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WHITEPAPER

Crisis Communications in Tourism: From Response to Resilience

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THE STRUCTURAL RISK

Why Crises in Tourism are Different.

Tourism is not a company. It's an ecosystem.

Airlines, tour operators, hotels, destinations, transport providers, public authorities and digital platforms are interdependent. When one node falters, others absorb the impact. A disruption at a single touchpoint can ripple across markets, partners and borders within minutes and hours. One failure can put an entire industry at risk.

Tourism demand is perception-driven.

Holiday-makers do not buy products. They buy trust. Risk is evaluated emotionally, not by numbers. Once doubt emerges, postponement or cancellation becomes the rational choice. Confidence erodes faster than operational capacity collapses.

Trust is the most critical asset in tourism.

Tourism is permanently visible.

Travel affects families, holidays and major life events. When crises occur, they attract disproportionate media attention and political scrutiny because they are relevant and part of our everyday life. Images travel instantly. Narratives form before facts stabilise.

Tourism is global by default.

Incidents rarely remain local. Information crosses jurisdictions immediately, while regulations, cultural expectations and media logic differ from market to market. Without alignment, fragmentation begins quickly.

In this environment, operational disruption is only part of the challenge. Incoherent narratives and failure in crisis communication is the greater risk.



Why Crisis Communication Fails Under Pressure.

Tourism is experienced in crises. The industry has navigated pandemics, natural disasters, security incidents and operational disruptions. And yet, our industry struggles with the adequate response.

Here's the problem: Organisations are structured for efficiency and growth – not for volatility and narrative shock.

Crisis plans exist, escalation processes are documented, spokespersons are trained. But crises rarely unfold by the playbook. They test leadership under pressure. When decision-making slows. When authority becomes ambiguous. Stakeholders interpret risk differently. Public and private actors move at different speeds.

This is when communication reflects uncertainty instead of stability and control.

The challenge is rarely a lack of goodwill or skills. It is the absence of structures designed for managing volatility. In tourism, hesitation is amplified. Fragmented messages travel faster than aligned ones. And without clarity at the top, alignment below becomes impossible.

In tourism, crisis communication is not a support function.

It is a core management discipline that protects demand, trust and economic stability.

From Response to Resilience

Crisis communication in tourism must evolve. Not incrementally. Structurally. Here are four necessary shifts to excel from response to resilience:

01

From Improvisation to Governance

Ad hoc reactions are replaced by clear escalation logic, predefined leadership roles and decision-making authority under pressure. Speed in crisis response requires an established, solid structure.

02

From Isolated Messaging to Narrative Architecture

Individual statements are insufficient in an ecosystem industry. Aligned narratives across public and private actors prevent fragmentation and unfold overarching credibility.

03

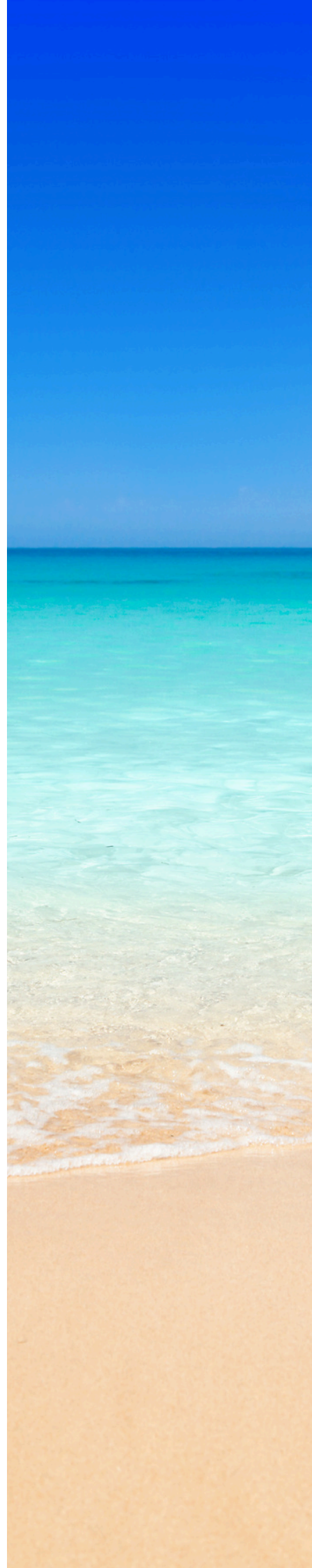
From Controlling the Media to Multi-channel Trust Management

Crisis communication no longer centres on press statements (and it never really worked). Real-time monitoring, digital responsiveness and AI-aware strategies are essential to stabilise perception across platforms.

04

From Static Plans to Institutionalised Practice

Crisis plans do not create readiness. They are useless without regular simulations, cross-sector exercises and embedded training. Adding an organisational crisis mindset will transform theory into capability. And plain response into meaningful resilience.



What Industry Leaders Should Do Now: Elevate. Align. Measure.

1

Elevate crisis communication to the executive level. Treat it as a strategic management function, not an operational afterthought.

2

Define clear escalation and decision protocols. Speed requires predefined authority and structured coordination.

3

Establish cross-actor alignment before crises occur. Public authorities, DMOs, airlines, tour operators and other players must understand each other's roles and constraints.

4

Integrate digital and AI-risk monitoring. Misinformation and narrative distortion move faster than official updates.

5

Measure crisis readiness as a strategic capability. Resilience should be visible in governance structures, training frequency and leadership accountability.



“Readiness is built long before it’s 11:59.”

— Martin Riecken
Managing Director 11 Fifty-Nine

When a crisis hits and the reputation is at risk, 11 Fifty-Nine is the independent crisis communications advisory at your side. Specialised on travel, tourism, and aviation. Focused on supporting organisations with their response to critical events and on helping leaders to build robust crisis-communications frameworks and to foster their crisis readiness.

What I Offer

The range of services covers all phases of a crisis: before, during and after. From check-ups, workshops, crisis planning, trainings and simulations to advisory and sparring in current crises.

What Sets Me Apart

Clients always work with me directly. No hand-offs, no theory-only advice — just hands-on advisory, before, during, and after a crisis. With a solid network of proven experts and strategic partners, I can quickly scale according the clients’ needs.

About Me

As Managing Director of 11 Fifty-Nine, I draw on 25 years of communication leadership at Lufthansa and TUI Group. Throughout my corporate career, I have navigated high-impact crises — from aviation accidents and fleet groundings to natural disasters, cyber incidents and pandemics, including the response to Germanwings 4U 9525. My work focuses on one objective: protecting trust when pressure rises. In critical situations, I bring structure, clarity and calm to leadership teams facing complex and highly visible challenges.