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CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM

Vladimir Senić[1]; Veljko Marinković[2]

Abstract

Crisis has many forms and can occur anytime and anywhere. Unfortunately, in most cases, even when it becomes apparent that the crisis is happening, a substantial number of managers and decision makers are not yet aware that crisis is taking place and that time is running out for making an adequate response. This is particularly true for the tourism sector that is exposed to a vast number of different risks that should be approached appropriately and professionally. Otherwise, tourist organizations, as well as tourist destinations, will be faced with catastrophic consequences that might be impossible to completely recover from. The first step towards avoiding damaging image and reputation of tourism organizations and destinations is in effective communication with various types of public and stakeholders in the moments of crisis. Those are moments when public relations officers can literally determine the faith of the company or destination. The scope of this paper is to stress the significance of communication in the state of crisis and briefly cover the most efficient strategies for communicating in crisis.

Keywords: *crisis, crisis communication, tourism*

Introduction

Crisis communication can represent the core of successful crisis management and can play a critical role throughout the entire crisis process. As such, crisis communication is a central, most critical component of the crisis management. Furthermore, it seems that proper and well executed crisis communication can turn crisis management, under some circumstances, into management of opportunities.

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1 Vladimir Senić, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism in Vrnjačka Banja – University of Kragujevac, Vojvođanska bb, 36210 Vrnjačka Banja, telephone: +381 36 515 00 25, e-mail: vsenic@yahoo.com
2 Veljko Marinković, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Economics – University of Kragujevac, Đure Pucara 3, 34000 Kragujevac, telephone: +381 34 303 525, e-mail: vmarinkovic@kg.ac.rs

Nevertheless, communicating in the state of crisis carries a certain amount of risk, yet, on the other hand, it seems that having no communication whatsoever when the crisis strikes is even more risky. In fact, when a company decides not to communicate during the crisis, even then a company sends a message that can have severe consequences for the company's future in the eyes of the public and its stakeholders.

Whenever a crisis occurs, all those who are affected directly or indirectly by it look for additional information. Through communicating, information is gathered, processed into knowledge and then shared with others, but it should be kept in mind that every phase of crisis communication has its own demands for creating and sharing knowledge, that is, its own needs for gathering and interpreting information.

Nowadays, tourist destinations and enterprises are exposed to risk more than ever before. On one hand, this is due to rise of factors that can stimulate crisis, while on the other, it is due to the fact that in the last two decades there has been an increase in mass media and social networks. Indeed, these two elements have shifted the way companies need to treat every crisis situation.

While companies were able to afford not to disclose information in earlier times, that seems to be hard to achieve in today's era of Internet society. It is the media that have a particular interest in disclosing crisis in companies and make information about the emerging crisis event available to as wider public as possible.

In the past, only those companies that were dealing with extremely dangerous production processes that can seriously impact human health (refineries, coal plants, chemical industry) were investigated by media.

Today, media's coverage of crisis events spans from corrupt activities to defective produce, as well as, natural disasters, terrorism and many other crisis causes. This is particularly true of tourism that has become in the past couple of decades extremely vulnerable to many risk factors.

Tourism and crisis

Tourism represents one of the most sensitive economic sectors. It is extremely dependant on political, social and economic conditions. Numerous events can lead to discouraging tourists from specific

destinations. Dirty beaches, an epidemic outbreak that can endanger public health or attacks that represent a direct threat on tourist's safety will inevitably lead to decline in interest for a specific tourist destination. In some instances, even the notion that something can go wrong will have enormous negative effects on tourism as a sector (Glaesser, 2003).

Certainly, many of the crisis events that are present in modern tourism have been around for centuries. But, what makes a big difference nowadays is the fact that there is a dramatic increase in the scale of tourism activities and in the human mobility. Thanks to cheaper means of air transportation, many destinations that were distant and difficult to travel to in the past are now much closer and far more reachable.

Tourism as a product is by itself a function of a risk. The risk has an enormous impact on tourist's decision whether to travel or not. If a tourist perceives a destination as unsafe and hazardous, then the destination will suffer greatly, because most of the tourist will avoid such places. Reaction to negative events in tourism is quite different compared to other economic sectors.

