

**PRE-CRISIS AND EMERGENCY RISK  
COMMUNICATION IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY,  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS**

**Author(s):**

**Arnaud BOUVIER, MA, ab@eshotel.com  
Constance KONOLD, Master of Arts in Teaching, ckonold@satcrew.com**

**Contributor(s):**

**- Master students -**

**Anisur MD RAHMAN, anis906@yahoo.com  
Mohammud Yasine NIAMUT, yasine03@hotmail.com  
XU Leilei, lei12587@hotmail.com  
Cédric YOUMBI FOKO, cedricyoubi@yahoo.fr**

**Author(s) details** Arnaud BOUVIER; Constance KONOLD

**Contact author** ESHotel, 76 rue Villeneuve 92110 Clichy France

**Email address** ab@eshotel.com

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### **Abstract:**

Crisis and emergency risk management have become a part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for the hotel industry, as the historical record is full of cases in which the tourism industry has been affected by a range of disasters (Garraway, 2008) and hoteliers are faced with their responsibility as hosts, sometimes even in court (Von Derschau, 2007).

Though the hotel industry has been actively communicating on CSR initiatives since the 1990s, disaster management is not generally listed on any of the CSR checklists commonly agreed upon in the literature (Lynn, 2009). The reluctance of the hotel industry to communicate on disasters is a major restraint on disaster mitigation and public preparedness and every new disaster comforts the negative image of hotels as dangerous places.

This presentation was prepared in partnership with the Red Cross and Red Crescent Climate Centre, an entity of the International Federation of Red Cross and Societies (IFRC), one of the most active Non-Governmental Organisations on disaster preparedness, recovery and risk reduction. The review of literature on the subject demonstrates the central role of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication in disaster preparedness and in particular of pre-crisis communication (Reynolds, Galdo & Sokler, 2002; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Seeger, 2006).

A partnership between the hotel industry and IFRC is proposed, to help the hotel industry communicate on their disaster preparedness by changing the primary message from “This hotel is prepared, as much as possible, to handle disasters” to “This hotel partners with International Red Cross to protect guests and help during disasters”. Expected benefits include industry wide enhancement of disaster preparedness and protection of its global image during future disasters.

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## **Introduction**

The first disaster hit on the hotel industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is undoubtedly the 2004 tsunami in Phuket, Thailand on December 26<sup>th</sup>, which resulted in 230 000 deaths. The Sofitel Magic Lagoon Resort 'Khao Lak' suffered perhaps the most extensive losses in the area with 200 deaths. In September 2005, a dozen families of the French victims filed a lawsuit accusing Accor of not having taken into account the risk of danger at its Sofitel, located on a beach in a region affected by tsunamis. It accused hotel management of alerting guests too late and not handling the situation properly, said hotel staff were not trained to cope with a tsunami, and said nearby hotels suffered fewer casualties. The complaint also accused Thai weather authorities of a delayed reaction in spreading a warning (Von Derschau, 2007).

The negative impact of a disaster on the image of a tourist destination or hotel can be both serious and long lasting. The corporate or business interests of the hotel industry actually provide an entry point to a broader approach incorporating corporate social responsibility (CSR) to address disaster mitigation. This paper presents a plan integrating CSR and disaster preparedness for the hospitality industry by proposing collaboration with humanitarian organization, particularly the International Federation of Red Cross and Societies (IFRC). How can the hospitality industry be encouraged to address issues of crisis management that are at the heart of IFRC work around the world and benefit from the Red Cross's disaster preparedness, disaster recovery and risk reduction know-how as a competitive advantage?

The focus in this presentation is on pre-crisis communication, to help increase preparedness from hoteliers and the public in general and to communicate effectively on disaster preparedness. It is our belief that the first hoteliers to implement this solution will gain considerable credibility and trust from the public, both usually considered as serious competitive advantages. It is our belief that communication on disaster preparedness is a growing demand of the public that would not have significant adverse effect as anticipated by the hotel industry, namely focus customers on disasters or divert them from destinations with higher risks.

Recent events in Japan following March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 earthquake and tsunami have led disaster management experts to call for a new level of crisis management (Paraskevas, 2011) including plans for people, facility and processes recovery. The hotel industry needs 'champions' and 'best practices' in this field, that can only emerge if a communication on crisis management plans (CMP) is made possible.

