

How the Next Pandemic May Impact the World's Tourism Industry

Anyone who is paying careful attention to the media cannot help but note that throughout the world, scientists and doctors alike are warning us about the potential for a world pandemic.

This undercurrent of media attention on what is called Swine Flu, the H1N1 virus or Influenza may have major consequences for the world's tourism and vacation industries. Certainly, if the past is a lesson for the future trends, then it behooves the tourism industry not to panic but to begin to plan now for potential current and future pandemics.



It takes very little to destroy a tourism site's reputation or to panic the public. For example, during the SARS Outbreak in Toronto, Canada, hotel occupancy dropped considerably despite the fact that no visitors to Toronto were stricken with the illness and every possible precaution was taken. The same is true of last winter's Swine flu outbreak in Mexico. Visitors simply stopped coming to Mexico.

World tourism faces a myriad of global challenges in the event of a world pandemic. Among these are: the possibility of location quarantines, fear to use airports and other centers of mass gatherings, fear of not knowing what to do in case of illness in a foreign land, the need for cross-border medical insurance. To add to these difficulties tourists and convention planners are acutely aware of how hard it can be to change or cancel reservations both at hotels and on airlines. The change and cancellation fees mean a higher degree of travel risk in uncertain times. Lastly should a pandemic occur during an economic turndown, the tourism and travel industry may be hit doubly hard. The fact that many potential tourists have opted for what is being called "staycations" or at home vacations, ought to be warning to the travel and tourism industries. To help tourism professionals prepare for a potential pandemic here are a few things to consider.

Develop a pre-pandemic set of plans now

Have a pandemic crisis committee ready so that it can swing into action as soon as possible. Make sure that this committee is composed of experts from a variety of fields and from cross-community businesses.

Especially during a potential pandemic emphasize the need for tourism employees to maintain both dignity and good service

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 don't frown but smile! On the other hand, make sure that all employees are provided with anti-influenza vaccinations. It will take only one sick employee to destroy a tourism business

Make sure that you have a plan for employee absenteeism during a pandemic

Not only do you want to develop a plan for working with a skeleton staff should your employees become ill, but remember that if your employees' family members become ill, they may not come to work or a sick family member may infect your employees.

Remember visitors from other places may see an illness outbreak although there is no pandemic.



The Toronto experience ought to teach tourism professionals that in case of a major flu outbreak they will need to fight a double battle, both the battle for healthful recovery and the battle to regain

a locale's reputation. Visitors do not need to visit your local 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.

Develop a pandemic working relationship with the media

Crisis can shift from small crisis to large ones, when the media discover that your agency's spokesman has not been truthful. Be truthful with the media, if you do not have the answer either explain why not or tell them when you will have it. Nothing destroys credibility more and thus provokes suspicions and a greater crisis than being caught in an "untruth." Instead provide real facts. For example, currently the death rate for people with H1N1 is around 1% of those infected. Most people will have a very mild case of this flu and many may not even know that they were infected by it.

Develop post-pandemic recovery plan now and do not base it on one single course of action

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



Do not just throw money at a crisis

Often people deal with crises such as a pandemic simply by spending money especially on equipment. Good equipment plays important role, but equipment without human touch will only lead to another crisis. Never forget that people solve crises and not machines.

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