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Crisis communication

Case study: Micato Safaris – marketing during a crisis

Figure 3.1: A typical Micato post on Instagram and Facebook during lockdown

Serving close to 5,000 clients a year, Micato Safaris is regarded by many in the luxury travel industry as simply the best in the world at what it does, offering scheduled itineraries and customized trips throughout East Africa, Southern Africa and India. Micato has a well-deserved reputation for giving guests an experience that goes far deeper than any other safari operator, with access to sites rarely open to tourists, while supporting the local economy in myriad ways.

For Micato, relationship marketing has always been a priority, and communicating with customers became even more important during the COVID-19 crisis. As international travel came to a standstill, Micato focused its attention on customer service, reaching out to all customers individually, processing refunds quickly or re-booking vacations. The company also continued with its marketing. “The first thing we did (compared to many of our competitors) was to maintain our marketing budget, although one advantage we have over competitors is that our marketing budget is quite modest. We learned after 9/11 that if you kept your foot on the gas you

What should I do with my hair these days? It's a question that comes up a lot, so we did a Zoom call this morning with some of our experts on the African plains. Here's one style that can be pulled off at home easily.

Photo: Micato guest Adriane Flinn



vulnerable. At the same time, Huru maintained its production of reusable sanity pads because as they say, “Periods do not stop for Pandemics.” “The emphasis on philanthropy through this period was a key driver of Micato’s mission to keep going through the crisis,” said von Neudegg.

Moving forward, von Neudegg expects that his marketing communications will change as people start to travel again. “We have to decide when we should shift our tone of message to be more sales-oriented. Certainly we will need to reassure our customers that they are in good hands.” Operations are also likely to change. “We will review every protocol we can get our hands on and establish best practices for each aspect of our business –airport greetings, lodges and camps, safari vehicle etc. We want the highest standard in each of those. Fortunately, our customers spend most of their vacation with us in big open spaces, and we can offer, for instance, fully private travel, with private helicopter transfers to a private safari lodge, and their only interaction needs to be with their guide and driver. So we are in a good position to come out of this and we are optimistic about the future.”

Sources: Personal communication with Marty von Neudegg, May 2020.

Introduction

An advertising campaign from Marketing Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic urged international travelers to “#staysafe” during the difficult times, while images of the idyllic Greek Islands allowed viewers to continue to dream and plan an escape to the stunningly beautiful country of Greece. Clever, one might think, sharing the message with the international tourist that better days are surely coming, while urging them to stay safe in the meantime. Yet some suggested that promoting tourism during the pandemic was borderline irresponsible (Spinks, 2020). In fact, quite a few destinations even campaigned against tourism – Visit Wales, for example, urged travelers to stay away. How should the travel industry have responded to this crisis? What was the correct tone of message? And what would persuade travelers to venture out of their homes once the coast was clear? This chapter will explore such issues, in addition to examining internal communications strategies employed by the industry during the pandemic.

The importance of communication during a crisis

Marketing in the midst of a global disaster is always a delicate proposition (Tinubu, 2020). Some organizations choose to go quiet, although previous crises have taught us that marketing is more important than ever at this time (Sapient, 2020). Micato Safaris, profiled in this chapter, appreciated this, having learned from 9/11. Getting the right tone with communications is critical. In North