

Building tourism resilience: Lessons from the Asian Resilience Summit

Resilience is surely the topic of the hour, particularly in Sri Lankan tourism circles following the Easter attacks. Sri Lanka was in fact an example drawn up at the recently concluded Asian Resilience Summit held in Kathmandu, Nepal. Organised jointly by the Global Travel & Tourism Resilience Council and the Nepal Tourism Board, the summit is the first in what is hoped to be a continuous series of resilience-focused events to be held in Asia over the coming years.

Australia's Market Development Facility (MDF) was at the summit in May, looking for insight on how best to continue our work in supporting Sri Lanka's tourism recovery. The program works in tourism and related sectors in Sri Lanka.

The summit presented a wealth of information on building resilience in tourism, driven by Nepal's rebuilding efforts following the devastating earthquake of April 2015. We share below four key areas which could be of use to Sri Lanka's tourism sector: some of this can be applied to the post-crisis context, while some would be useful for future crisis management.

The defining motto for good crisis comms is "One narrative, one voice"

Crisis communication

Crisis communication is a business best practice that can be planned for in advance, as well as implemented during an actual emergency. It is a layered approach on how to build a narrative around a potential or ongoing crisis and applies to a set of actions taken during and after the crisis, and the steps required to ensure that the message coming out of your organisation is exactly what you want it to be.



There is no real way to predict the nature or exact timing of a crisis - natural or manmade. However, having a plan in place helps. For this, a business can look at:

The actual message - *What will you say?*

While there is no real way to predict an emergency, the business can prepare the type of message that can be communicated in the case of one and decide on who would deliver it (e.g. CEO, Head of Corporate Communications, General Manager, PR rep). There is also value in having a back-up plan if the designated person is unavailable (See 'Action' below).

Timelines - *When will you say it?*

An established communication timeline can provide guidance during crisis, keeping in mind that regular official communication from the business can help reinforce the message. Here, the narrative would differ according to the 'stage' of the crisis - during or after. It is also important to determine what stage of the event is to be considered the 'end' of a crisis to determine the flow of the narrative.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CRISIS

Although people still refer to traditional media (TV, newspapers and the radio) as the initial point of information during a crisis, this is shifting online towards social media, where user interactions and real-time updates are valued over official channels, especially in the face of conflicting messages being shared 'officially'. With the proliferation of social media comes the threat of 'fake news', where bad actors use crisis situations to spread misinformation with varying motives. Investing in and using social media analytics can be useful in this space. Analytics tools can help identify topics being discussed, types of users discussing these topics and the locations of the discussions. Using this information would allow business to cater its message to specifically target and counteract the impact of false narratives or misinformation.



Sri Lanka was cited as an example where bad-actor-influenced fake news, as well as the official response to this misuse of social media, caused further unrest after the initial crisis. The Sri Lankan Government opted to shut down social media after the Easter Sunday attacks in a bid to curtail misinformation and social unrest, but the ban had the opposite effect. It moved the misinformation offline and further eroded public perception that the crisis and the events after it were being handled inappropriately by the government. Although the government's decision may have averted a bigger crisis, professional opinion was that such drastic measures are generally counterproductive in the long run as people would seek and opt for workarounds via use of software such as VPNs.

Action - *Who will do/say what?*

Clearly earmarking responsibilities prevents the spread of rumour and the possibility of the narrative being 'hijacked' by untrained/unprepared actors.

When deciding on who will speak to the public or media, consider:

- (i) Are they the most credible person(s) to deliver the message?
- (ii) Are they trained and capable of conveying the message effectively under duress?
- (iii) Is there a suitable alternative in case they are unable to be reached during a crisis?
- (iv) What channels will be used to disseminate the message?

Most of the time, no degree of theoretical planning can prepare an organisation for the actual crisis. However, during the crisis, the business's communication should ideally focus on:

Transparency - All stakeholders need to hear the same message. Ensuring the key players (management, greater staff, clients) are in the loop will ensure message consistency and avoid it being diluted. It will also prevent to some degree the spread of misinformation from your own key players.

Integrity/Credibility - The key to ensuring that your message is at the top of the conversation during a crisis is to be both on the offensive (by tackling and correcting misinformation) and the defensive (by sticking to the agreed upon message you would like to share and by providing evidence where possible).

Dual role - Your message should focus on being able to **inform** people of what is going on and **set expectations** of how the situation is being handled.

Post-crisis communication is a crucial step towards the next stage, resilience marketing.

Resilience marketing

Resilience marketing is a post-crisis step taken to communicate that normalcy has been restored and that a destination is safe for tourists. The most successful instances of resilience marketing put the customer at the forefront; this is especially effective in a social-media-savvy world, where user-generated content has a huge impact on customer perceptions. This positive feedback can also be used



to turn a destination post-tragedy into an opportunity; a good example of this is the Jianchuan Earthquake Museum in Cheng Du, China, which contains some of the most valuable cultural relics from the devastating 2018 Sichuan earthquake and preserves many ruins and quake-relief items. This establishment is now a crucial tourist stopping point for both local and international travellers.

