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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- PREPARE
- PRIORITISE THOSE AFFECTED
- RECOGNISE THE CRISIS
- TAKE RESPONSIBILITY
- REMEMBER WELFARE AND WELLBEING
- EXERCISE AND TEST

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WHAT HAPPENED?

July has been a month of record-breaking temperatures and extreme weather events across the globe. In late July a series of wildfires swept across the island of Rhodes with further fires in Greece, Corfu and parts of Italy. The extreme heatwave for many days with 30degree and higher heat led to conditions for wildfires.

Thousands of holidaymakers on Rhodes were forced to flee hotels alongside local people leaving their homes. Some holidaymakers were left to sleep in schools, other shelters or even at the airport. The situation also saw some tourists arrive for their break only to be moved straight to emergency shelters due to the fires.

Airlines faced criticism for not cancelling flights to the island and being slow to react to the situation. Travel operators said they were monitoring the situation and the UK Government took the position that much of the island was unaffected, so it was for people and travel operators to decide whether to go on holiday to Rhodes and other affected areas.

Evacuation of holidaymakers did get underway with flights scheduled to bring people back to the UK in the biggest evacuation in Greece's history. A United Nation report from 2022 stated that extreme wildfires will be 50% more common by the end of the century, and there will be a 14% increase by 2030.

What was the communication response and what could it have been?

It is not the first time that Testing Times has looked into the emergency communication response to such events. But it is clear that this is something every organisation and business needs to be prepared for and to consider how it will impact on their operation.

There was criticism of the lack of communication from travel operators to holidaymakers. Jet2 was slammed for using the same statement for every question they were asked on social media. On the news reports, tourists complained of a lack of information after facing some terrifying situations. There was also confusion about whether holidaymakers should travel to the island or not.

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The Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office of the UK Government was also criticised for a slow response and a lack of up-to-date information about the developing situation. However, minister Andrew Mitchell said they were doing everything they could to help the thousands of holidaymakers and had sent staff to the area.

The advice was for travellers to keep in touch with their operators and to make the decision themselves. At the same time the Greek Government were playing down the impact of the wildfires stating that they had affected just part of the island of Rhodes. This left holidaymakers in a difficult position looking at whether they travelled and if they didn't what it would cost them.

During the heatwave governments across Europe were urging people to stay cool and keep out of the worst of the heat during the day.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Be prepared – the impact of extreme weather, including heat, floods, wildfires and cold, should be one of the risks all businesses are preparing for. Thinking through the impact these events could have will allow you to be ready when they happen.
- Think communication – put communication at the centre of the crisis response so that those caught up in events are being given regular and updated information about the situation and what they need to do.
- Streamline processes – moving quickly needs to have a simple governance structure particularly in authorising the release of information.
- Take responsibility – don't wait for others to communicate on your behalf take the initiative to ensure that your are communicating directly to people.
- Money should not be the main consideration – people need to be encouraged not to put themselves and their families in danger just to avoid a financial hit.
- Welfare matters – holidaymakers were affected by what they had seen so ensure there is welfare support build into the emergency response plans.
- Recognise the crisis – still the most important step and it is vital to see the situation and be ready to act decisively.
- Avoid being a disaster tourist – some people want to go to the eye of the storm or be in the middle of a crisis. Put measures in place to discourage this activity, and make sure you are not adding to the challenge of the disaster response.
- Exercise and test – decision making under pressure is an important skill and something that needs to be continually tested. Consider carrying out exercises to look at the response to extreme weather conditions.

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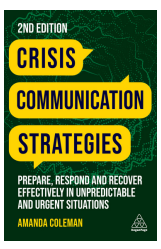

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