

A Guide to Developing Crisis Management Plans

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Introduction

"The best defense is a well-planned offense."

The travel industry offers exciting opportunities for travelers to experience destinations across the globe. With this unique opportunity comes great responsibility, not only to your tour passengers, hotel guests or any visitor to your area, but also your company.

A crisis management plan is designed to provide guidelines for a practical communications system that is adaptable for any crisis situation. It should be a working document – continually updated as the industry, the world and your company changes.

One would assume that most companies have responded to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks by making crisis preparedness a high priority. However, according to the American Management Association, a recent survey on Crisis Management and Security showed that 51 percent of the organizations do not have a crisis management in place and 59 percent do not have written policies and procedures for crisis management.

With the incidents of Sept. 11 and with NTA and many of its members moving toward a global marketplace, the need for such a crisis management plan to be in place and for companies, regardless of size, to be prepared for the unexpected is more important than ever before. The following will provide a model for developing a crisis management plan and will outline procedures to follow in a crisis situation.

Getting Started

A crisis management plan should be part of an overall safety and emergency preparedness plan and a standard part of your overall strategic planning process. As important as dealing with any emergency situation is dealing with perceptions – what the public thinks happened. This should be planned in the same way you would plan for damage to property or injuries to people. Planning for perception will also protect your company's image/credibility and its ability to recover after a crisis.

Too often, companies make the mistake of waiting until a crisis occurs to plan a reaction. This gives the company the smallest chance of surviving the crisis without damage. Be prepared ahead of time and your company has the greatest chance to weather the crisis unharmed. The following will give you some easy-to-remember guidelines on getting started with your crisis management plan:

- **Predict** – Anticipate everything that could go wrong with your company. Identify the issues.
- **Position** – Decide what your position will be on these issues.
- **Prevent** – Take preventive measures.
- **Plan** – In case prevention doesn't work, prepare a plan for dealing with the crisis.
- **Persevere** – Follow your plan and stick to the positions you have taken. See the crisis through in a thorough and professional manner.
- **Evaluate** – If the plan is enacted, review the results to determine if there are other steps that can be taken to prevent the crisis from happening again.

These steps will help get your crisis management plan started and keep it vital and updated as your surroundings change.

Issue Identification

Identifying issues is an ongoing process. The crisis team should identify every imaginable issue and list them, starting with the most likely to happen. Crisis issues can generally be put in two categories – manmade or natural.

Manmade issues include violence, vandalism, accidents, operator error, negligence, defective equipment, poor planning and scheduling, strikes, fire, and illness such as food poisoning. Natural issues include things such as weather, earthquakes and communicable disease.

Some examples of potential issues to consider include motorcoach or plane accidents, robbery, death on tour, strikes, natural disasters, bankruptcy, terrorism or war, and travel scams. Even if such a crisis does not happen to your particular company, but happens to another tour operator or industry partner, be prepared to answer questions regarding your readiness should you face the same situation. The crisis team should continually look for potential issues and develop a plan of action should that issue become a reality. That will keep your crisis management plan up to date and vital.

Crisis Team

There are many steps in the development and implementation of a crisis management plan. The establishment of a crisis team is your first step. The team prepares the plan and meets regularly to update and test it. If a crisis occurs, this team will be prepared and in control.

A crisis team should include top management, operations personnel, public relations experts, legal assistance and insurance carriers. This list will vary from company to company and from crisis to crisis, but be sure to identify those who can feed into the process.

Smaller companies who do not necessarily have the resources or personnel to form a crisis team can still utilize this process to prepare for a crisis situation. The owner(s) can be their own team, following the same review and issue identification process listed above. It would be suggested that a list of advisors or professionals – such as attorneys, insurance agents, etc. – be made. These people can be called on for their particular expertise not only during the planning stage but also if a crisis should occur. Having the benefit of a large crisis team is nice, but it is not an absolute necessity in being prepared for the unknown.

The team, regardless of size, will be responsible for identifying all audiences that may be affected by each crisis situation. They can also designate contacts to gain specific information on each situation as needed. The crisis team is charged with identifying various scenarios that could adversely affect the company and developing a model or plan to follow in each. Prepared media statements, press releases, notification lists and other materials will help keep a crisis situation under control and calm the person who must deal with the situation.