## **Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication and CSR**

### **Corporate social responsibility**

The emerging perspective on CSR focuses on responsibility towards stakeholders (shareholders, employees, management, consumers and community) rather than on maximization of profit for shareholders. The leading companies have discovered that working together with non-profit and government organizations to solve problems can give them new insights and approaches to creating business opportunities as well (Subbalakshmi, 2007).

According to surveys on consumer attitude and global public opinion, people around the world focus on corporate social citizenship ahead of either brand reputation or financial factors; two in three people want companies to go beyond their historical role of making a profit, paying taxes, employing people and obeying laws; they also want companies to contribute to broader societal goals. Half the population on the surveys had paid attention to the social behaviour of companies. Because of the change of consumer attitude, the conclusion is that this pressure on companies will likely increase more and more (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2002).

While the benefits of CSR activities to corporations may vary depending on the nature of the company and are often hard to gauge, there is a wide range of articles and websites that argue for the business case of CSR (Nord, 2006). Commonly cited reasons to engage in CSR activities include enhanced reputation, employee satisfaction, risk management and financial performance ((Business & the Environment with ISO 14000 Updates, 2004), quoted in (Nord, 2006), p.11).

### **Present CSR Practices in the hotel industry**

Holcomb et al. (2007) conducted a study of the major hotel chains CSR communication on their website and found out that “eight out of the ten top hotel companies (80%) reported giving charitable donations, 60% reported having diversity policies, and 40% mentioned social responsibility as part of their company mission statements. Community, environment, marketplace, vision and values, and workforce were the categories the top ten hotel companies’ available information was entered into. Hilton Corporation was found to have the most comprehensive CSR reporting. Marriot came in as second and the Accor hotel group was third. According to this reference, most hotel companies should improve their CSR reporting and live up to their reputation of being ‘hospitable’ not only to their guests but also to society”. Some initiatives are worth mentioning:

#### ○ Cash donations

Cash is still the most important, and often the most appropriate, donation for humanitarian relief and recovery efforts. For instance, Marriott International converts donated points to cash for a contribution to the IFRC Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (Marriott, 2010). Bali Hotels association raises funds for Mount Merapi volcanic disaster which occurred just recently. Rhode Island Hotels has shown Charity to Flood Victims. In Pakistan, during the heavy flood that impaired a large portion of the country, Serena Hotels through its Corporate Social Responsibility Program- SEED (Environmental and Educational Development) has embarked upon a comprehensive fund raising effort throughout Pakistan (Serena Hotels, 2010). In 2007, IHG donated £626,000 in support of community initiatives and charitable causes at corporate level (IHG, 2010).

#### ○ Work force initiative

Hyatt’s F.O.R.C.E (Hyatt, 2010) is a volunteer program that allows Hyatt associates worldwide to participate in local community outreach and volunteer efforts on paid company time.

“Business is often willing to provide in-kind support facilities, technical expertise and volunteer labour rather than money. This can be used to good effect. A growing number of employees wish to make a greater contribution to society through volunteering, and companies are increasingly recognizing that volunteering improves staff skills and motivation” (Twigg, 2001, p. 54).

#### ○ Partnership with NGOs

In Bali, Indonesia, the Red Cross has an outstanding way of collecting blood for utilizing in emergency condition which involves hotels. They put signs in hotels and visit to collect blood, but only if its rhesus is negative, as rhesus negative blood is scarce in Indonesia. Hotels are flooded by millions of people from different parts of the world each year with tourists having rhesus negative blood. Hence the Indonesian Red Cross capitalizes on this opportunity.

#### ○ Shelter and evacuation

In the Bahamas, for example, some hotels have secure locations to save the senior managers when a hurricane hits the island. Hotels sometimes have planes for the senior managers to transfer to a secure location. If hotels had extra secure locations and planes for guests and local employees, this could be something to communicate on, to show the world they are willing to help (Suarez, 2010).

### **Crisis Management Plan**

Disaster preparedness and mitigation plans have become a major issue for all businesses, including the hotel industry, even more as hotels have a responsibility towards their customers, considered as guests. Crisis Management has become a part of the responsibility of hotels towards their guest, i.e. a part of their Corporate Social Responsibility.

