The Information Conundrum

WE LIVE in an information age. Too much information from too many sources is too often competing for too many readers, viewers and listeners who have too little time. Furthermore, recipients have to use all this information to make too many decisions too quickly – and to get it right each time.

An enduring lesson emerging from the various crises buffeting travel and tourism is that a world of more information is not necessarily a better world. Quantity does not mean quality. Rather, both the volume and transmission speed of information can be a double-edged sword. Interestingly, none of the gurus who predicted a better world in the information age ever forecast the negative impacts of information overload. These are only now beginning to emerge and could well gain further impetus in the years ahead.

The travel industry is facing four major threats:

1. Political conflict and global instability,
2. Health threats (of which the SARS virus is only the most recent),
3. The impact of travel advisories, and
4. Terrorism

The speed at which information flows – and the massive number of people it reaches – exacerbates these threats. The threats themselves are not new. In the information age, however, travel and tourism is an indirect and inadvertent victim of fast and efficient, but not necessarily accurate, information pertaining to these threats.

Political conflicts and terrorism have been around for ages. Health scares occur regularly as well. When HIV/AIDS emerged in the 1980s, it caused similar fear-of-the-unknown effects that SARS is causing today. The foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom in 2001 is another example of how a health scare can seriously damage a major destination.

Environmental threats emerged when a haze caused by forest-fires blanketed many parts of Southeast Asia in 1997/98. Bush-fires blaze in Australia from time to time. Other natural disasters like floods and earthquakes strike frequently worldwide.

Indeed, the 21st century began with a travel industry crisis – the fear that the so-called Y2K technical bug would jam up computer systems and make aircraft fall out of the sky. In this case, the industry had time to make the appropriate technical fixes and used information to maintain the public's confidence in travel.

From a communications perspective, each issue, regardless of its nature, requires a response to some pertinent questions: What is the problem? How bad is it? How could it affect the traveller? What happens if the traveller does get affected? How long will it last? Is there a solution?

Similar requirements for specific information arise in dealing with crises like airplane crashes or hotel fires. Even cities and destinations with law-and-order crises have had to address their 'image problem' in order to attract visitors.

While some problems can be pre-empted and prevented, many others cannot. In all cases, information and communications management is extremely important. However,

when the unexpected happens, the art of allaying fear and restoring confidence is vital.

The Reality of Perception

Travel and tourism has to contend with a number of factors when addressing the information conundrum and the crisis communications imperative.

One significant factor is the unbalanced flow of information. The same media that transmit 'negative' information do not give equal and corresponding coverage to 'positive' information. Rarely are there stories that provide a broader perspective on a situation. Thus, the public perceives the dangers associated with a crisis to be bigger than they actually are, thereby causing more economic damage than it should.

Headlines and sound bites become the perceived reality. Add to that, generalisation, ignorance, preconceptions and stereotypes – the resulting media cocktail is lethal. After over-dosing on television and newspaper reports, it is no surprise that travellers believe that the SARS virus and terrorists are omnipresent.

Nothing influences travel decisions more than perceptions of danger, lack of security and health risks. Indeed, public perception (or misperception) of high risk, and the resulting cancellations and postponements to travel plans, affects everyone in the travel and tourism food chain: agencies, carriers, hotels, tours and attractions.

As perceptions of security and health threats become more entrenched, people think: Why bother? Why take the risk? Even those who once needed no persuading to take a trip, today think twice about it. Deciding "where to go?" is being replaced by deciding "should I go?"

Safety, security and health concerns are affecting the travel decision process like never before. Human beings are creatures of habit – they share a common fear of the unknown and they generally fear risk. Not surprisingly, many are choosing to travel domestically, because it is familiar and comfortable. If they have to get into trouble, better that it be at home where they speak the language and can get help. This shift in consumer needs has major implications for travel and tourism marketers and communicators.

Catching the Industry Off Guard

The spate and regularity of recent crises have caught travel and tourism off guard. Progress made over the years to build up confidence in travel, to make it a part of everyday life, has now stalled.

The promise of the job-creating and foreign exchange-generating capabilities of the industry attracted the attention of politicians and bureaucrats. Liberalised visa policies, marketing promotions and increased hotel and airline capacities were the results of optimistic forecasts about how many people would be on the move in the years to come.

Travel and tourism, used to benefiting from the positive spin on globalisation, is now having to reconcile itself to the new reality. The industry is a victim of a changed scenario in which the same media that were transmitting the good news are now transmitting the bad news about globalisation. And now the perception that terrorists and viruses can move as freely across borders as tourists can has shaken the public's confidence in travel.

The challenge is to help people regain their confidence in travel. Hopefully, the travel habit has become such a global tradition that it will help the industry survive the peaks and troughs. The question is: How many of these crises can the industry survive, especially as they seem to be increasing in both frequency and intensity?

As it looks ahead, travel and tourism will need to adopt strategies that will:

1. Put the threats into perspective (what medical doctors would call localising the problem), and
2. Provide accurate information about what is going on so that people can make informed decisions

Blaming the Messenger

Blaming the messenger is the traditional unthinking reaction to a new problem. However, it is wrong.

The debate between the role of the media and the travel and tourism industry is as old as the hills. Ironically, the media and the travel and tourism industry survive off each other. Travel and tourism is a major global advertiser. In turn, editorial coverage of destinations and products has played a major role in driving demand for travel. No one complains when everything is fine – in good times, the media is a friend. In bad times, we often reclassify them as foes, as though they have waged an information war against travel and tourism.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

1. WHAT? What is 'accurate information.' Information changes on a daily basis. As the web sites of many news organisations like to claim, updates go online every second. Information can move from being accurate to inaccurate at the speed of light, largely due toobsolescence rather than premeditated inaccuracy.

