10 E-communication in crisis communication: Best practice for tourism destination management organizations

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Introduction

The role of crisis communication is becoming increasingly important in disaster management, especially considering the impact that disasters can have on the image and reputation of tourist destinations. Although the literature has begun to focus on this topic in recent years, the greater number of natural disasters and the impact of new media communication tools, make this theme particularly interesting for further scholarly investigation. Developing an effective crisis communication strategy requires consideration of the role that local authorities, including destination management organizations (DMOs) play, the channels they use, and the content that should be included. Numerous authors have analyzed this issue from a chronological perspective in terms of the difference phases of a crisis starting from preparation and ending with recovery. However, a series of strategic requirements emerge alongside these phases for successful crisis management, including:

■ Cooperation with the media in providing information to the public; in particular, imparting a consistent message to all stakeholders to build credibility and preserve the image of organizations and destinations.

- Preparedness and the capacity to plan an effective communication response to a crisis in advance, paying attention to the specific characteristics of each case.

- The development of a public relations plan that creates a support network for the dissemination of communication across multiple channels facilitated by the web and Information Communications Technologies (ICTs).

This chapter presents a number of strategic approaches to crisis management communication for DMOs and tourism organizations. It discusses these approaches in alignment with the prevention and preparedness, response and recovery phases of a crisis. Within each stage, various communication approaches, including the use of e-public relations (E-PR) are presented. Examples of crisis-related communication practices from a variety of destinations around the world are incorporated to illustrate the application and effectiveness of these approaches.

Crisis communication: A review of current literature

As Ritchie et al. state, "Crisis communication is mainly concerned with providing correct and consistent information to the public and enhancing the image of the organization or industry sector faced with a crisis" (2004: 205). The key factors of an effective crisis communication strategy can be summarized as follows: existence of a crisis communication plan and recovery marketing plan; speed of development and implementation of the marketing plan; access to funding for marketing activities; consultation with stakeholders; consistency of messages; use of messages to correct unfounded destination image perceptions; and honesty and openness (adapted from Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008: 176).

Crisis communication has its origins in public relations (Palttala et al., 2012), and is typically associated with managing public perceptions to contain or limit the damage to the organization and its stakeholders (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). The emphasis in communication and public relations should be to limit the potential negative effects on current and future tourists' perceptions that position the destination as dangerous (Rittichainuwat, 2013; Kozak et al., 2007; Fall & Massey,

2005). In disaster management, public relations can improve the business capabilities of tourism destinations, but the level of stakeholder engagement – especially between DMOs and destination stakeholders will often depend on the stakeholder relationships that existed prior to the disaster (Granville et al., 2016).

Prevention/preparedness

Most scholars agree that preventive communication planning is required for successful post-crisis recovery strategies (AlBattat & Mat Som, 2013; Ritchie, 2008; Huang et al., 2008; Hickman & Crandall, 1997). According to Ritchie et al. (2004: 215), "the cost of developing a crisis management strategy would be far less than the cost of not having one, and a key aspect to any crisis strategy is crisis communication." These authors also propose a communication planning model that articulates the following essential criteria for crisis communication to be effective:

1) Respond quickly and develop two-way dialog with the media;

2) Provide all necessary and detailed information on what occurred;

3) Ensure communication is coherent and discourage the dissemination of unofficial information;

4) Be open and accessible at all times to offer clear and honest information about the crisis;

5) Acknowledge and express sympathy to victims and their families.

Communication before the crisis can help in disaster preparedness, particularly through targeted and well-planned information dissemination activities regarding future possible emergencies (Volo, 2008). Such activities may prove difficult, because tourist destinations are often multifaceted contexts in which many actors work, often without common guidelines (Splendiani, 2017). Therefore, communication activities must be based on cooperation, coordination, and collaboration among the various stakeholders (Martin et al., 2016). Likewise, as Curtis (2015) states, "Disaster preparedness and mitigation depend on how well governments and service organizations communicate and coordinate with one another." Analyzing the gaps in crisis communication, Palttala et al. (2012) highlight that coordination among local entities in terms of the development of effective crisis communication strategies is a challenge, because everyone tends to work in their own way. Therefore, the different roles related to crisis communication in the preparation phase should be clarified to avoid the risk of poor and inadequate cooperation. From the organizational point of view, several

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