The historical record is full of cases in which the tourism industry has been affected by a range of disasters (Garraway, 2008). Tourism destinations are often remote and exposed to both natural and man-made threats such as terrorist attacks. Whenever a natural disaster strikes a particular region, the tourism industry is also badly affected. The Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 has shown the tragic consequences on international tourists in a natural disaster: thousands of western tourists were the victims of the tsunami. One estimate puts the overall death toll as surpassing 280,000 and the number of tourist casualties at more than 3,500 (Sharpley, 2005, quoted in Garraway 2008, p.2). In 2005, Hurricane Katrina left more than 80 per cent of New Orleans underwater and blew away the state's largest source of revenue - tourism - which in 2004 drew more than 10 million visitors and created 80,000 tourism-related jobs (Reuters, 2005). Terrorism has also become a global concern, afflicting the hospitality industry directly and indirectly: 56 persons were killed and 265 injured at the attack on the Marriot hotel in Islamabad on 20 September 2008, among the casualties, 30 were hotel associates (Gunaratna, 2008); In the same year, 165 persons were killed, including 26 foreigners, at the Taj Hotel in Mumbai (Kronstadt, 2008); Again in the coordinated terrorist attack on the Ritz Carlton and JW Marriott hotels on 17 July 2009 in Jakarta, Indonesia, nine people were killed and 25 injured, further emphasizing that hotels have become a target for many terrorist groups (Solomon, 2009).

In the Great Hanshin Earthquake in Kobe, Japan in January 1995, which was measured at a magnitude of 7.3, 249 180 buildings collapsed, 6 436 people lost their lives and 43 792 were injured. However, in the midst of this destruction, for the tourism industry, precautions such as earthquake proof architecture, fire proof equipment and the value of frequent fire and evacuation drills had paid off. In addition, although in many cases, guests had to stay in hotel lobbies for 2 to 3 days, they were given frequent situation reports in order to prevent panic and employee morale was kept high.

Four key points have come out of that disaster (Garraway, 2008):

1. The basic rule of prioritizing human life prevailed – each employee must act for guest safety soon after an emergency event. This was evident by the fact that most guests were evacuated from their rooms on hour after the event;
2. The importance of having a unified information flow that prevents the spread of rumours that may lead to panic and confusion;
3. Moving down decision making power to the front lines in emergencies;
4. Maintaining a good relationship with the local community so that there is rapid cooperation during disasters.

Research on crisis management and complexity thinking (Paraskevas, 2006) have shown that a CMP should not aim at specific agent behaviours and actions but at the collective robustness and resilience of the organisation. It should set the rules of interaction between its various agents but not dictate their actions. Such CMP can only work in an environment where hotel managers are fully, understand regularly, trained on crisis management. As stressed by Reynolds and Seeger (2005), crisis management plans (CMP) should be designed with the help of outside experts; the American Red Cross, for example, with its emphasis on disaster relief, has been a traditional proponent of emergency preparation (American Red Cross, 2011).

### **Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication**

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) was first introduced in 2002 as a merged approach of crisis communication and risk communication (Reynolds, Galdo & Sokler, 2002). One of the main contributions of this merged approach is the recognition that communication is part of the preparation process, and that effective communication must be an integrated and ongoing process (Seeger, 2006). Pre-crisis communication includes the public preparation for the possibility of an adverse event and alliances, cooperation and the development of consensual recommendations by experts (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

If disaster preparedness is a growing concern in the hotel industry, there is surprisingly few communication on this point, not on any hotel chain website anyway (Hyatt, Hilton, Starwood and Accor websites checked by the authors in March 2011). And though the hotel industry has been introducing Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives since the 1990s (Holcomb, 2007), disaster management, such as needed after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, is not generally listed on any of the CSR checklists commonly agreed upon in the literature (Lynn, 2009). Best Western, Hilton group, Accor, Intercontinental, and Six Senses did commit over \$2.5 million for the 2004 tsunami relief, and other chains also provided aid ((Henderson, 2007) quoted in (Lynn 2009), p.5), but their communication is centred on charity and completely excludes any initiatives taken to prepare their hotels and resorts for inevitable future disasters.

