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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- HAVE A PLAN
- PROVIDE CLEAR WARNINGS
- EXPLAIN THE ACTIONS
- SPEAK FREQUENTLY
- RIGHT MESSAGE, RIGHT PEOPLE, RIGHT TIME

WHAT HAPPENED?

At the conclusion of 2023 lots of people were planning to take trips home or abroad and a combination of issues led to plans being affected. A combination of storms and bad weather, damaged infrastructure and industrial action impacted on many plans. Storm Gerrit brought heavy snow to Scotland and even a mini-tornado to part of Greater Manchester. The Channel Tunnel crossings were halted due to a leak in a tunnel, and London Euston was closed for some time after the storm affected lines. In addition to those there were rail strikes in the UK and industrial action in France and Geneve.

People were forced to try and make alternative arrangements using other forms of transport or taking different routes to attempt to get to their destination. It was hard to find a route that had been unaffected by one of the problems.

The weather and strikes would have caused problems at any time of year but the days ahead of the Christmas celebrations are always some of the busiest in the year. This meant that many more people were affected and needed to make alternative plans either staying in hotels, changing the route they would take or waiting until routes were back in operation.

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COMMUNICATION

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

Despite heading into the holiday period there was extensive communication about the storms and the predicted impact as well as media reports of the damage that had been caused by the weather. The messaging focused on urging people to stay safe and avoid travelling during the worst of the weather or to consider travelling at alternative days and times to avoid the disruption.

Travellers have become more used to industrial action which has taken place at many points on the railways in 2023 but the action in Europe did come as a surprise. Planned engineering work also added to the problems for many although communication around this could be planned some weeks in advance.

The issue was how quickly information could be shared and what contingency plans could be put in place so close to the holiday close down. People needed clear advice on how to stay safe in the storms. After the mini tornado in Greater Manchester the Met Office issued a further tornado warning but it was not clear what should be done, if anything, to prepare.

With a number of storms arriving in quick succession, getting people's attention about what to do and how to respond was becoming increasingly problematic. Raising awareness of how to be prepared continues to be a huge challenge for businesses.

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What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Extreme weather should be discussed – there needs to be a broader discussion about what to do in what weather events, and of how people can be prepared
- Avoid overuse of warnings – be clear what each warning means to people and what action needs to be taken
- Focus on support to customers and service users – how can you provide alternatives and how can you make sure they are kept informed? This needs to be the core approach for the communication when people's plans are affected
- Share updates frequently – keep talking to those affected throughout the disruption and listen to what they are saying about what they need and what they understand about the situation
- Use technology if available – social media, customer service systems and other technology can assist in keeping those affected updated about what is happening. Make use of those email and contact systems as well as social platforms
- Have an extreme weather plan – this should be a priority for all businesses in 2024. They need to have a plan that will address severe storms, heat and cold
- Adjust the communication – different messages may be required at different locations so be clear that the plan can provide the right messages to the right people at the right time

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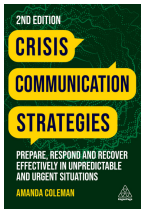

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