Policy Preparation

When preparing policy statements, the following general principles can help.

- When responding to a crisis situation, the response should be honest, timely and direct. Having a prepared, approved and distributed policy document will help you resist the temptation to say “no comment” or have your company appear uncooperative or secretive during a crisis situation.
- Incorporate your ethical standards into the policy. Do the right thing, being fair to all parties to the best of your ability.
- Think now about how your business practices will be interpreted by the media during an emergency. In addition to specific policy statements, it is important to have background information on your company available. It is your

responsibility and in your best interest to provide current, complete information.

Preparing Specific Responses

After issues have been identified, specific responses for each should be prepared. Consider the following checklist when drafting position statements:

- Define the scope of the crisis – local, regional, national or international.
- Establish a unified response – one spokesperson, one person established to distribute statements to the media, etc.
- Keep the message simple, clear, consistent and tailored to each audience.

Understand that the media wants to know three things: what happened, why did it happen and what are you going to do to make sure that it never happens again? If you understand the media's psyche, you are on your way to finding a solution to the problem.

Once position statements have been prepared for each issue identified by the crisis team, include them in your overall crisis management document. In addition, prepare sample press releases for each issue in advance. It will be much easier to modify an existing, approved release than to start from scratch in the middle of a crisis.

In addition to the policy statements and press releases, anticipate questions that will be asked by the media. List the questions with developed answers that the crisis team is comfortable with and continually update the list as new questions are identified.

Crisis team members should each know their roles. Clearly identify job assignments and responsibilities and let those who will serve as spokespeople know so they can be prepared to jump into action should the need arise. Team members should have immediate access to each other at all times in the event of a crisis. Finally, the news media must be briefed on a regular basis. All phone calls from the media must be answered quickly and completely. Keep a media log listing the date and time, source, reporter, phone number and the question. Stick to your core message and deliver that message to everyone.

Post-crisis Review

As mentioned before, the crisis management process does not end once a crisis has occurred and been resolved. Each situation should be carefully evaluated. Look at the media coverage received, the resulting image of your company,

short- and long-term programs to rebuild image and review position statements for relevance and necessary revisions.

Only after a crisis management plan has been put to the test can the crisis team evaluate its effectiveness. If a company has been lucky enough not to have a crisis situation in which to test its plan, it should be constantly monitored to make sure the position statements are still relevant and no new issues have arisen. A crisis management plan should be a living document, undergoing constant evaluation and updates.

Examples

After identifying the issues, developing position statements and preparing information to utilize when facing the media after a crisis can be the most difficult aspect of crisis management. The following will provide some ideas and guidelines to follow to develop a position statement, press release, etc., for specific issues:

Motorcoach or Plane Accident:

- First, express your knowledge of the situation and your concern. For example, “We learned of the incident this morning and we are very concerned whenever we hear about any accident. On behalf of this company, I send our regards and best wishes for a speedy recovery to those who were injured.”
- Be prompt with information that you know, but don’t speculate. If details are not available, report that complete information is not known but that you understand the situation is being investigated further by the proper authorities.
- If the accident involves a motorcoach, point out that these accidents are a very rare occurrence. “The overall safety record of motorcoaches is very solid. Accidents associated with motorcoaches are lower than those involving other forms of transportation. Millions of people vacation by motorcoach each year. It is our commitment to provide them with the safest vacation possible.” (Motorcoach safety statistics can be accessed at <http://www.buses.org/MAINframeset.cfm?dir=industryprofile&path=index.cfm>).
- Stress all the steps you take to provide passengers a safe trip. “As professional tour operators, we stress safety to the drivers who operate our motorcoaches. They receive extensive training and are required to obtain a special driving permit.”

Robbery:

- First and foremost it is vital to have a prompt and honest response to the media regarding the details of any robbery, especially when reiterating information they have from the police report. Should the media ask for details

of the robbery that you are unfamiliar with, refer them back to the police report – never speculate.

