



11 DESTINATION MARKETING TIPS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

by Karen Weiner Escalera

1. **Be proactive with positive news.** There is always something positive to say, even in a time of crisis. New tourism appointments, new flight service, new attractions, increased cruise ship arrivals, festivals, events, hotel packages and hotel developments generate positive news that helps rebuild an image in the eyes of overseas visitors, namely, potential tourists. Social media is a ripe avenue to share your positive news with a large audience, and it's recommended to set up a news feed on your website to ease browsers search for updates.

A question that always arises is how to deal with [U.S. State Department travel warnings](#) -keep in contact with senior U.S. government officials in your destination and put them on your mailing list to receive your news.

2. **Utilize social media marketing.** People prefer brands with a personality that treats customers like real people. Social media (blogs, social networking, etc.) do just that, and are invaluable channels for connecting directly with customers. Making your destination's personality come alive builds a following and keeps travelers directly informed.
3. **Images speak louder than words.** Photo- and video-sharing sites are perfect for showcasing the unique, authentic "face" and soul of your destination. Visuals will be one of the best investments you make, and are critical for painting an accurate experience. According to the TIA (Travel Industry Association), the vast majority of online reservations are still made from the visual gallery or one click later. Share pictures and videos across photo and video hosting sites, such as Flickr, YouTube, AOL Video, Google Video, Travel Channel and iTunes, which are especially engaging for customers.

A good example: Reacting to BP's Gulf oil spill, [Panama City Beach CVB](#) launched a digital billboard campaign blasting inviting beach scenes, snapped by a staff member's iPhone camera, to roadside billboards in drive markets from Baltimore to Atlanta. The snapshots of emerald green waters and white sugary sand were displayed with messages such as "Our Coast is Clear," serving as a giant-sized "Wish you were here" reminder for those caught in traffic or traveling along stretches of highway to lure back tourists.

4. **Target niches.** Travel is fracturing as never before, and special interest travelers are passionate about pursuing their interests and connecting with their own kind. Gone are the days of simply selling to larger, mature niche markets. It's about drilling down. For example, in the case of the family travel, curate information for micro-niches such as family reunions, multi-cultural families, gay/lesbian parents, active families, religious families, etc. Explore new growth areas such as art, heritage, educational travel, or voluntourism - integrating charitable voluntary service combined with the traditional attractions of your destination such as the arts, culture, geography, history, and recreation.

And don't forget to reach out to expatriates living abroad, urging them to become the new tourists in their own country, generating nostalgia and enthusiasm for their heritage and history. The Icelandic government held an hour long online event, called the [Iceland Hour](#), after the volcanic eruption that paralyzed European air traffic. They asked the population to go online, post and send messages to friends around the globe about why they love Iceland.

5. **Reach out to opinion makers and media in the industry.** Opinion makers create the "buzz" and set the agenda as they're respected and listened to by colleagues. Reach out to them with one-on-one meetings. Moreover, pay close attention to and participate in social media communities. Target

“influencers” to help spread your message and interact with fans, because a recommendation from a “friend” in the community can be more powerful than one from a marketer.

6. **Have a crisis communications plan.** Effective crisis management can help to limit the damage caused by intense, negative media coverage. To be prepared, an organization must create a detailed crisis communication plan with a crisis communication team assigned to execute the plan that spells out the official spokesperson, key audiences, and internal and external communication chains of command. Practice crisis scenarios and recommended action, and have prepared fact sheets, statements and news release templates on hand. Sometimes, the best course of action might be to “wait and see” rather than risk fanning the fire.
7. **Perform media training.** Identifying the right spokesperson for traditional and new media is an important task. It’s not just the messages that are delivered, but how they’re delivered. A dedicated spokesperson should be versed on the do’s and don’ts of effective communication, skillful handling of key message points and tough questions, and even how to dress for the camera. Social media approach to online conversations must be integrated with existing communications channels, messages and goals. A spokesperson should represent the image and persona of the company at all times.
8. **Celebrate your celebrations.** Normalcy is marked by parties and celebrations. New Orleans tourism’s first priority after hurricane Katrina was to stage and promote its annual [Mardi Gras](#), letting the world know that New Orleans was open for business. Use every opportunity to tie into these events with hotel packages, discounted fares, etc. that will encourage travel and generate news.
9. **Promote a destination within a destination.** Cities and other cultural centers within a country can promote themselves as a stand alone destination. An excellent example: During a period of violence in Colombia, the city of [Cartagena](#) emphasized its historic appeal and why it was uniquely different - the culture and good food, its many squares, cathedrals and fortresses within this walled city.
10. **When the time is right, make a big splash.** Make big announcements at the right place and the right time by leveraging other location-based news and opportunities to garner the most attention. For instance, one of our first initiatives for luring tourists back was to orchestrate a press conference with a cruise line at the White House, announcing the resumption of cruise ship calls to the destination.
11. **Image building is a process.** Continuity is crucial and stay consistent. When your marketing communications create a single impression for your business, they build a strong brand. Marketing programs also require cooperation on the part of the destination’s departments, programs and offices in times of transition. Don’t squander precious marketing resources by embarking on a program and then changing or abandoning it a year later.

About the Author:



For over 30 years, first in New York City and now in Miami, Karen Weiner Escalera and her firm’s [KWE group](#) have been among the nation’s leading strategic marketing and public relations experts in travel, hospitality and destinations. Creator of the [KWEst PROcess](#) for strategic market positioning and product development, Karen has worked for [brand leaders](#) in all segments of the industry, including the destinations of New Zealand, Hong Kong, Finland, Mexico, Grenada and Cartagena. Named one of the “Top 25 Most Extraordinary Minds” in hotel sales and marketing by the Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMIAI), Karen is author of the internationally syndicated [Luxury Travel & Lifestyle Trends newsletter](#) and [blog](#), and has spoken at industry forums including the Destination Marketing Association International, Preferred Hotels and the Caribbean Tourism Organization.

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