



Crisis Management: Are We Safer Today?

By Tina Stark

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Today, more than at anytime in our country's history, tragedies and disasters have invaded our psyches in greater proportion and made us acutely aware that managing crises in our cities has taken on unprecedented attention. Is it any wonder, then, that people in the hospitality community are finding that taking precautions in this environment requires a new discipline. Accordingly, the mental processes required to deal with major dilemmas not only necessitate sound management practices, but also creative out-of-the-box thinking.

As high-profile public buildings serving thousands of guests each year, hotels and convention centers need to be particularly well prepared for emergency and crisis situations. Particularly in the wake of tragic disasters like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, properties and convention visitors bureaus who take a proactive approach to crisis management as a "not if, but when" challenge are far better prepared to respond, minimize negative perceptions and outcomes and recover faster with their reputations and corporate images intact.

Potential crises in hospitality are varied both in scope and impact and, while not an all-inclusive list, would include:

- Fire
- Terrorism
- Disabled communication or operational systems
- Natural disaster
- Widespread infectious disease or food-borne illness
- Employee violence/sabotage
- Bomb threats
- Cybercrime (reservation systems)
- Unethical behavior at the management level
- Damage to a facility's reputation/brand

Are these kinds of events unlikely? Certainly. Do they occur? Yes. How prepared is your facility?

Preparedness First!

Identifying the type or types of crisis and the audiences affected by each must be communicated to all the parties involved in event planning. A thorough crisis management plan enables an organization to respond and communicate in a crisis promptly and appropriately. At its core, the crisis management plan identifies types of

crises, the audiences affected by each who must be communicated with, and a set of emergency responses to be carried out.

“One of the biggest challenges is trying to plan for every type of scenario,” says Donna Karl, CMP and Vice President of Client Relations at the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). Having experienced the Katrina disaster first-hand, Karl helped spearhead development of a post-Katrina crisis management plan in effect today which integrates the crisis response of the city, the CVB and individual properties in use today.

“I even heard people say ‘well, what’s the point of an emergency plan since it’s impossible to plan for every type of crisis.’ Although it’s true that crises are unpredictable, there are definitely common threads and common response activities that take place in every emergency. You can plan for those common areas as well as create crisis-specific plans,” she notes.

Building a response team

A crisis team or emergency response team is formed so that, in the event of an emergency, individuals with specific responsibilities are familiar with the plan and are prepared to respond. Creating a crisis team is an important step that helps to eliminate miscommunication, confusion and inefficient redundancies.

Crisis planning experts agree that the best hotel and convention center plans have the full support, if not the full participation, of the executive level of the property’s management structure. For example, the crisis management team at the New York Marriott Marquis Hotel includes individuals at the highest levels of management, security, operations and communications.

According to Lacqua Cammareri, Convention Services Manager at the Marriott Marquis located in bustling Times Square, there is a top-down commitment to emergency planning at the hotel with a crisis team that includes the general manager meeting with New York City officials on a regular basis.

“The hotel is very involved and in the know about what’s going on in the area,” she says. “The hotel’s GM is the area GM for all of New York and is also vice president of the Times Square Alliance.” The Alliance is a non-profit economic development organization which coordinates several public safety initiatives. These include a force of 50 trained and unarmed Public Safety Officers who patrol the area 24/7 and maintain radio contact with New York City Police as needed, bomb-sniffing canine units and security procedures to guard against vehicle bombs.

This is a test

Ongoing training, education and testing is the only way to know—for sure—if your planning is effective. Simulation of various emergencies should not only test your plans but allow for creative on-the-spot solutions to the unexpected that might occur. Successful response to a crisis is dependent upon how rapidly and efficiently a crisis team is able to evaluate the situation, recognize the true ramifications, address the crisis and communicate to its various internal and external publics. The team should test the plan should through ongoing training and/or simulation of an emergency situation to ensure familiarity with procedures and to probe the plan for weaknesses.

The New Orleans CVB is part of a response team that includes city and law enforcement officials, state officials and federal FEMA and Homeland Security representatives. “We all got together right after Katrina to develop the emergency plan and now we review and physically practice it annually before hurricane season and look for ways to improve it,” explains Karl.

Cammareri observes from her previous professional experience that, while most properties have some degree of emergency management procedures, crisis planning is an area where properties may vary in terms of readiness.

“At the Marriott Marquis we have mandatory crisis management training and fire drills every year that we all have to complete. Most properties have emergency plans, but not all practice them like we do here,” she says.

Mission critical communication

As important as the forethought and preparation behind a crisis management plan is, part of the unpredictable and chaotic nature of a crisis is that it will not happen precisely as planned. A crisis team’s readiness and organization, in terms of team members’ knowledge and command of the defined roles each will play ultimately comes down to the ability of team members to communicate with each other and with internal (employees and guests) and external audiences (the media, law enforcement, utilities, regulatory agencies, investors and boards) during a crisis.

In fact, communications is often the first aspect of a crisis to go awry due to lack of planning or infrastructure failure such as a power outage. “With Katrina, the city, the New Orleans CVB and individual facilities had emergency plans, but what we learned was that those plans weren’t talking to each other.” Karl explains. “We didn’t realize that we wouldn’t be able to communicate well and you really need to in a crisis.”

The convention and visitors bureau has become a key cog in communicating with a variety of hotels, convention center, and other targeted venues to which the CVBs come in contact on a regular basis. To that end, the CVB now has extensive contact information on each hotel, including cell phones, emails and home communications. When they need to push information out to the city’s hospitality community they have a communications system to do so as well as posting information on their website.

Karl has also stepped up emergency planning with meeting planners bringing meetings into the city. “From the hotel executive’s point of view, they need to be sensitive to the fact that, in my experience, only 10 percent of the association and corporate meeting groups coming into their facilities have an emergency plan for their meetings. We share our plan with them and offer assistance to help them create a plan,” Karl explains.

Collaboration that works

In hospitality, the areas of safety and security are an important opportunity for properties and CVBs to share ideas and work collaboratively. Where will you send guests, employees in an emergency? Who’s talking to whom to get instructions, vital information, etc? No plan works if all the planning is done independently. “Integration of an individual facility’s crisis plan, a CVB’s plan and a city’s plan is something I constantly preach,” says Karl. “Facilities need to look to their CVBs and find out what’s in place.

Where would they send their guests in an emergency? How would the CVB help evacuate their guests from a city or an area? Hoteliers should be asking these questions, if they aren't already."

Avoiding a crisis may not be possible in today's world. Planning for it creatively, collaboratively, and honestly, however, can provide a way to mitigate it's severity and bring about improved relations and communication skills that will help all parties in the long run, as well as make working relationships better for it.

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