Namely, tourism has an above average sensitivity to crisis events, given that tourists have to leave the safety and comfort of their homes to visit a destination. Most tourists are risk-averse and do not seek an adventure that can threaten them in any way.

Tourism has many characteristics that can make crisis more likely, strengthen the impact of crisis events or generate extremely high levels of interest among public and media.

Niininen (2013) stresses the following five factors that contribute to it:
  - Tourism represents a large portion of the economy and, as such, it is usually referred to as "the largest sector of the economy in times of peace". Tourism is also referred to as the sector that offers possibilities for sustainable development, in particular for the third-world countries.
  - Tourism sector is closely integrated with many other sectors. In other words, if the crisis strikes hospitality sector, it is very likely that many companies that specialize in supplying hospitality sector will be directly impacted by it.
  - The main objective of tourism is travelling of people (all individuals with means and motives for travel are potential tourists). Therefore, a

set a psychological and sociological reactions to unexpected events on behalf of the guests of an international hotel is going to be a major challenge even for the most detailed crisis plan, as well as for the veteran public relations managers who have to keep their composure even in the moments of highest tensions.
- Given that the consumption of the tourist product demands that the 'buyer' travels to a particular destination, demand for tourist products and tourist destinations is very sensitive to reports concerning safety and health.
- Many tourists are attracted to destinations that are very vulnerable to natural disasters (such as tropical weather, proximity of ocean/sea or seismic movements) or have a rather low level of developed infrastructure (poor road quality, inadequate communal services or hospital services).

Evidently, tourism can be regarded as a sector that is exposed to risk. The question is not if the crisis will happen, but when it will happen. This is so much true, given that crisis is now considered to be inevitable part of tourism business.

However, this means that tourism sector needs to invest much more time in planning in order to anticipate crisis and to manage it once it happens. The beginning of twenty-first century has seen a number of distinctive events that literally shook the worldwide tourism and had huge impact on its further development.

Terrorist acts in New York on September 11, 2001, followed by the war in Afghanistan, Bali bombing of a tourist district in 2002 (with over 200 dead tourists), SARS epidemic in 2003, war in Iraq, Madrid bombing in 2004, Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 (with a total of over 230,000 dead), London bombing in 2005, volcanic eruption in Iceland in 2010, Japan tsunami in 2011, Tunis terrorist attack on tourists in 2014, Paris bombing in 2015 serve as reminders how vulnerable tourism sectors is.

Because tourism is a true global sector, even those countries that were not directly affected by the crisis can be easily hit. For instance, terrorist attack on New York in 2001 has had the worst effect on the US travel and tourism sector since the World War II (Wilkerson, 2003). The similar can be said for the global tourism market as well.

Defining crisis in tourism

As a term, tourism is usually interpreted in many positive ways including enjoyment, relaxation, satisfaction, leisure or entertainment. Unfortunately, previously mentioned instances warn us that quite easily all those positive associations can become their opposites in the matter of hours and sometimes even minutes, brining fear, distress, trauma and panic.

Unfortunately, the issues related to crisis have become the reality for all those who are involved in any kind of tourist activity. Despite all discomfort tied to crisis, it should be accepted that a crisis (whether it was caused by nature or by people) was and will continue to be a part of everyday life impacting directly or indirectly vast range of stakeholders – such as local community, visitors, promoters or investors.

Where tourist destinations – in economic terms – greatly depend on activities linked to tourism, their vulnerability on crisis events considerably increases, under the assumption that they should keep a positive image in terms of attractiveness and safety in order to achieve continuous success. Taking this into consideration, those responsible for decision making should be aware of ever increasing sensitivity of the tourism sector on crisis and make an effort to create mechanisms that will first and foremost avoid crisis from occurring, or if it happens, they should precisely determine the phase of the crisis.

Neither the literature on crisis management in general nor the literature on crisis in tourism offers a universally accepted definition of crisis. In order to understand the nature of crisis in tourism, two issues should be stressed (Sönmez et al., 1999).

