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For tour ops, crisis management is another day at the office

By Michelle Baran



If you're ever freaking out, call a tour operator. Sure, they might be freaking out too, but they have an amazing ability to seem calm in the face of adversity.

The thing is, they're used to it. From 9/11 to swine flu, from the volcanic ash cloud to the Egypt revolution, for years they've been sorting out the travel messes that such crises leave in their wake.

So when faced with the aftermath of the devastating Hurricane Sandy, tour operators -- which are dealing with every facet of travel, from flights to hotels to ground transportation -- had the crisis management skills necessary to tackle the logistical challenges created by the displacement of tens or hundreds of travelers.

"It's a big, complicated matrix as we try to sort out where everybody is and what can we do," said Richard Launder, president of TravCorp USA, which owns several tour operator brands.

TravCorp, like many tour operators, has a crisis management team it puts into place to handle the large volume of calls required when disaster strikes. With Sandy, the company had done so two days in advance, anticipating the storm's impact.

The Globus Family of Brands calls it their "Incident Response Team," comprising senior-level employees representing every facet of the company, from the president to call center staff, explained Steve Born, vice president of marketing for Globus.

Unfortunately, tour operators have had numerous opportunities over the past decade to test and improve upon their crisis management systems.

"Over the years, we've put this process into practice many times," noted Born. And, he added, "We've learned some key things along the way."

Some of the keys to managing a crisis, he said, are communication (between everyone involved: the company, the ground operator, the tour guides, the travel agent, the client, etc.); the ability to act quickly and efficiently in a fluid situation; and having some pre-established decision guidelines.

If an incident is particularly large or complex, Globus has a team specially dedicated to the incident and creates a hotline that goes straight to that team. In some cases, tour operators have to employ additional staffing so as not to cause any disruptions to their regular business operations.

So, while they didn't say how much, there are clearly some additional costs involved for every crisis.

Perillo Tours, which is based in Woodcliff Lake, N.J., and had employees impacted by Sandy, pointed out the importance of having a strong virtual workforce strategically placed throughout the country to ensure that the company's call center is always staffed.

Not surprisingly, all the tour operators used the opportunity to plug their crisis management capabilities as a big benefit of working with a tour operator. Even in a crisis, they're calmly toing the company line.

These guys might have a second career in stress management.

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