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Understanding the Cruise Industry's Responses to Health-Related Crises: A Case Study Approach

Introduction

The cruise industry is one of the fastest growing sectors within the tourism and hospitality industry (WTO, 2010). In spite of the increasing popularity, there has been a continued interest in traveling albeit an increased exposure to various types of health risks, such as seasickness, nausea, and foodborne disease (CDC, 2014). Oftentimes these health risks can develop into health-related crises to which both passengers and crew members are vulnerable (Henderson, 2007). The outbreak of health-related crises can exert epidemic effects on the cruise industry and therefore have catastrophic impacts (CLIA, 2014). The direct outcome normally manifests itself as damage to personal health and well-being of the traveler; while indirect outcome can take the form of customer dissatisfaction, impaired brand images of cruise lines, and distorted images of destinations (CDC, 2014; Crimson Hexagon, 2013). To cope with these challenges, scholars have highlighted the importance of crisis management practices as well as effective crisis responses (Coombs, 2014; Ritchie, 2008).

Crisis management is a topic of growing importance within the hospitality and tourism industry (Ritchie, 2008). Several studies have examined different sectors' crisis management practices, such as destination management (e.g. Pennington-Gray et al., 2010) and the lodging industry (e.g. Chen & Law, 2003). Surprisingly, the cruise industry remains an underexplored territory at present. Similarly, health-related crises have recently attracted an increasing amount of scholarly attention (Henderson, 2007), but very few of the existing studies have examined the cruise industry's crisis management practices that involve health related crises. To fill this gap, this research presents a case study that is concerned with the health crisis norovirus and the cruise lines' responses to that crisis. Specifically, two research questions are addressed: (1) How did cruise lines respond to the health crisis norovirus? (2) How effective are these responses?

Theoretical Development

Health-related Crises and the Cruise Industry

The continuous outbreaks of health-related crises, such as norovirus, Ebola, and influenza, can produce profound impacts on the cruise industry. A recent report shows that the presence of a crisis on cruise ships not only can influence passengers' impression of a cruise line, but their intention of purchasing a cruise product, likelihood to visit a cruise destination, and perception towards the entire cruise industry (Crimson Hexagon, 2013). Although the industry has established several policies that focus on passengers' health and safety (e.g. pre-boarding health screening, fire protection measures), the narrow scope on risk management is not enough (CLIA, 2014). Instead, the cruise industry needs to implement comprehensive crisis management plans to help practitioners properly handle various crisis situations and become better prepared and responsive towards health-related crises.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is one of the major theoretical frameworks within the area of crisis communication, and has been used by many studies (Avery et al., 2010). Effective crisis response strategies can help organizations protect their reputational assets and brand images during crisis situations, reduce economic losses, and accelerate the recovery process following a crisis (Coombs, 2014). The SCCT suggests that effective crisis responses should match the crisis situations and cover three elements: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management strategies (Coombs, 2014)

Theoretical Contribution

The contributions of this study are two-fold. First, this study operationalizes the SCCT variables within a tourism context, which can provide useful references for future research. Second, this study serves as one of the early attempts that applies a crisis communication theoretical framework to the cruise industry and evaluates the industry’s crisis management practices. This attempt can not only provide a critical review of the current crisis management practices within the industry, but also offer recommendations to the practitioners, with a transformation from theories to real life actions.

Methodology

This study chose norovirus as the context considering health-related crises. Norovirus is one of the leading causes of food-borne diseases in the U.S., and about 20 million people get sick each year because of norovirus (CDC, 2014). Recently, due to the continuous outbreaks on cruise ships, norovirus has received an increasing amount of public attention. The World Health Organization declared norovirus one of the major public health crises that associated with cruise travels (WHO, 2014). Additionally, this study selected Princes Cruises as the major subject. Princess Cruises is one of the oldest and the best-known names in the cruise industry, and currently is the third largest cruise line in the world. However, norovirus has become one of the major problems for Princess Cruises – a total of 40 outbreaks were reported and over 4000 people have been affected from 2004 to 2014 (CDC, 2014). Therefore, an analysis of Princes Cruises’ crisis responses can not only present the current condition of crisis management practices within the cruise industry, but also provide important lessons for other practitioners.