Best practices in crisis communication (Seeger, 2006) include pre-event planning; partnership with the public; credibility building and strategic partnership with experts before a crisis occurs. Hoteliers can generalise Crisis Management Plans but if kept secret, their efficiency is proved to be hindered as communication is a part of the process, and best practices in crisis communication can not be applied as long as pre-crisis communication is avoided. As the public is not aware of the risks, plans and basic safety procedures, CMP will be inefficient.

As the hotel industry is not communicating on crisis management, it is weakening its own and the public disaster preparedness, putting their customers at risk. All CSR efforts are also plundered by the silence around disaster preparedness and every new disaster comforts the negative image of hotels that are not responsible of their guests safety and can not help during disasters.

### **Partnership Concept**

It is not easy to conduct pre-crisis communication initiated solely by hotels, as the hospitality industry cannot communicate easily on disaster mitigation for its own business interests. The hotel industry needs to function through an “integrated triangle model” where three actors (hotel, IFRC and the public) take part. The trade-off is a “handshake”: if the hospitality industry renders cooperation and financial support to the IFRC, the latter will act as an intermediary between the hotel and the public to implement the hotel’s CSR program, including disaster preparedness

The hotel will benefit from the IFRC’s expertise and thus, ensure the safety and security of guests, employees and property while enhancing its brand reputation and image by using the trade-off as a marketing tool. Further, it will increase staff morale and motivation, and help employees to acquire new skills and experience, all leading to a more committed and productive workforce. It will also strengthen relationships with visitors or guests and local and national authorities.

### **Roles of Hotels**

#### ○ Assess vulnerability

A list of questions can serve as a checklist regarding vulnerability to different kinds of disasters: “natural disasters” (tsunamis, earthquakes and wild fires), industrial accidents (spills, explosions and product defects including food poisoning) and intentional events (product tampering and terrorist attacks) (Seeger et al, 2003). Self-assessment includes questions on potential risks, evacuation questions, staff responsibility and training, guest preparedness, business recovery and post-disaster management (Udu-gama, 2008).

#### ○ Prepare staff

In November 2010, the authors interviewed Pablo Suarez, Phd, Technical advisor for Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Centre. He stressed that employees should be trained on a regular basis, instilling them with the aptitude to adjust with any disaster and thereby ensuring safety and security of the hotel and the guests. Hotels should also contribute to the response and recovery process by supporting the families of hotel staff.

#### ○ Command post & logistic support

Hotels can allocate space and accommodation to the IFRC, based on availability, to establish a temporary command post during disaster and post disaster recovery, to enable them to conduct their operations smoothly. Hotels could also provide logistic support. The various hotel departments could lend the following services: housekeeping can distribute relief items (blankets, water, food, health, etc.); food & Beverage (F&B) department can arrange sustenance for IFRC personnel; front desk can organize accommodation for IFRC staff when available, ultimately grouping customers to free rooms; the Administration & HR departments can allocate employees to work closely with IFRC personnel during immediate post disaster response (Suarez, 2010).

### **Roles of IFRC**

#### ○ Make communication happen

The partnership makes it possible to communicate on disaster for the hotel industry as the primary message “This hotel is prepared, as much as possible, to handle disasters” is converted to “This hotel partners with International Red Cross to protect guests and help during disasters”.

It can even be positive for any hotel to use the name and resources of an internationally recognised humanitarian organization, such as Red Cross.

#### ○ Training

Hotel employees are not essentially trained to act in case of a disaster. Untrained employees may complicate the situation more. Hotels could benefit from training by the IFRC to have their employees react in an appropriate manner in times of need, including during normal operations. Training includes first aid and community or businesses disaster preparedness through short guides like “Preparing your business for the unthinkable”.

#### ○ Technology

Communication and sharing of information is essential during a disaster and when disaster strikes, usual means of communication are often disrupted. Red Cross uses innovative technology like Global Relief Technologies Trimble Nomad handhelds for data collection. The device is generally connected via GPRS technology (General Packet Radio Service) that is built in. In the event that GPRS is not available, because of the location or adverse weather conditions, the Trimble Nomad handhelds can also interface via Bluetooth with a BGAN Satellite terminal to send data. BGAN (Broadband Global Area Network) is a mobile communications system created to transmit broadband wireless voice and data communications almost anywhere on the earth’s surface.