2. WHO? Who should provide that information? In a recent survey, PATA members suggested that the Association should play a role. National tourism organisations, embassies, government departments, private sector associations, regional organisations and airlines all have their stakeholders and customers. Everyone asks everyone to get involved because everyone is affected and everyone has responsibilities – countries to their taxpaying citizens and associations to their members.

3. HOW? At whom should the information be directed, and through which channel? Covering all the bases is practically impossible. Not everyone requires the same information, nor does everyone watch, read and listen to the same media. Someone may see something on television and then verify it with a travel agent. The travel agent may then check with the global distribution system or the means of transportation, which, in turn, may be getting its information from the television.

4. WHAT IF? Who will take responsibility for the consequences that may result if the information is misunderstood? These days, fear of legal action is very real. Information providers open themselves up to considerable risk if they report anything that does not turn out to be true, or if it is only partially true, or if the information is misunderstood. One can appreciate the desire to sue. People save for months, if not years to take a holiday that transports them from the drudgery ofdaily life into an escapist dream world for a few weeks. To have those dreams shattered is bound to make people angry.

Blaming the media is like blaming the postal worker for delivering the bills or the doctor for diagnosing the disease. The media has a responsibility to warn people in case of a problem. It does that, and we should not begrudge them for it. However, it is true that the information revolution has given a 'voice' to everyone, blurring the distinction between regular and alternative media. Clearly, the surge in 'quantity' of information has not markedly improved its 'quality'.

Putting Things into Perspective

The chances of becoming the victim of a terrorist attack or a viral infection while abroad are no greater than becoming a victim at home. At any time, humans are at risk from car accidents, neighbourhood crime or contaminated food in their own restaurants. One man's home is another's tourism destination. Yet, how often have we called a relative or someone else in a foreign country to ask if they are fine after learning about something going on in that country?

In the past, when violence struck a Pacific Asia country, the strategy was to stress that the location of the incident was a long way from tourist spots. The October 12, 2002, bomb blast in Bali put paid to that. Clearly, no place is immune. Anything can happen, anytime, anywhere.

At its annual assembly in Geneva, May 20, the World Health Organization gave hope to embattled airlines saying that only 16 of the 7,800-plus people who have been infected with SARS caught the disease while aboard an airplane. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), airlines carried more than 200 million passengers in the weeks before pre-departure screening for SARS symptoms were implemented. There was a greater chance of being eaten by a shark during that time than catching SARS on an airplane.

The psychology that makes such low odds so significant in people's minds needs close scrutiny. Is it the way the media report these issues that needs addressing? Does the definition of 'news' need revamping? Does the travel and tourism industry have to be more proactive in its communications with stakeholders? Should the industry be more proactive in supplying information to media in a crisis situation?

'Alternative' Sources – 'Accurate' Information

There are often calls to counter media reports by giving the public access to 'alternative' sources of 'accurate' information – it is easier said than done.

Mass information can lead to mass confusion. Technically, providing information is the job of the media. However, the media is selective about what it reports. Furthermore, the media gets it wrong sometimes. This is often not the media's fault – government agencies and public relations companies often release information that is self-serving and incomplete, if not misleading.

In the case of travel advisories, often the "intelligence" upon which they are based is itself based on sketchy media reports, field agents, operatives and the business community, to name just a few sources. In a discussion organised at the 52nd PATA Annual Conference, Bali, April 14-17, ambassadors of three advisory-issuing countries confirmed that they are not the final arbiters of the decision. Their political and bureaucratic masters back home are, who themselves err on the side of caution because they fear criticism from their media and local constituencies. Uploaded on to web sites, these travel advisories are picked up by the media, global distribution systems, insurance companies and others and passed off to the public as important statements. Confusion mounts.

In the case of SARS, in April 2003, the World Health Organization took the lead in ascertaining the extent of SARS cases in various countries, and then making available proper information about it. Meanwhile it was rumoured that the virus was spreading because information about it was allegedly being covered up. However, the opposite side of the coin suggests that for weeks after the first cases began to emerge, no one knew what they were dealing with. It is possible that information was being withheld until a clearer picture had emerged. It was precisely this fear of the unknown – the hysteria sparked by the deaths, the stigma attached to the word 'incurable', and uncertainty over how SARS spreads – that aggravated the problem for travel and tourism.

Conclusion

Supposedly, all publicity is good publicity. That is debatable. Bad news can spread faster than viruses. These days, staying out of the spotlight can be an asset, and the best way of doing that is to ensure that there is no bad news at home. Prevention is better than cure.

The media is both a messenger and a mirror. It reflects what is going on in society. The mirror may sometimes be a bit convex or a bit concave and reflect a distorted image, but the warts will show nevertheless. Are there more warts to come? Certainly, and as long as there are global geo-political, economic, social and health crises, the media will continue to ensure that they quickly become common knowledge, with the resultant disruptions to travel and tourism. The industry may consider itself resilient, but as has been mentioned in previous editions of *Issues & Trends*, the prospects for long-term planning do not look promising.

The entire Information Revolution concept deserves a thorough review. It could prove to be seriously, if not entirely flawed, because little or no thought was given to its negative side effects. These side effects are slowly making themselves felt. Speed and volume of information is not everything. Faster is not necessarily better. There is far too much information out there, most of it irrelevant and useless. People are already unable to cope with the deluge.

The travel and tourism industry needs to look inwards to see how much blame it deserves for painting what many would consider an outrageously unrealistic and excessively rosy self-portrait. If our brochures are true, all our destinations are paradises, free of crime and environmental problems and full of friendly, happy, wonderful people. The reality, as we all know, is quite different. It is the reality biting the industry right now. Perhaps that is a bigger shock to our system than most of us would care to admit.