First, crisis can seriously impede normal business processes in any tourism-based company or even destination by making harm to the overall reputation of the tourist destination related to safety, attractiveness and comfort thus spreading negative perception among visitors about that particular destination. That will eventually result in lower levels of demand leading to less tourist arrivals and less tourist spending in the local economy.

Second, having in mind the complexity of the tourism system, accidents or crisis in one area can easily spread or be strengthened due to

inappropriate management reaction onto other areas or regions. In a world where technology dominates, a small-scale event in a part of the global system can lead to disproportional outcome somewhere else.

Taking into consideration previously mentioned characteristics of tourism, Glaesser (2006) defines crisis as unwanted, unique and often unexpected and time-limited process with ambivalent development of possibilities. Crisis demands instant decisions and counter actions in order to limit – and when possible avoid – negative consequences on tourist enterprise or tourist destination.

Definition proposed by Glaesser is quite similar to a definition given by the UNWTO (2011), which defines crisis as unwanted, extraordinary, often unexpected and time-limited process that has many developing scenarios.

Further, Beirman (2003) defines destination crisis as a situation that demands radical response by management as a reply to events that are not within the internal control of an organization, and that demands an urgent adaptation of marketing and business practices in order to rebuild the trust of employees, partner companies and tourists into the sustainability of the destination.

Pacific Asia Travel Association (2011), defines crisis as an event or a group of events that can significantly compromise or hamper market reputation of the tourist enterprise or the entire tourist region/destination.

According to Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), there are two wide categories of crises that are related to tourism:
- Category 1: crisis events that are outside of management's reach. These events include natural disasters, acts of war and terrorism, political struggle, crime or epidemic outbursts.
- Category 2: crisis events that result from management mistakes or lack of contingent measures that are taken to tackle predictable risks. These events include company's meltdown due to large management mistakes, inadequate strategic management, financial scams, loss of data, destruction of company's site due to floods or fire without adequate protection procedures or insurance coverage, high levels of management and employee turnover.

Defining crisis communication

In general terms, crisis communication could be defined as gathering, processing and dissemination of information necessary for managing a crisis situation. However, every crisis consists of several phases and each phase of crisis process has its own demands in terms of gathering and interpreting information. In other words, the crisis phase determines the tasks of crisis communication. In a *state prior to crisis (incubation phase),* crisis communication is focused on gathering information regarding crisis risks, making decisions on how to manage potential crisis situation and training people/staff that will be involved in the process of crisis management.

Training usually involves the members of the crisis team, public relations staff as well as every other individual that is seeking to provide assistance in crisis. During the *phase of crisis (acute phase)*, crisis communication involves gathering data and processing information that the crisis team needs in order to make decisions along with creating and disseminating crisis messages to people who are not within the crisis team. The *phase after the crisis* includes analysis of crisis management activities, communicating necessary changes to individuals and, if needed, assuring the following of crisis messages from the environment (Vos et al., 2011).

Nowadays, it is assumed that crisis communication covers everything – starting from prevention strategies to assessing strategies after the crisis. In different phases of crisis, the main objective of communication is to minimize uncertainty related to reaction, negative implications, perception of public and responsibility for a given situation. In the context of public relations (PR), the concept of crisis communication is traditionally associated to efforts of PR staff to provide answers to questions, concerns and criticism coming from general public or media, and in doing so, limit negative effects of crisis on company. In the state of emergency, crisis communication deals with information on imminent danger and how people can help themselves – by protecting their lives, health or property, for instance. Therefore, crisis communication could be defined as sending and receiving messages that explain a specific event, identifying its possible consequences or outcomes and assuring specific information for reducing damage for affected communities in an honorable, honest, exact and complete manner.

Fearn-Banks (2007) suggests that crisis communication represents a dialogue between an organization and its public before, during and after an incident. In order to reduce negative effects on organization's image, details of strategic and tactic dialogue are carefully shaped. Successful crisis management includes crisis communication that can not only reduce or eliminate crisis, but can bring a reputation to the organization that is even more positive than it used to be prior to crisis.