- It is also important to point out that this is a very rare occurrence. To illustrate this point, you may want to add a statement such as: “I’ve/We’ve been in business ___ years and have served/transported more than ___ people and this has never happened on one of my tours/in my hotel/at our attraction before.”
- Point out that although the situation was very unfortunate, there is a bright side in that no one was hurt (if that is the case). Additionally, you might want to relate a testimonial from a member of the group if you know of one. For example, did anyone express relief that they were not driving in their own car or that they were grateful to be in a group situation when the robbery occurred?
- It is important to note that the passengers, the driver and the company were not negligent in any way. Should they ask if it is unsafe to travel or visit a location where a robbery occurred, remind them that crime is inexcusable under any circumstances and is a societal problem – not one limited to the travel and tourism industry.
- If asked what you as a tour operator, tour supplier or DMO intend to do to further protect travelers, inform them of all the measures you currently take to ensure the safety of your passengers/visitors. Follow with any additional plans you intend to implement.

Natural Disaster – Weather:

- If a natural disaster, such as a tornado or flood, occurs while on tour or in your area, you must remain calm and professional in order to reassure your passengers/visitors of their safety.
- It is important to point out that this is a rare occurrence. Relate statistics and facts regarding the location of the disaster and the damage caused, as well as the history of such disasters. For example: “There has not been a flood/tornado of this magnitude in this area for ____ years.”
- Point out that although the situation was unfortunate, there is a bright side in that no one was hurt or damage was minimal (if true). You may also wish to relate testimonials from tour passengers or visitors if you have them.
- Tour operators can reduce the impact that a weather-related disaster has on their passengers by contacting the appropriate DMO before arriving in the area. The DMO can then alert the tour operator to any existing weather problems.

Fuel Crisis:

- A fuel crisis could drastically affect a tour company. In a dire situation, a company would not be allowed any fuel to conduct motorcoach tours, or in

- a lesser crisis, fuel prices could skyrocket. With either situation, you need to have an optimistic, yet realistic, statement prepared. In it you should report your knowledge of the crisis, how it has affected your operators and when you expect things to return to normal.
- If the fuel crisis has occurred because of environmental concerns, perhaps the situation warrants your support. Relate that although the crisis has negatively affected your business, the preservation of the environment is a big concern.
 - Note any steps that your company has taken to secure alternative modes of transportation.
 - If the crisis causes fuel prices to skyrocket, you may be asked how much of the burden is being passed on to your consumers. Respond that tour prices may increase, however, taking a tour vacation remains a bargain. For one price you still receive accommodations, most of your meals, sightseeing and educational opportunities, and an experienced, knowledgeable tour director. Beyond that, point out the convenience and safety involved with tour traveling.

War or Military Conflict:

This scenario is somewhat different from the others in the fact that you and your company have little or no control over what happens. The same speaking guidelines could apply to this situation, along with the following:

- Stay informed. During the Sept. 11 crisis, many members found NTA Online as a great way to get to-the-minute information as well as utilizing the forums to call for help from fellow members. A great sense of community and willingness to help was born from that situation and would be there in the case of a similar situation.
- The first thing to remember is that no person or company can **guarantee** a customer's safety. Companies can take every step necessary to ensure that all guidelines are met and every possible precaution has been exercised. However, it is this fact that makes advertising and promoting safety and utilizing that as a selling point dangerous.
- Emphasize business as usual and share travel experiences. Discuss how having a tour operator making travel plans ensures that travelers have someone to contact, no matter what happens. There is a travel professional working behind the scenes to make certain their trip is fun, relaxing and secure. Talk about group travel and how sharing experiences with travelers of similar interests can enhance the entire experience. This promotes safety in numbers, without actually invoking thoughts of fearful situations.

The bottom line when facing the media and preparing press releases is to be honest and open with any and all questions. Say it like it is. Point out the bad as well as the good and inform them of the steps your company has taken or will take to ensure that such a crisis be avoided in the future. State your company's position and then support that position with fact. Honesty and preparedness will help your company weather the crisis and keep your reputation, and that of the packaged travel industry, unscathed.