Destination Management Organization

Strategic Decision-Making for

Crisis Management Public Relations Marketing of Mega-Events

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Introduction

A significant component of the Destination Marketing/Management Organization (DMO) planning process often includes the development and coordination of communications plans designed in preparation for and in anticipation of crises or other activities which may negatively impact a mega-event from a public relations (PR) communications perspective. Regarding perspectives on risk management and PR, Cloutier (2000, p. 98) advised "A high(er) level consideration (in risk management) is the public-relations impact: how will the (organization) look in the public eye, and will the incident affect its image?" The ability to effectively produce pertinent information as a public relations communications incident develops may assist a DMO, with support from associated agencies, to mitigate or minimize actual negative event impacts and publicity related to a mega-event (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003, p. 114, 218, 221-229).

In preparation for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver and Whistler, British Columbia, Canada, DMOs and related mega-event organizing agencies needed to engage in a strategic decision-making processes to facilitate effective marketing communications. This paper reviews selected literature to identify issues and factors for consideration to enhance DMO decision-making strategies with a view towards developing and utilizing more effective public relations marketing communications in preparation for and response to significant incidents at mega-events. In this case, the focus of this paper is the analysis of pertinent literature identifying theories and best-practices from previous mega-events, major incidents, Olympic Games and other relevant literature resources and how these may apply to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. Furthermore, this review asks what emphasis should be placed on the potential challenges and opportunities of utilizing public relations marketing communications resources and strategies to consider, plan, coordinate, identify early incident indicators, facilitate actionable mitigation, and more effectively manage potential and/or emerging incidents and their negative impacts at mega-events.

Mega-Events

Mega-events differ from hosting other special events due to the significant complexity of their scope, size, expense and logistics as well as the extended time necessary to plan, organize, manage and execute (Singh & Hu, 2007, p. 933). For example, Ritchie & Crouch (2003, p. 120-122) cited Getz (1997), suggesting that large-scale mega-events; and more specifically Olympic events, may contribute towards creating considerable international awareness of a host destination, due to an amplification of the range of factors which may assist to make a mega-event a competitive core attractor. Some of Getz' significant competitive core attractors include: a diversity of goals, a festive spirit, uniqueness, quality, authenticity, tradition, and symbolism. Supporting this assertion, Ritchie & Crouch stated that "those events that tend to have the greatest and often the most lasting impact on the reputation and renown of a destination are referred to as 'hallmark events' and 'mega-events'." Furthermore, hosting of mega-events necessitates that destination managers be cognizant of reputation management challenges when going through their strategic marketing planning processes in order to manage and promote positive benefits while striving to minimize negative PR impacts.

Leading up to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, a number of media stories emerged primarily focusing on negative factors, activities or potential impacts related to this mega-event, as was the case prior to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games (Wang, 2009).

Examples of some of these stories included: "Poverty: B.C.'s PR nightmare scenario" (Bula, 2010), "Olympics get bronze for climate impact" (CBC, 2010), and "Medals won't be the only Olympic story" (Morris, 2010). Morris (2010) in particular, summarized a number of the most intriguing storylines of the 2010 Games, including: "Games go home" (regarding local protest movements), "Street of lost dreams" (poverty in the Vancouver downtown eastside), "Are we safe?" (referencing security costs and effectiveness), "Transportation" (affects on local residents), and "Was it all worth it?" (self-explanatory).

Public Relations Marketing Risk Issues

Qi, Gibson, & Zhang (2009, p. 44) advised that mega-event tourism, and in the case of their example, strategic decision-making for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, necessitated risk management planning in response to a number of significant terrorism events which have occurred globally over the last decade, such as; New York in 2001, London in 2005, and at previous Olympic Games, including; Atlanta in 1996 and Munich in 1972 (Ladkin, Fyall, Fletcher, & Shipway, 2007, p. 96; Qi et al., 2009, p. 50). In order for DMO and participating agency planners to make appropriate strategic communications marketing decisions in preparation for a mega-event, such as an Olympic Games, planners need to identify a range of significant potential risks and develop a scope of realistic responses which align with available resources. Ritchie (2007, p. 319) cited multiple authors, identified the following natural hazards and disasters for consideration: hurricanes, flooding, tsunami, earthquakes, bushfires, bio-security and disease. Additionally, Ritchie & Crouch (2003, p. 226-227) referenced Mitroff & Anagnos who offered the following seven major crises types and/or categories of risk: economic, informational, physical, human resource, reputation, psychopathic (acts), and natural disasters.

The effects on tourist destination choice may be positively influenced by hosting a mega-event (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003, p. 120); however, the threat of terrorist attacks may be the primary security concern weighing heavily on the ultimate choice of destination by tourists to attend a mega-event, depending upon the perceived level of risk (Qi et al., 2009, p. 45). This perceived level of risk is often influenced by media attention on an incident or leading up to an event and has the capability of prejudicing or altering an audiences' view (de Sausmarez, 2004, p. 167). Toohey & Taylor (2008, p. 464) informed that the increased public commitment to safety and risk management of mega-events is evident in the significant and highly visible security resources apparent at the Athens Olympic Games in 2004. Toohey & Taylor cited Furedi (2002), who "suggest(ed) that the precautionary principle and risk aversion…pervaded the event planning process (p. 465)." However, Toohey & Taylor warned that it is a fine line to balance the representation of security efforts to provide an appropriate level or perception of security without over-reacting and expending excessive resources. Over expenditure, or at least the perception of an excessively high level of security may result in risk amplification, creating an unnecessary escalation of fear. Toohey & Taylor continued to suggest the importance of effective marketing communications information management in order to avoid needless fear escalation (p. 466).