On the other hand, UNWTO (2011) states that crisis communication is a process which exists only once the crisis emerged that is used for diminishing negative impact on organization and/or those for whom the organization is responsible. Such process requires instantaneous decisions and counter-measures by using all available means of communication in order to direct crisis development into positive direction and to have as much impact on crisis as possible.

Objectives of crisis communication are to utilize communication as an effective vehicle for protecting reputation and credibility of an organization and/or destination through proactively providing exact and timely information to key stakeholders.

For a given national tourist organization (NTO), key objectives of crisis communication could be to (Wilkis & Moore, 2003):
  - protect reputation and credibility of a country as a tourist destination,
  - protect reputation and image of the NTO,
  - persuade key stakeholders that the NTO responds to crisis in an appropriate and adequate matter, that is in the best interest of all stakeholders, and
  - provide support to crisis management strategy at the NTO level, as well as, on the national level.

According to Dreyer et al. (2001), the objective of crisis communication is in limiting damage, and providing fast and fair information to public. Similar to this view, Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior (2008) lists objectives of crisis communication as:
  - immediate, transparent, competent and trustworthy reporting by media and informing public on causes, impacts and consequences of crisis, and
  - strengthening of trust and credibility in order to enable successful crisis management and avoid possible crisis escalation.

Stakeholder groups in crisis communication

Crisis communication aims to have an impact on shaping attitude of media. Yet, in spite of huge importance of media, it is vital to reach other, equally significant, key stakeholder groups. First and foremost, this includes those who are directly or indirectly affected by the crisis. For an instance, in an accident that results in serious damage to a certain area, priority of informing goes to local population and nearby neighborhoods. The idea is to immediately inform all those affected in order to avoid speculation and reduce casualties. Lack of information for those key stakeholder groups that are affected can have disastrous effect on the crisis itself.

Certainly, when defining key stakeholder groups, it is essential to understand type of crisis and its expected impact. The list of key target groups given in the communication plan should include all types of public, *internal* and *external*, with whom an organization needs to communicate during crisis. Such list will vary among different organizations and it should be as inclusive as possible.

According to ASEAN Marketing Task Force (2007), there are four key stakeholder groups, including:
- media – local media, international media, business/financial media, on-line media, off-line media;
- government – consulates, embassies and missions, foreign tourist organizations, foreign government agencies;
- investors – global and regional organizations, such as, IATA, UNWTO, WHO, local and overseas business partners (hotels, facilities of selling food and beverage, wholesalers/retailers, tourist attractions, air-carriers, MICE organizers, etc.);
- public – domestic/local public, current visitors (and potentially their families and relatives), potential visitors.

Crisis communication to internal stakeholders

Crisis communication within an organization is often neglected in acute crisis. However, well informed staff will be more likely to successfully overcome crisis or limit its effects. If staff is well informed, there is almost no room left for speculation and second guessing.

Internal communication involves all types of sending messages among staff members. Employed personnel represent organization's greatest potential. Indeed, very often staff is in direct contact with the outside public. In the eyes of the public, they are the organization's spokespersons, that is, somebody who can create public opinion by delivering information to customers, distributors, media and public in general. Therefore, it is essential that employees are informed about crisis event before external stakeholders (Dreyer, 2001).

Sharing no information with employed staff, or communicating to staff with delay can (and it often does) have severe consequences for an organization. Employees are feeling insecure and may even have a fear of losing their jobs. By not sharing information with employees, this internal stakeholder group can easily become alienated and lacking motivation to take any kind of action. If they don't receive information internally, they will seek information externally. However, such information is often based on rumors and views of those who are not directly involved, potentially creating distrust in times when high level of identification with organization is a must.

Crisis communication to external stakeholders

When speaking of external stakeholder, they could be roughly divided into two categories – those who are considered to be direct or indirect victims of the crisis (individuals and their families) and those who are not directly affected by the crisis, but have an interest in knowing what and why happened (media and general public).

