POST-DISASTER RECOVERY MARKETING MESSAGES FOR TOURIST DESTINATIONS

Gabby Walters, UQ Business School, University of Queensland
Judith Mair, UQ Business School, University of Queensland
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Primary Motivations behind willingness to visit Queensland at the time of the floods</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Common Disaster Recovery Marketing Messages</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Climate change, terrorist attacks and natural disasters are all potentially devastating for tourist destinations. Some of the climate change related impacts that are projected to increase over the next 50 – 100 years include more frequent severe weather events (for example; hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons), the increased risk of bush fire in some areas of the world, brought on by reduced rainfall, and conversely, the increased risk of flooding in other areas (IPCC 2007). Terrorist attacks such as 9/11, the Bali bombings and the attacks in London on 7/7 are rare, but nonetheless cause significant and long lasting issues. Finally, natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanoes, whilst not necessarily more common than previously, have the potential to damage or destroy ever growing towns, cities and infrastructure around the world.

The terms ‘crisis’ and ‘disaster’ are often used interchangeably, but it is important to note that they refer to slightly different issues, and that each has its own definition. The most commonly cited definition is that coined by Faulkner (2001: 136), who stated that a disaster is ‘a situation where an enterprise or destination is confronted with sudden unpredictable catastrophic changes over which is has little control’. A crisis on the other hand is ‘a situation where the root cause of the event is, to some extent, self-inflicted through such problems as inept management structures or practices, or a failure to adapt to change’ (Faulkner, 2001: 136). This chapter examines natural disasters and whilst there may be some elements of poor planning and management that reveal themselves during a disaster, this chapter will not examine crises.

It is important for tourist destinations to be aware of their vulnerability to crises and disasters, whether man-made or not. Disaster management plans should be integrated into all tourism business and operating plans at both a national and operational level. Yet, despite the obvious risks, many tourism organisations and businesses are not well prepared when a disaster strikes, and rely instead on ad hoc responses (Ritchie 2008; Walters and Mair, 2012). Research to help tourism destinations assess how best to recover is relatively scarce, and in many cases very descriptive (Carlsen & Liburd 2008). However, literature is building in this area (Prideaux, Coghlan & Falco-Mammone 2008), and research is beginning to demonstrate that such ad hoc measures, especially when it comes to marketing, may be ineffective and in some cases do more damage than good.

Sadly, there have been many disasters around the world which have affected tourist destinations, and therefore there have been plenty of opportunities to witness recovery efforts and assess the effectiveness of marketing communications following such disasters. We do know that it is vital for destinations and operators to have disaster management plans, yet we also know that many do not have such things. However, research has not kept pace with the number of disasters that have occurred and while we have some ideas as to how to help a destination recover following a disaster, we are not yet in the position to make any substantive claims about the best way to do this. This chapter examines visitor responses and post-disaster marketing communications in two case studies – the Brisbane and Queensland floods of 2011 and the Black Saturday Victorian Bushfires in 2009. In doing so, this chapter reviews a number of marketing techniques and messages that have been used in disaster-struck regions, and identify those messages that appear to be more successful, and those
which perhaps not be employed.