The sample was collected using a keyword search (e.g. “norovirus” ”Princess Cruises”) over the database LexisNexis. The timeframe is from 2004-2014. Twenty one responses were included and each response served as a unit of analysis. A SCCT framework (table 1) is developed to guide the data analysis process.

Table 1. Crisis Communication Strategies

Instructing Information	Basic Information	Basic information about the norovirus	e.g. The illness was confirmed as Norovirus, which is highly contagious and typically transmitted from person to person
	General Approach	General approaches that cruise lines use to prevent the norovirus outbreaks	e.g. All our ships have stringent ongoing cleaning and hygiene policies in place as a part of normal onboard operations
Adjusting Information	Sympathy	The cruise lines expressed sympathy for guests’ experiences	e.g. We are sorry this incident has impacted our guests’ vacations.
	Corrective Actions	The cruise line took actions to address the incident	e.g. We will increase cleaning and disinfection procedures according to their outbreak prevention and response plan
Reputation Management	Denial	Include strategies of attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat	e.g. The company believes the June 19 passengers were exposed to the virus by a passenger who brought it aboard.
	Diminish	Include strategies of excuses and justification	e.g. It’s not a cruise ship disease. It happens elsewhere
	Rebuild	Include strategies of compensation and apology	e.g. We will give the 3,078 passengers on the ship full refunds and a 25 percent credit on a future cruise
	Bolster	Include strategies of reminding, ingratiation, and victimage	e.g. The health and safety of our crew and guests is our top priority.

Adopted from Coombs (2014)

Findings and Discussion

The results suggest that Princess Cruises did not address all the norovirus incidents. In most cases, it is not until after multiple incidents occur that the cruise line will take action and

officially respond to the crisis. However, when responding, Princes Cruises incorporates all three necessary components as suggested by the SCCT -- instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management strategies. As different reputational management options have been employed, it is noticed that strategies of diminishing and rebuilding are presented more often in these responses. To rebuild the company image and to assure the passengers, Princes Cruises usually provides various kinds of compensations to passengers, which include refunds, future credits, and complimentary hospitality services. To diminish the negative influence, Prince Cruises normally justifies the appropriateness of their measurement.

Table 2. Key Findings

Year	No.. of norovirus outbreaks	No. of Responses	Response Rate	Response Strategy			
				Instructing Information	Adjusting Information	Reputation Option	Reputation Strategy
2004	8	4	50%	✓	✓	✓	Diminish, Rebuild
2005	4	0	0%	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2006	5	4	80%	✓	✓	✓	Rebuild
2007	3	1	33%	✓	✓	✓	Denial
2008	2	2	100%	✓	✓	✓	Rebuild
2009	3	1	33%	✓	✓	✓	Diminish, Rebuild
2010	0	0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2011	4	1	25%	✓	✓	✓	Denial
2012	7	5	71%	✓	✓	✓	Diminish, Rebuild
2013	1	1	100%	✓	✓	✓	Rebuild
2014	3	2	67%	✓	✓	✓	Rebuild, bolster

Implications

Overall speaking, the Princes Cruises 'responses to the norovirus outbreaks can be regarded as appropriate, since they cover all necessary elements and feature the rebuilding strategies (Coombs, 2014). To increase the efficiency, practitioners can incorporate multiple strategies in the responses, such as enhancing and bolstering. Both bolstering and enhancing can remind the public of an organization's good works, add positive information to the crisis situation, and therefore aid in protecting the reputational assets (Kim & Liu, 2013). Additionally, the industry should be aware that crisis responses need to be not only effective, but exhaustive. All the incidents should be addressed quickly, with responses that are strategic, clear, and appropriate. With the rise of digital media, practitioners should also devote communication efforts to social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, user-generated sites), and facilitate communication with the concerned passengers and other potential customers (Coombs, 2014).

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