#### ○ Certification

An external expert, such as IFRC, may certify the preparedness, ability and concern of a hotel, reassuring clients that the hotel is prepared to handle any kind of problem in an efficient and effective way.

As an existing starting point, “the American Red Cross *Ready Rating program* is a free, self-guided program designed to help businesses, organizations and schools become better prepared for emergencies. Members complete a 123-point self assessment of their level of preparedness, gain access to tips and best practices, and commit to improving their score each year to maintain membership. The 123 Assessment has been aligned with the federal government's private sector preparedness standards (PS-Prep).” (American Red Cross, 2011)

Current Ready Rating member listing on the American Red Cross website includes hotels from major hotel chains: Courtyard by Marriott, Newport News; Element hotel, Hanover (Starwood); Hilton Garden Inn, Hampton and Hilton Garden Inn, Frederick; Holiday Inn Express Williamsburg; Hyatt Place, Richmond Airport and Hyatt Regency, Long Beach. It is striking that lone properties are part of the program and nothing is done at the chain level; it is also striking that no hotel chain or property page mentions their Ready Rating membership.

### **Partnership Communication Strategy**

The overall objective of the proposed partnership campaign is to raise public awareness and to increase will and resource allocation among the hotels, public, NGO’s, and humanitarian organization for preventing and responding to all forms of natural and man-made calamities in a collaborative manner with the primary aim of enhancing work among the mentioned entities. The campaign will focus on global encouragement, strengthened efforts and partnerships at national levels and regional levels.

The collaboration plan will only happen with the active commitment of partners to prevent and response to all forms of natural and man-made calamities in order to achieve sustainable and responsible tourism practices by ensuring safe and secure environment to the visitors, employees and neighbouring community.

## **Aims**

The purpose of this communication strategy is to enable the hotel industry to communicate on their crisis management efforts and preparedness of staff and hotel properties. By communicating, hotels will raise the public awareness thus helping management during crisis; and also raise their staff demand for training and preparation.

It can also help the industry to develop its Corporate Social Responsibility and protect its global image during future disasters. The hospitality industry has an immediate opportunity – and an obligation – to enhance its image in disaster preparedness and mitigation. It might bring the ultimate competitive advantage for the first hotels to implement the concept.

## **Key Message**

The key message for all audiences is a two-way partnership between the hotel industry and NGOs where the hotel industry supports NGOs by providing support to their operations throughout the world, when disaster happens; and that NGOs in return share their experience and knowledge with the hotel industry to prepare them to protect staff and guests in case of an emergency.

## **Communications Tools**

The following tools can be developed:

- A basic website can be created in different languages for the launch of the campaign. It can be updated and expanded to include feature highlighting news and activities carried out in conjunction with the campaign.
- A coordinated database on disaster risk mitigation and sustainable tourism destination can be established as a way of monitoring progress under the campaign.
- A logo has to be developed and has to be made available, with guidelines for its use, on the campaign website.
- Online outreach tools can be explored, such as social networking sites and blogs, as an effective way to reach large audiences, raise awareness and build constituencies that can be further engaged.
- A brochure and fact sheets about the campaign can be developed, first on-line and then in print form.
- Guidelines for safety procedures can be developed and distributed to the media.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed partnership between NGOs and the hotel industry can help mitigate natural or man-made disasters and reduce the impact on destinations. Also, by allowing early adopters to communicate on crisis management and disaster preparedness, the partnership will raise public expectations, thus participating in the spread of crisis management practices.

As the hotel industry can not communicate effectively on disaster preparedness and all efforts are kept secret, required investments and budgets are not fully allocated and the public is not prepared, resulting in additional casualties during disasters. The virtuous circle led in motion by the partnership will move the whole industry and should benefit particularly to the first partners.

Before any implementation of the partnership, future research is required on the expected negative impact of communication on disaster preparedness, as anticipated by the hotel industry, and means to soften the effects, with samples of reactions and customer survey. Additional research should also identify best practices in disaster management and their impact on the public when used in communication.

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