DISASTROUS EVENTS AND THE TOURISM MARKET

The importance of the destination image held by potential tourists is universally acknowledged given its influence on the tourist’s decision process and ultimately destination choice (Gartner 1993; Pearlman and Melnik, 2008; Lehto, Douglas and Park, 2007; Armstrong and Ritchie 2008; Pearlman and Melnik, 2008; Machado, 2010; Dolnicar & Huybers 2007; Beirman 2006; Faulkner 2001; Walters and Clulow; 2010). The downturn in visitor numbers following a disastrous event provides increasing evidence of this. Following the 2004 Tsunami, tourist arrivals to Phuket decreased by 50.4% (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2005a); visitor numbers to Victoria declined significantly following the Black Saturday bushfires (DRET, 2009); whilst Christchurch, NZ experienced a loss of 1 million guest nights in the year following the 2011 earthquake (Carlville, 2012). The global availability and often sensationalist coverage by the media can rapidly lead to the formation of negative perceptions and it is these perceptions (which may not reflect reality) that have the potential to dissuade tourists from visiting the destination (Cavlek, 2002; McKercher & Pine, 2005; Kozak, Crotts & Law, 2007). The management of such perceptions represents the biggest challenge for tourism destination marketers (DMO’s) and one possible explanation for this is that little is known or understood as to the precise reasons why tourists choose to stay away from disaster prone areas (even after the immediate danger has long passed) and for those that choose to visit regardless, what motivates them to do so. The following case study presents a snapshot of the behavioural responses and subsequent motivations behind the tourist’s decision to travel to or avoid a destination struck by disaster.

Case Study 1: The Tourism Markets Response to the Queensland Floods

Between December 2012 and January 2011, a series of floods hit the Australian state of Queensland and over seventy five percent of the state was underwater. Prolonged rainfall accompanied by the mismanagement of Queensland’s waterways and storage resources (Queensland Floods Commission 2012) led to the loss of 33 lives and the inundation of 29,000 homes and businesses. Over 2.5 million people were affected by the disaster which was estimated to cost the state in excess of 5 billion dollars. Much of the state was officially declared a disaster zone and the majority of the state’s main thoroughfares remained closed for up to seven days leading to a significant shortage of food and water supplies in the short term. The tourism industry was expected to experience a loss of up to 590 million dollars (IBISworld, 2011) for the year following the event and acknowledged their most immediate challenge as being the extensive damage to the image and perceptions held by their tourism market (Tourism Queensland, 2011).

Critical to a DMO’s success in managing consumer perceptions following an event such as this is an understanding of the intervening effect that disasters have on the tourist’s behaviour. The aim of this project was to gain an understanding of the tourist’s psychological and
behavioural responses to the 2011 Queensland floods. An online survey was distributed to members of Queensland’s interstate travel market. A database comprising 12,000 members of this population was purchased from a commercial database provider and a total of 2110 usable responses were obtained and revealed the following information.

To gain some idea of the impact that the flood activity had on the travel behaviour of visitors who had intended to visit Queensland at the time of the floods, respondents who did have plans to travel to the region were asked whether they cancelled, postponed or went ahead with their trip. Of those who had travel plans, only 14% cancelled their trip, 40% postponed their arrangements until a later date and 46% of respondents were not deterred by the flood events and went ahead with their trip as originally planned. Respondents were also asked to provide an open ended explanation as to what led to their decision. Accessibility to and within the state was the most common deterrent for those who cancelled their existing travel plans. The fear of being in the way, or hindering recovery efforts was also a common theme among the respondents. Many open ended comments also presented a collection of words and phrases such as ‘scared’ and ‘fear of the unknown’, which suggested that those who cancelled their trip may have done so out of fear. A review of the qualitative responses also suggested that those who cancelled or postponed their trip did so out of concerns for their safety. Perceptions regarding the weather in Queensland at the time of the floods also led to the cancellation of travel plans.

Those respondents who stated they would be prepared to visit Queensland despite the floods were asked to rate their motivations or reasons behind their decision. These are listed in the table below.

**Table 1- Primary Motivations behind willingness to visit Queensland at the time of the floods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I would like to help the QLD tourism industry recover</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I feel sorry for the QLD people</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I would like to witness the community spirit seen on the media</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I believe I could offer some assistance</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I believe QLD would be much the same</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I believe it would be quieter</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I would like to see how things have changed</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I would feel guilty if I did nothing to help the industry recover</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I believe it would be cheaper at this time</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I would like to see for myself</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I would like to see the extent of damage and destruction</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two of the three primary motivations of those willing to visit the state at the time of, or immediately following the floods appeared to be driven by a sense of compassion and empathy for the Queensland community and the need to assist in the recovery process. The third motivation is testament to the good news stories presented via the media regarding the local community spirit and comradery that evidently appealed to the visitor market. On
examination of the least motivating factors, it appears that curiosity or the need to witness the extent of the damage first-hand, perhaps a type of thanatourism (Lennon & Foley 2000) is not a motivating factor for the Australian visitor market. The prospect of accessing a cheaper holiday as a result of the disaster is also unlikely to motivate the tourism market.