Each stakeholder who is affected (true victim) or that can be potentially affected (potential victim) is considered to be a victim. The damage can be physical, psychological and/or financial. When a crisis results in actual damage, reaction needs to be directed towards the victims. The message in such situation focuses on the victims and explains organization's efforts to assist the victims. For instance, during the Costa Concordia crisis in 2012, Carnival Cruise Lines was heavily criticized in traditional and social media because it was not engaging enough in assisting disaster victims.

The way in which an organization decides to approach affected victims will have a long-lasting effect on its image. Media will be favoring victims and their families because of the dramatic personal testimonies

that always draw attention of the general public. On the other hand, many victims or their family members will be willing to share their story. The first and the right thing to do in such situation is that organization takes care of direct and indirect victims by assisting them and showing as much empathy as possible.

Although, each crisis is different, there are certain services and procedures that need to be carried in relation to *directly affected victims*. Their duration will depend on the type and severity of the crisis. It is highly suggested to take the following steps (UNWTO, 2011):
 - Appoint an employee who will be in charge of gathering and maintaining data for contact and other relevant information about victims and their families immediately after the occurrence of crisis.
  - Define the procedure for giving first aid to victims and their families.
  - Appoint an employee that will be serving as a main contact person for the entire company.
  - Assure safe place that will be away from media and general public, where victims and their families can gather.
  - Assure free means of communication (landlines and mobile lines).
  - Provide psychological support to victims and if necessary, provide free short-term psychosocial counseling.
  - Cooperation with government in order to avoid travelling issue for those who lost their passports/visas.
  - Provide support in terms of transportation of the victims or their remains.
  - Company representative needs to have regular briefings and offer all updates to media regarding the state of victims and their families, as well as informing media on what is company doing to assist victims.

Another external stakeholder group that needs to be addressed is *media*. Media is constantly present in our lives and it plays a crucial role in informing general public on any given crisis or incident. Under the general term, it covers printed media (daily newspapers, specialized magazines, etc.), electronic media (radio, television) and "new" media (Internet, videotext, fax, etc.). Certainly, media has undergone huge changes since 2000. Auditorium for printed media and television is getting smaller and older. Many younger individuals are relying on the articles found on the Internet as the prime source of news. On the other hand, media auditoriums are getting more and more fragmented.

Although crisis may be different in their scope, Figure 1 shows a summary of typical course of crisis in the media. In general, it could be stated that the greater the intensity of crisis, the greater the interest of media. Such crises that draw a lot of public attention could be divided into three PR phases. Certainly, this model cannot fully reflect the complexity of crisis, but it allows us to get a better grasp on crisis and offers a useful framework for utilizing PR measures in the state of emergency (Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2008):

- Within the first phase, there is a sharp increase in media's interest. Reporting includes news and commentaries, as well as speculation and sensationalism. This phase lasts three to seven days.
- The second phase lasts for about two weeks. Media's attention stays on high level and reporting is characterized by reports on the event's background, new developments and comments on crisis aftermath.
- In the third phase, media's attention starts to fade out. Reporting consists of crisis consequences and new details on event's background. In about three weeks from the first report, the topic is not anymore in the news.

