expect tourism employees to provide excellent tourism catastrophe management.

Remember that when someone else suffers we call it a crisis, but when we suffer we call the event a catastrophe! Thus, be empathetic and understanding of the person's problem and have a plan to help each individual tourist on the micro level.

Never assume that a crisis will not touch your part of the tourism industry. Perhaps the most important part of a crisis recovery plan is to have one in place prior to a crisis. While we can never predict the exact nature of a crisis before it occurs, flexible plans allow for a recovery starting point. The worst scenario is to realize that one is in the midst of a crisis and that there are no plans to deal with it.

Know that the further one is from the crisis the worse it appears. No one has to visit your community and once the media begins to report that there is a crisis, visitors may quickly panic and begin to cancel trips to your locale. Often it is the media that define a crisis as a crisis. Have a plan in place so that correct information can be given to the media as quickly as possible.



Catastrophe Recovery Programs can never be based on one factor alone. The best recovery programs take into account a series of coordinated steps all working together. Never depend on only one remedy to bring you toward recovery. Instead coordinate your advertising and marketing campaign with your incentive program and with an improvement in service.

Make sure that you let people know that your community is not closed for business. After a crisis, it is essential that the message be sent that your community is alive and well. Encourage people to come by creative advertising, good service and incentives. The key here is not to worry about the size of a discount but rather to get the flow of people back to your community.

Emphasize the need for employees to maintain both dignity and good service, especially when a natural disaster is occurring. The last thing a person on vacation wants to hear is how bad business is. Instead, emphasize the positive. You are pleased that the visitor has come to your community and that you want to make the trip as enjoyable as possible. After a crisis now frown but smile!

Invite magazines and other media people to write articles about your recovery. Make sure that you provide these people with accurate and up-to-date information. Offer them the opportunity to meet with local officials, and provide them with tours of the community. Then seek ways to gain exposure for the local tourism community. Go on television, do radio pieces, invite the media to interview you as often as they like. When speaking with the media, in a post-crisis situation, always be positive, upbeat and polite.

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