THE VEGAS EXAMPLE

When a lone gunman opened fire on a crowded concert on the Las Vegas strip in Nevada in 2017, public perception of the popular tourist destination took a bad hit. However, Las Vegas tourism stakeholders made a concerted effort to counter this and return Vegas to its former glory through a well-crafted marketing campaign.

- Stakeholders saw that social media users were circulating several fake photos of the incident. They used this trend to gather positive stories and narratives of solidarity with the victims, which they then circulated on social media.
- The post-crisis message marketed was strongly that an incident cannot be allowed to define a destination.
- Stakeholders acknowledged those who had been there for them during the good times and thanked them for being there during the bad as well - building a link between the community and destination and establishing trust.
- In a bid to show that normalcy had returned, organisers went ahead with the planned annual Las Vegas Marathon a month after the shooting.

“Relationships matter, you have to develop relationships in economies that rely on tourism. To be a growth engine for the economy, you have to be part of the community and the community has to trust you”

Michael Goldsmith, Former VP of Marketing, Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority

Engaging the community

While communication and marketing are effective tools to craft public perception and build more resilient business models, tourism is an industry that is deeply embedded within local communities, and so it is meaningful community engagement that can assist considerably in helping the sector grow into a stronger version of itself.



Reducing the barriers of interaction between the local community and visitors can greatly aid in building resilience. This is in general frowned upon by formal businesses, as it is seen as a possible threat to revenue streams, and most tourism businesses feel that Corporate Social Responsibility suffices; however, being willing to share the actual business with the community is a crucial step towards long-term resilience. Positive effects of community engagement include:

- Allowing travellers to experience local life and culture, which adds authenticity to the overall travel experience. This is especially valuable as industry trends shift towards experiential tourism.
- Creating a personal connection between travellers and community, which is a powerful peacebuilding tool to foster understanding between different cultures.
- Encouraging community members to offer tourist-targeted goods and services that may not be offered by traditional accommodation or tourism providers (e.g. souvenirs, local cooking classes). This could potentially create new jobs and bring in additional income for the community, strengthening the overall tourism ecosystem.

Engaging the community in tourism also results in including a wide group of people, occupations and industries in the value chain. This diversifies a destination's tourist offering - and in turn creating a stronger tourism ecosystem that can absorb shocks better because it caters to different audiences and markets.

“The word ‘crisis’, in my own native language, actually has two connotations. One is about the disaster, about the crisis. But also the second part of the same word means opportunity. We must turn a crisis as it happened in this part of the world to opportunities we must catch.”

H.E. Jing Xu, Regional Director, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

Data-driven steps

Using data is a tourism best practice, even in periods of relative normalcy. However, it is an essential resilience-building tool in a post-crisis context. Multiple data sources are now readily available to tourism businesses – ranging from official published statistics to online travel portal analytics. This data is invaluable when investigating whether information on offerings is easily accessible for those seeking it and whether the online infrastructure is in place to book it.



Travel marketing is undergoing a seismic shift, from destinations/travel operators marketing the destination to actual traveller experiences and feedback informing and influencing other like-minded travellers. Travelers use online information, social media content and personal experience to make travel destinations. In this context, data is key. Analysing the traffic on and around a destination means a business can effectively craft and channel its product and its marketing.

Digging deeper, TripAdvisor recommends that, beyond looking at traditional traveller

KENYA AND THE SHIFTING MODEL

The Kenyan capital of Nairobi has seen several terrorist attacks in the past few years, most recently and notably the January 2019 attack on a hotel. However, the attacks did not receive overt media attention and travellers, too, showed less reluctance to travel to Kenya. This was a result of the general traveller profile shifting to that of Free Independent Travelers (FITs) who evaluate information and make decisions independently and not as reliant on tour operators as the package tour segment. This is seen as the result of customers digesting information differently and market being more resilient. Moreover, it is an example of how travellers are moving from ‘official’ narratives to social media content.

demographics, businesses should try to identify the intent behind purchasing decisions. This allows the business to fine-tune its current offering and/or create products in parallel that would capture their attention in addition to what they were initially seeking. The trend in tour package travel is shifting towards dynamic tours where destinations, accommodation and activities are selected by the tourist themselves and not necessarily the tour operator.

In conclusion, investing in the staff and management training, data tools, and promotions and marketing required to build resilience no doubt presents a challenge to the Sri Lankan tourism industry, especially in its current fragile state. It can be strongly argued, though, that it is an investment worth making. Embedding resilience in business models can only have a positive pay-off for Sri Lankan tourism in the long run.

Market Development Facility (MDF) is Australia’s flagship private sector development program. In Sri Lanka, MDF’s focus is on diversifying tourism with new products and services and supporting authentic Sri Lankan products. MDF is implemented by Palladium in partnership with Swisscontact.