**Marketing Implications**

Based on the results, the following recommendations were put forward;

Given access is clearly a consideration, DMO’s and those responsible for the dissemination of disaster related information need to avoid ‘regionalising’ the affected areas and refer to each specific affected area individually when communicating to a national audience. The tourism market should also be made aware of those areas not affected by the floods so they are able to consider alternative Queensland destinations should they need to re-evaluate their current travel plans. DMO’s should also work closely with the media and other organisations likely to relay disaster related information to ensure tourists are adequately informed in terms of the safety status of the destination. Honest and factual information from a trusted source are essential to the eradication of unnecessary fears and other negative perceptions that may arise as a result of sensationalized media coverage.

Those responsible for the management of the State’s natural resources, i.e. beaches and national parks, should also ensure that regular information regarding their safety and accessibility is available to the interstate tourism market. One of the main reasons interstate visitors chose not to visit Queensland at the time of or immediately after the floods was due to their perceptions regarding bad weather. In the case of flood activity it appears logical that one might assume that this is accompanied by consistent rainfall when in fact this was not the case for Queensland. To counter these perceptions, regular updates should also be provided regarding the weather conditions – particularly if favourable.

Since the two primary motivations of those willing to visit Queensland at the time of floods were centred around firstly, assisting the tourism industry to recover and, secondly, their sympathy for Queensland people, it is recommended that DMOs employ empathetic themes when compiling their advertising messages that are likely to tap into this psychological disposition of wanting to help. Media should also be encouraged to present a more balanced approach to their coverage of the event with emphasis on the ‘good news’ stories that are based on the community spirit and comradery that has developed as a result of the disaster.

---

**THE ROLE OF MARKETING POST DISASTER**

Clearly in the event of a disaster, the first thoughts and actions are directed towards the immediate recovery efforts – rescuing people, assessing damage, stabilising buildings and infrastructure, and caring for those injured and displaced. However, once the dust has settled so to speak, it is not long before governments and agencies begin to consider how to help the
affected area recover economically. Tourism is often seen as a good way to boost the economic recovery efforts, and as Carslen and Hughes (2008) point out, one of the first questions operators want answered pertains to how long it will be before visitor numbers return to normal. This can be problematic on a number of levels. In the first place, the disaster may have destroyed or badly affected existing basic infrastructure such as roads, communications and power supplies. Further to that, the disaster may also have reduced the destination’s capacity to cater for visitors, that is, hotels, shops and restaurants may be damaged or operating in a limited way (Sanders et al 2008). Finally, it is likely that the disaster will have had some impact on the tourism product itself – beaches, scenery, attractions and activities (Cioccio & Michael 2007). Nonetheless, the role of marketing communications in restoring visitation to the destination is undeniable (Lehto, Douglas & Park 2008). Communicating with the tourism market may have a number of different goals, from correcting misperceptions about the scale of the disaster, to restoring confidence in the destination, reducing perceptions of risk to repairing the destination image. In each case, it is important to craft a marketing message that is likely to achieve the goal of the destination marketer.

In a review of the existing literature on post-disaster marketing for tourist destinations, Walters and Mair (2012) identified nine major themes that have been used in the past as marketing messages to encourage tourists following a disaster. Examples of the types of messages DMO’s are likely to use when employing such themes are demonstrated in Case Study 2. Research has showed that some of these messages are more successful than others, but it is worth remembering that each disaster is unique and therefore there is unlikely to be any one message or strategy that will work in every occasion. Nonetheless, the most commonly used message types are discussed below.

