

Inside Tourism Column

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Managing a crisis

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The resilience of the Christchurch and Canterbury tourism sector and the way the whole industry has swung in behind them in the aftermath of the 4 September earthquake has been impressive.

The first priority of TIA and other agencies such as Tourism NZ and Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism in the days following the 7.1 magnitude shake was the wellbeing of operators, and ensuring international markets were getting accurate and timely information. TIA's Quake Break Facebook page provided a forum where operators from outside Canterbury could post special offers for all the people of the region traumatised and exhausted by the earthquake. That page has attracted more than 300 fans and loads of great offers.

Now the priority is letting the world know that the region is back in business and ready to welcome visitors.

It is also important that once the dust has settled we evaluate how the tourism industry and our own businesses managed this crisis. What went well, where we could improve, and lessons for the future.

Even without the prompt of a strong earthquake, spring is a good time to ensure safety systems are up to speed. Incident and accident prevention is a great place to concentrate some initial efforts: Do you actively drive a positive safety culture? Are your standard operating procedures comprehensive and accurate? Is the training and checking up to date? Is safety reporting a fully functioning and supported system in your operation?

While we all take our duty of care seriously, risk can never be removed entirely. Businesses are subject to a huge range of variables (the greatest of which is human behaviour) and therefore our safety systems must include an effective crisis plan to help us manage abnormal and potentially stressful situations.

While all plans have some must-haves, it's important to note that preparing a crisis plan for your business is an art not a science – it must look and feel right for your operation. The development of a good plan represents only half the job – its effectiveness will be measured by your team's confidence in its contents and their ability to use it to best effect in a real crisis.

When you are reviewing (or writing) your crisis plan prepare procedures for a broad range of possible scenarios e.g. natural disaster, visitor death or serious accident, but avoid the temptation to prepare a template for every possible situation – that just leads to a confusing and unwieldy tool.

Don't underestimate the impact of media enquiries during the crisis – a strategy for managing the media (while under pressure) should be addressed in the plan.

A good plan will come to nothing without high levels of awareness by those who may have to use it. Training can involve everything from complex, well-planned scenarios involving emergency services to simply asking team members testing questions on a daily basis as a way to assess their knowledge and build their confidence.

An effective crisis plan is part of good business. It's also great for morale as team members feel the confidence that comes with professional preparedness. TIA members can call us for more information on how to go about this.