

Ten Building Blocks To Turning Around The Image Of A Distressed Destination

By Karen Weiner Escalera

1. **Get out the positive news.** There is always something positive to say and write about even in what seems like the darkest hours. New tourism appointments, new flight service, new attractions, increased cruise ship arrivals, festivals, events, hotel packages and hotel developments make for positive news that helps balance the negatives.

The question always arises about how to deal with U.S. State Department travel warnings? Keep in contact with senior U.S. government officials in your destination and definitely put them on your mailing list to receive your news releases.

2. **Target niches.** The fracturing of travel niches and offshoots of special interest travel are exploding as never before. Special interest travelers are desperate to reconnect with their own kind and it's easier to reach them than ever before via low/no cost options such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, SMS (Simple Messaging Service), multicasting, podcasts and the exponential number of online media and blogs. Exploit these niches by focusing on growth areas such as art, historic, and educational travel. Consider tapping into 'Voluntourism' - the integrated combination of charitable voluntary service in a destination combined with the traditional elements of travel and tourism - arts, culture, geography, history, and recreation. Target "edgy" magazines and outlets with offbeat, unusual angles. 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.
3. **Celebrate your celebrations.** Normalcy is marked by parties and celebrations. With good reason New Orleans tourism's first priority after hurricane Katrina was to stage and promote its annual Carnival. Use every opportunity to tie into these events with hotel packages, discounted fares etc that will encourage travel and generate news.
4. **Promote a destination within a destination.** Cities within a country can promote themselves as a stand alone destination. An excellent example is the job done by Cartagena, Colombia.
5. **When the time is right, make a big splash.** Get out there and make big announcements at the right place, the right time. Leverage these opportunities to get the most attention. One of our first initiatives in getting tourism back to Grenada after the U.S./Eastern Caribbean intervention was orchestrating a press conference with Cunard cruise line at the White House. This was to announce the resumption of cruise ship calls.
6. **Reach out to opinion makers and media in the industry.** Opinion makers create the "buzz" and set the agenda as they're listened to by colleagues. Reach out to them with one-on-one meetings.
7. **Images speak louder than words.** Today's world is inundated with news and multimedia. It's about less copy and more about images, which will ultimately make the most impact. One of the best investments you'll ever make will be in strong visuals and video footage.
8. **Have a crisis communications plan to minimize the damage when a crisis occurs.** Define what triggers a crisis and execution of the plan. Sometimes the best course of action might be to wait and see rather than risk fanning the fire. Be prepared with a plan spelling out key audiences

and laying out staff and equipment requirements. Have a communication chain of command (internal and external), practice crisis scenarios and recommended action, and have prepared statements and templates of news releases on hand.

9. **Do media training.** It's not just what you say but how you say it. Designate a dedicated spokesperson and make sure that person is media trained, practicing the handling of anticipated tough questions and key message points.
10. **Image building is a process.** Continuity is crucial throughout a changing environment. Marketing programs require cooperation on the part of the destination's departments, programs and offices, which is ever more important in times of transition. It's no good to embark on a program, and then change or abandon it after a year.

(This is a summary of a speech given by Karen Weiner Escalera at the Haiti Tourism and Economic Summit held in Miami, Florida in July 2006)