

Tourism Police Help Create the Destination Image

Recent shootings in the US and political riots in many parts of Europe once again made the public aware of the fact that tourism security is not only a concept but depends to a great extent on its practitioners, law enforcement. In many parts of the world, police have formed special units to work with tourism and to make the police department more than a mere law enforcement agency but also an integral part of the tourism industry.



Tourism policing goes by many names. In the US it often uses the acronym TOPPs, meaning Tourism Oriented Policing and Protection Services. In Latin America it is often called, "seguridad turística" or "politur".

These units do more than protect visitors and the locale; they also make a positive tourism image statement. The way we use our security professionals expresses a locale's image and values.

For example, the first person the visitor sees when s/he arrives at an international airport is an immigration officer. Has that person been trained to smile and say "welcome to my country" or does that person merely act as a faceless bureaucrat who appears bored with his or her job, and gives the impression that he only wishes that fewer visitors had arrived? In a like manner, when a visitor needs directions, has a problem, or in the case of a crisis, it is often the security professional to whom the visitor turns. Are our security professionals empathetic or do they give the impression that they could care less about the visitor's wellbeing?

What is true for the single leisure or business traveler is even more important when it comes to group visitation or security at major events. In these cases, thousands (or even millions) of visitors

arrive at a single location. Security personnel must not only manage the relations between the visitor and the local community but also the relations between the visitor and his/her fellow visitors.

To add to the challenges, most major events simply lack manpower and this scarcity of personnel results in security professionals being overworked and over-stressed. This means that the person who acts as the face of a particular locale may not be emotionally prepared to offer empathetic help at the time that this help is most needed. The result? Instead of turning the crisis into a marketing recovery tool, the visitor is left with the impression that the host locale is not interested in his or her wellbeing.

To begin to understand the importance of TOPPs or tourism policing units to the tourism industry consider the following:

- These units must be well-trained: TOPPs units are officers who have studied both security and the basics of tourism science. They understand that their job is not only to protect the visitor but also the local visitor industry. TOPPs officers are people who demonstrate that they understand that their police department is not only the first line of defense against both acts of crime and terrorism but also understand that the crisis recovery mode is as important as risk avoidance. In the world of TOPPs it is not only how we prevent or deal with crime, but also how we deal with each person as a customer. TOPPs units understand that good customer service is an essential element of good security.



- Distinguish your tourism security police or tourism security staff from other security officers by a unique and distinct uniform: In most places the public well understands that different security personnel have different missions. Just as a SWAT officer has a different look from a traffic control person, so too should your tourism safety and security personnel have a different and distinguishable look from that of other officers. Tourism oriented police and private security personnel should have a distinct uniform that tells the world that they are trained to help not only locals but also visitors and that they care not only about the visitor's wellbeing but also about their

community's reputation.

- **The unit's name describes your tourism industry:** For example, there is a big difference between a tourism safety unit and a tourism crime unit. In the first case, the image is that you want your tourists to be safe and for nothing to happen to them, in the second case, the impression given is that your community is filled with crime, and that your police are only there to solve crimes rather than assure tourism safety and to protect the community's good name. Make sure that your police department and other security professionals work with local marketing departments to create an overall sense of community.

- **Pick the right people for a TOPPs unit:** All too often police departments choose anyone who is willing to do the job. Tourism security and safety are not appropriate jobs for everyone. Tourism Security Professionals need to be extraverted people with high degrees of tolerance. They should speak more than one language, enjoy people and want to be both security professionals and community representatives. Your visitors will judge your community as much as by what they see as by what your TOPPs officers do.



- **Turn your tourism security professionals and TOPPs officers into a career and not merely a stop along the way:** All too often these highly trained people receive promotions and are taken out of the tourism realm. What then happens is that, each time a police department changes personnel, then the training is lost and there is a continuous need to relearn everything. Tourism security is specialty that not everyone is capable of doing. Choose your personnel carefully and then give them the chance to progress in their careers within the ranks of tourism security professionals. In the 19th century the goal was to learn a little about everything. In the 21st century policing and security requires well-trained professionals who are specialists in their field.

- Consider extra pay for tourism policing and security specialists: In the same way that medical professionals receive extra money for their specialty, tourism ought to provide extra pay for those security officers who are both well-trained and work in areas such as TOPPs. The extra pay will provide not only an incentive to the TOPPs officers but also act as a way to provide these people with extra dignity and respect.

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