**Open and Ready for Business**

This type of message is one of the most commonly used following disasters, and reflects the keenness of DMO’s to see their destination’s visitor numbers return to normal as soon as possible. ‘Business as usual’, or ‘open and ready for business’ messages have been used in a number of settings, including New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina (Pearlman & Melnik 2008), Far North Queensland following Cyclone Larry (Prideaux et al 2008), in the Maldives after the Boxing Day Tsunami (Carslen & Hughes 2008), and in Canberra following 2006 bushfires (Armstrong & Ritchie 2008). More recently, Queensland’s destination marketing organisation employed this message in their bid to prevent tourists cancelling their Queensland holiday plans at the time of and immediately following the 2011 floods (Walters, Mair and Ritchie 2011). There have been some criticisms of such messages, particularly where it seems clear that the destination is far from ready to cater for visitors. In the case of Queensland for example, their ‘open for business’ marketing attempts were being transmitted at the same time as requests from the State’s Premier for charity aid and assistance to help the region of recover – this mixing of messages is not good for the overall destination, and touches on an important point, that of the identified lack of communication between various stakeholders that govern a destination (Xu & Grunewald 2009).
Solidarity Messages

In the aftermath of a disaster, it is normal for adults to experience numerous powerful emotional reactions (Vastfjall, Peters and Slovic, 2008; Lazarus, 1991; Raholm, Arman and Rehnfeldt, 2004; Walters and Clulow, 2010). These feelings that occur may also have an impact on everyday decisions (Vastfjall et al., 2008, Schwarz, Zuma and Clore, 1988) and the impact of emotions on the tourist’s decision process is well documented (Crouch and Louviere, 2001; Kahneman, 1995; Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Tuan Pham, Pracejus & Hughes, 2001). Several destinations have used messages intended to evoke an emotional reaction among potential visitors. Examples are ‘Canberra needs your support’; and ‘By visiting the Maldives you are helping us’. These types of messages are also intended to counteract any guilt on the part of visitors associated with the thought of getting in the way of recovery efforts. Such beliefs were identified by Walters & Clulow (2010) in their study of Victoria, Australia following the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. Lehto et al (2008) also suggested that visitors anticipated an overwhelming recovery process which put them off visiting a disaster-struck destination.

Community Readiness

It is important to remember that when a disaster strikes, the local community has to bear the brunt not only of the initial physical impact, but also the prospect of ongoing economic hardship due to loss of businesses and income (Pearlman and Melnik, 2008, Walters and Clulow, 2010). Therefore, it may seem that getting tourists to return as quickly as possible would be the main aim. However, as noted above, tourists may feel that they would be intruding on locals at a bad time or imposing on people in difficult situations. One way to get over this is to design marketing messages that reassure potential visitors that the community wants them to come. Promoting community readiness in this way is potentially an effective message – ‘we are ready to welcome you’ was used in Sri Lanka following the Boxing Day Tsunami (Robinson & Jarvie 2008).

Messages to restore confidence

One of the key issues with marketing a tourist destination post-disaster is that the market may have lost a degree of confidence in the affected destination. This is often based on the reports that they have seen in the media, which may be misleading, and are often accused of being sensationalised (Hystad & Keller 2008) or perpetuating disaster myths (Faulkner 2001). On some occasions, media coverage has led to confusion regarding the extent of the disaster by exaggerating the extent of damage or the size of the affected area (Walters & Clulow 2010). Lehto et al (2008) suggest that the first marketing message should aim to restore confidence in the minds of potential visitors. The central theme of this message type focuses on reassuring visitors that the effect of the disaster is less than they think. Examples of messages which have been used in this context include ‘our heart’s still going strong’ (Armstrong & Ritchie 2008 - used to promote Canberra after bushfires in 2004); ‘New Orleans – never better’ (Pearlman & Melnik 208 - following Hurricane Katrina) and ‘Never Better’ (Prideaux et al 2008 - used in Far North Queensland following Tropical Cyclone
Larry). It is important however, that this message approach is only considered if destination marketers are confident that the majority of spaces tourists are likely to occupy remain relatively unaffected.