Figure 1: *Typical course of crisis in media*
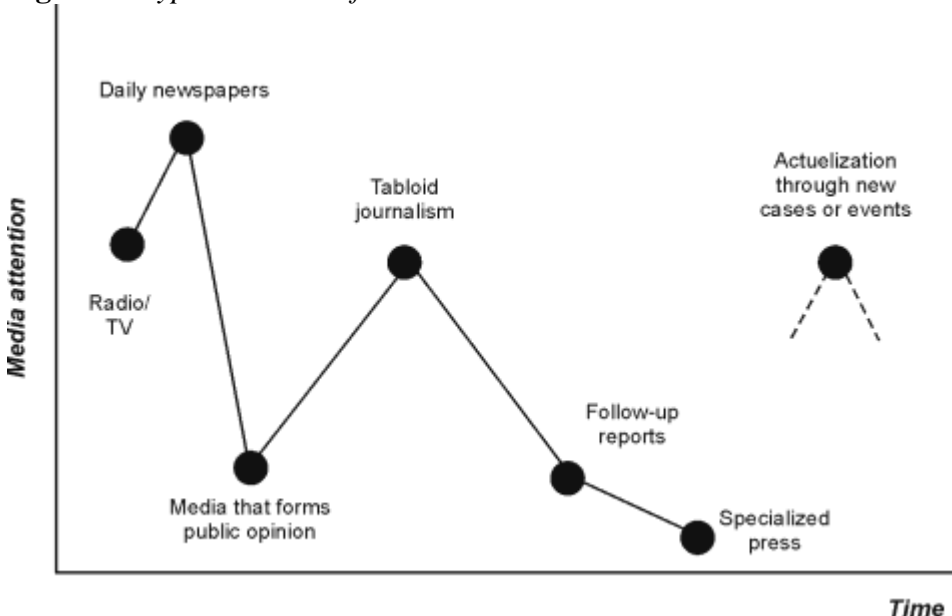
Source: *Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior (2008), Krisenkommunikation: Leitfaden fur Behorden und Unternehmen, p. 27. Available at: www.bmi.bund.de (access: February 26, 2016).*

If during the crisis a new significant event occurs, journalists and media will be switching to a new topic. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that media reporting is crucial for the course of crisis. The intensity of media reporting usually depends on the company's policy of sharing information.

If the organization's policy is to be open and transparent to media, then the media's need for information will be satisfied quickly resulting in shorter duration of reporting on crisis. On the other hand, if the company is defensive and is not readily sharing information with media, then the media will be in charge of creating news, which is often not the best choice for a company. Namely, this will result in not so favorable reporting for the company and the duration of reporting on a given crisis will tend to be longer.

Usually, the very first information on a given event or crisis is reported by media. Having this in mind companies and destinations must take a proactive role, leaving no room for interpretation by media. Therefore, cooperation and contacts with media must exist in the early stages of the crisis. Public's perception of the crisis and of the image of the entire company/destination is highly dependent on media reports. Media should be viewed as the vehicle of successful communication of a tourist destination or tourist organization with existing visitors, potential visitors, as well as, local community.

Many key stakeholders often get their first (and last) impressions on a tourist destination based on media reports. With a right approached, media offers a chance for an organization to explain circumstances leading to a crisis. In fact, media can become a great asset for the organization. Pre-requirement for this is nurturing contacts with a number of different journalists in normal times, because trust cannot be gained over night, but rather should be built over a longer period of time.

It is of a crucial significance that those responsible (PR staff, top managers, etc.) appear in media in a timely manner. Their statements should be balanced, clear and above all accurate, and presented in an understandable manner. Constant updating serves as the best barrier to many speculations and misunderstandings.

Organizations should meet all media's reasonable requests, so that facts are disseminated to the general public. In that way,

organization/destination positions itself as an open and responsible entity that works in the best interests of its customers and other stakeholders. The nature and dynamics of reaction to media reports must be directed by the scale of crisis or incident.

Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that media's interest for an event depends on a number of factors, such as (Dreyer et al., 2001): the level of sensationalism, competing news, place and time of the event, journalist personality and the overall philosophy of the news media/broadcast media.

Conclusion

Crisis communication is a central component of the crisis management. Through communicating, information is gathered, analyzed and finally processed into knowledge that is disseminated with others. Each phase of crisis management has its own demands in terms of creating and sharing knowledge. By utilizing three phases of crisis management (phase prior to crisis, phase during the crisis and phase after the crisis) we are capable to identify and then use different types of crisis communication.

One of the main objectives of crisis communication is to shape the attitudes of key stakeholder groups. The list of key stakeholders should involve all audiences, internal and external, with whom the organization needs to communicate during the crisis events. It is of particular importance that organization/destination understands how media shape public opinion. Therefore, immediate proactive reaction is required by organization in the case of the crisis outbreak in order to maintain the control over the information that is sent to general public. In the case that the organization decides to remain silent, rumors and sensationalist reporting will fill in the information gap, creating a potentially devastating situation for the image of organization/destination that will be difficult to improve in the days following the crisis.

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