Curiosity Enhancement

Sanders et al (2008) highlight the importance of portraying a good news story, with less focus on the destination needing help, and more focus instead on encouraging people to return to the destination, to see it ‘with fresh eyes’, or to see the state of the destination for themselves. Research suggests that messages that stress curiosity enhancement are likely to be an effective approach to post disaster marketing. Ashworth and Hartmann (2005) for example claim that unusual natural phenomenon, such as hurricanes and floods, pull tourists to experience the unusual event and satisfy human curiosity – which according to Mayo and Jarvis (1981), is simply a need humans are born with. Also of relevance to this approach is the concept of ‘thanatourism’ or ‘dark tourism’. Seaton and Lennon (2004) propose that the motivation to participate in this type of tourism is driven by an ulterior fascination with death and or misfortunes of others. While the majority of tourists who engage in this form of tourism are normally attracted to sites of mass or individual death, internment sites and memorials or those that offer symbolic representations of death, one of the main driving forces is that of curiosity (Lennon and Foley, 2000). Rittichainuwat (2008) in her study that investigated tourist motivations to visit the island of Phuket following the Boxing Day Tsunami provides support for this proposition, revealing that curiosity was one of the primary motivations among Thai and Scandinavian tourists to visit the destination.

Messages using visitor testimonials or celebrity endorsement

Testimonials have been used successfully by a number of destinations. These can be a celebrity endorsement, or testimonials from guests who have recently visited the destination. Guest testimonials have been seen as particularly credibly by potential tourists (Carlsen & Hughes 2008), and as such may be of considerable value to destinations. However, in our celebrity obsessed society, an endorsement from a well-known figure may capture the viewers’ attention, increase public awareness of the destination and encourage consumers to purchase the product, or visit the destination (Avraham & Ketter 2008). Swerdlow and Swerdlow (2003) suggest that celebrity fame, bought or contrived, has certain advantages and risks. A celebrity-product association can capture a viewer’s attention, increase the public’s awareness of the product, and cause consumers to purchase the product endorsed. In contrast, celebrity-products associations can be very costly and risky based on the potentially volatile image, nature, and credibility of the spokesperson used. Examples of celebrity use in endorsing destinations struck by disaster include Olympian Grant Hackett’s endorsement of Queensland’s Sunshine Coast following the 2009 oil spill (Koopman, 2009) and Hollywood actor Brad Pitt following Hurricane Katrina (Moore, 2010).

As well as designing marketing messages to encourage tourists to visit the destination, there may be occasions where the disaster forces a destination to make changes to its overall tourism strategy, perhaps in light of changes to the built and natural environment, or perhaps
in response to low numbers of visitors following a disaster. There are a number of strategies that destinations could consider, however, the most commonly used are pricing strategies, and product diversification strategies.

Short term discounts

A number of disaster-affected destinations have used a pricing strategy to help them to recover. In some cases, the manipulation of this element of the marketing mix may be in the form of short term price reductions, whilst in others it may be more about adding value to the existing product. As Lehto et al (2008) point out, on occasions, the product may be damaged or operating below capacity or below standard, and as such, a discount is required to reflect the changed circumstances. However, in most cases, short term discounting is generally considered to be a last resort – operators are already suffering from financial difficulties due to loss of business, and discounting new business will not help them to recover (Beirman 2006). Adding value with offers such as stay three nights, get the fourth free, or buy one get one free on attraction entrance tickets may be a better option. Research has not yet identified the long term impacts of post-disaster discounting on tourism business, but it may be the case the operators find it difficult to resume full prices.

Product Diversification

Another option open to operators and destinations is product diversification. It has been suggested that festivals and events might offer an opportunity to encourage visitation and may be a drawcard for those who have not visited the destination before (Lehto et al 2008; Sanders et al 2008). For example, Victoria’s key destination marketing organisation, Tourism Victoria took this approach following the Black Saturday Bushfires and provided financial and other incentives to fire-affected destinations to organize and host an array of community festivals and events with the expectation that intrastate tourists in particular would be drawn to these regions (Walters and Mair, 2012). Other options may be to utilize existing attractions in a different way, for example offering special interest tours to disaster affected areas (examples might be taking biologists to see the re-growth and recover in a burnt out forest, or taking architects and town planners to see the results of an earthquake). However, these are likely to be small-scale and short term options and research has not yet fully engaged with assessing the success or otherwise of such strategies.

The following case study provides some insight into the effectiveness of these post disaster marketing messages, the tourists’ attitudes towards post disaster marketing communications and the timeframe in which tourists are likely to return.

Case study 2 – How and when to market a destination post disaster: The case of Gippsland Victoria
A study by Walters and Mair (2012) tested the nine post disaster marketing messages in terms of their effectiveness in encouraging visitation to a disaster affected destination. Using Gippsland, Victoria and the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires as the context, the study employed an experimental design to test the effectiveness nine mock print advertisements (see Table 2). The messages in these advertisements were designed by the authors for demonstrative purposes in consultation with a DMO from the region of Gippsland. Gippsland was one of several Victorian regions to be affected by the Black Saturday Bushfires in 2009.

Table 2: Common Disaster Recovery Marketing Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad Number</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Open and ready for Business</td>
<td>Gippsland, open and ready for Business – come, be inspired!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Solidarity / Empathy</td>
<td>Gippsland needs you now more than ever, come and visit, support our tourism industry and let us inspire you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Community Readiness</td>
<td>Gippsland, ready to inspire you.... .....we wouldn’t invite you if we weren’t ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Restore confidence and change</td>
<td>Gippsland, still going strong Less than 5% of Gippsland was affected by the Victorian bushfires. In fact, some of our most inspiring national parks and destinations remain untouched. All our roads are open and for 99% of our operators it’s business as usual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>misperceptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Curiosity Enhancement</td>
<td>Gippsland, come and see for yourself.... Gippsland’s stunning natural attractions are regenerating faster than ever, visit now and be inspired by the fascinating landscape mosaic of fire recovery mixed with the usual Gippsland splendour.... don’t miss this opportunity to experience the resilience of nature..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Short term discounts/price reductions</td>
<td>Gippsland is on Sale! Visit our website now to take advantage of our special promotional offers and save up to 50% on accommodation, attractions and food and wine produce. Find a variety of inspiring packages starting from just $200 per couple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Visitor Testimonial</td>
<td>“....If you want a peaceful country or coastal break at one of our most precious destinations, now is the time to go....” My family and I visited Gippsland immediately after the fires. Whilst it is right that there has been some fire damage in Gippsland, this has only affected a very small part of the region and most of the areas and attractions that we love remain untouched. We were able to go swimming, boating, hiking and participate in all the things we love. Basically, it was like nothing ever happened and the local tourism operators were so happy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to see us.
Darrell Jones, Bayswater

8  Celebrity Endorsement  Denise Drysdale...one of our biggest fans
“I’m a great fan of Gippsland and I was so saddened by
the news of the bushfires in the region. However, having
just spent a number of weeks travelling throughout
Gippsland I was surprised to see that many of
Gippsland’s fascinating landscapes remain relatively
untouched and it’s pretty much business as usual as far
as the tourism industry goes. I strongly urge the
Victorian people to come and see for themselves just how
resilient Gippsland’s wondrous natural landscape is...”

Denise Drysdale

9  Product Diversification – Festivals and Events  Look what’s happening in Gippsland in February
Our events calendar is full of fantastic reasons why you
should let yourself be inspired by Gippsland this
February. Whether you’re a race goer, a music lover or a
fan of fiery foods we have it all going on in Gippsland
this summer (events calendar included)

The study’s results indicated strong support for the use of celebrity endorsement when
attempting to persuade visitors to visit a disaster affected region. The authors stress however
that it is important that the chosen celebrity is recognizable by the target market as having
some affiliation with the region so potential tourists are able to establish a clear relationship
between the region and the celebrity. An advertisement communicating community readiness
also proved to be the most effective condition in evoking an emotional response among
tourists, which according to previous research can often lead to a travel decision (Walters,
Sparks & Herington, 2010).

In contrast to the existing literature, the study found that messages enticing curiosity, as used
for example in the case of the Victorian bushfires in 2006 (Sanders et al 2008) were not well
received by respondents. In addition, one of the most commonly used messages – ‘open for
business’ also performed relatively badly in this study with responses indicating that the
messages lacked credibility. The study suggests that price discounting is unlikely to capture
the tourist’s attention and consequently generate interest in the destination.

The timeframe within which tourists will return to a disaster struck destination is often one of
the biggest concerns for DMO’s and operators alike. This study revealed, that is the case of a
bushfire event, tourists generally are likely to return within 12-24 months following a
disaster and it would therefore be difficult for this particular destination to encourage new
visitors within 12 months. Nevertheless, the study did suggest that regular visitors (who have
visited five or more times in the past) are more likely to return within 6 months of the disaster
than irregular visitors (i.e. those who have visited only once).
The final issue tackled by the study pertained to the question, raised by Beirman (2006), that is, whether it is in fact appropriate for a destination to continue promotional activities during and immediately following a disaster. Surprisingly, the study indicated that tourists believe that it is not inappropriate for destinations to continue their marketing and promotional activities in the wake of a disaster, but rather destinations should carry on with its efforts to attract visitors.

Lessons Learnt

This study has several valuable implications for those responsible for disaster recovery communications. Evidence has been provided to support the continuation of marketing and promotional activities over the course of the disaster recovery period. In particular, the fact that frequent visitors are more likely to return in the short terms strongly suggests that relationship marketing be the focus of the initial promotional activity. Operators need to be encouraged to maintain visitor databases, identify their loyal consumer base and within the initial six month period make contact with their regular clientele and encourage their patronage. When marketing a destination struck by disaster, destination marketers should consider integrating celebrity endorsed messages that communicate community readiness into their post disaster recovery campaigns. Not only should the chosen celebrity be recognizable by the target market as having some connection with the region, the advertising campaign be accompanied by public relations activity in the early stages of development to educate the market about the celebrity - product association. It is strongly recommended that post disaster communications messages be factual in nature and provide an honest representation of the region’s status in its attempts to reassure tourists that the destination is ready to host them. Finally, open for business campaigns should not be employed until the community is ready and willing to receive tourists. When this time arises, the open for business style message should be exchanged for a promotional message that communicates community readiness and short term discounting strategies should not be employed at any time throughout the disaster recovery phase as a means of encouraging visitation.

SUMMARY

This chapter has highlighted a range of issues, which are relevant for DMO’s that seek to restore their destination image following a disastrous event. In the case of the 2009 Queensland floods it was evident that tourists woud not necessarily avoid a destination that has been struck by disaster should they perceive that by visiting the region at the time of or immediately following the event they will be able to assist in some way. Tourists exhibit a propensity to refrain from cancelling or postponing their travel particularly if they are reassured the destination is accessible and or they are planning to visit family and friends. To this end, open communication between the destination and the tourism market is encouraged and it is imperative that the information communicated at this time is perceived as both factual and honest.
This chapter discussed a range of different message options DMO’s can employ in their attempts to encourage visitation and prevent unnecessary cancellations. Looking at the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires, a celebrity endorsed message appeared to be the most effective means of communicating with the market post disaster. It was noted however, that the chosen celebrity must have some affiliation with the destination and be widely recognized as doing so. Messages communicating community readiness were also given some credibility, however DMO’s are advised against the dissemination of such messages too prematurely to avoid instilling a sense of distrust among the market.
REFERENCES