Marketing Communications Management & Public Relations

DMOs hold marketing communications management and public relations as core

components of their operating mandates (Pike, 2008, p. 288). Pike referenced Barry (2002) who defined PR as: "The process of managing how, when, and in what way you communicate, so that you may ultimately influence the behaviour, attitude, and perceptions of those important to you." More specifically, Pike identified some of the core spectrum of PR functions to include:

- ⑤ Achieving positive editorial media coverage
- ⑤ Engaging the public
- ⑤ Active management of communications
- ⑤ Application of strategy and creativity in reputation management

Figure 1. Spectrum of PR Functions (Pike, 2008, p. 288)

Pike continued to suggest that host community public relations plays an important role in the development of a DMOs media communications plan and may be effectively facilitated through a proactive media relations strategy. More specifically, Pike emphasized the importance of effective media relations to address perceptions developed through negative media publicity in order to respond and attempt to reverse impacts of incidents and/or media stories which may be detrimental to the viability of a tourism destination. Pike cited Ahmed (1991a) who declared that marketing activities may not be able to reverse a negative image. An example of the potential ineffectiveness of PR was presented by Warwick Rogers' opinion of the PR industry (Inside Tourism, n.d.) who declared: "Journalists, for the most part, still work in the interests of the public. PR and advertising people…operate only in the interests of money and bullsx@t" (Pike, 2008, p. 290-296, 341).

Effective communications management, media relations and PR predicates the necessity of a well-developed marketing communications plan. The Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC, 2007), produced a Business Plan and Games Budget document which incorporated a Risk Management Plan (p. 111) and a Communications Plan (p. 157). In the risk management plan, VANOC informed that risk management was a core management capability with a view towards achieving goals, maximizing opportunities, and minimizing losses. More specifically, VANOC identified a key deliverable as a: "Comprehensive and robust risk management framework, content and reporting" (p. 112).

Complimentary to the risk management plan was VANOC's Communications Plan (p. 157) which included provisions for the organization of a steering committee to facilitate effective communications planning and decision-making, while acting as a primary point of contact for effective integrated communications management (Pike, 2008, p. 262). More precisely, VANOC highlighted a key function within their communications plan to include: "Develop(ment of) an overarching Communications Plan for both proactive and reactive communications strategies in all key areas, including a crisis communications plan" (2007, p. 159). Interestingly, the crisis communications plan was not included within the VANOC Business Plan and Games Budget document, presumably in the interests of security. Similarly, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was in charge of the Vancouver Integrated Security Unit (V2010ISU, 2010) whose role was coordinating security activities between police forces, military stakeholders, and security forces during the event. Despite the availability of publically accessible information regarding Integrated Security Unit activities which may affect the public, details of specific communications strategies were not readily available, again, presumably for security purposes.

The Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC, 2009) in their "Leveraging Canada's Games: 2008-2012 Olympic Games tourism strategy" document made reference to their Crisis

Communications Plan (p. 16, 23), however, details of their crisis communications plan were not included in the strategy document.   The CTC did advise that as a part of their media relations strategy, the CTC would:

> Engage partners in the CTC Crisis Communications Plan and ensure that industry and government partners are informed and educated with respect to the working points of the plan, and to ensure any negative perceptions of Canada that may result from coverage of the Games coverage is mitigated through a communications strategy.

In concert with the CTC, Tourism British Columbia (TBC, 2005, p. 14) in their Service Plan referred to their Media Relations Plan; however, the media relations plan was not readily available on the TBC website. Furthermore, the City of Vancouver, a strategic partner with the CTC, TBC, and other municipalities involved in the games (namely, Whistler and Richmond), incorporated a "Communications and Media Relations" strategy within their 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games strategic plan, and referred to reputation risk identification and risk management strategies within the Managing Risk section of their plan (City of Vancouver, 2006, p. 23-24).

The first organizational challenge in developing a mega-event marketing communications strategy is to identify the lead agency to take ownership and leadership of the event as a primary point of contact and coordinator for other participating agencies (Parent & Seguin, 2008, p. 544). In the case of the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, the lead agency was the International Olympic Committee (IOC), however, the IOC entrusts organization of the games to the host country national organizing committee; in this case, VANOC (Singh & Hu, 2008, p. 930). As VANOC was a temporary entity, Singh & Hu advised that the IOC and host nation national organizing committee need to be coordinated and aligned carefully to ensure effective marketing communications leadership, as the time-line leading up to the event is limited (p. 937). VANOC subsequently coordinated communications between a range of agencies, including the Canadian Tourism Commission, the Canadian Federal Government, the British Columbia Provincial Government, Tourism British Columbia, participating municipalities (primarily, Vancouver, Whistler, and Richmond), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and other agencies.

Planning Strategy

Prideaux (2003, p. 285) suggested that Faulkner (2001) significantly advanced the study of tourism disaster planning by developing a contemporary disaster management framework (see Figure 2). Looking at media components in Faulkner's framework, starting with a "Pre-event" phase; pre-planning, prevention, and collaborative coordination for communications were advised between appropriate agencies. Precursor identification in the pre-event phase could provide early indicators of an emerging incident based upon a range of identified potential incidents. In the subsequent "Prodromal" phase, indication of an imminent incident would facilitate early media warning responses to minimize potential impacts to the public at large. The "Emergency" phase would utilize an appropriate media campaign to reassure or capture new tourism markets. A following "Intermediate" phase, where short-term needs were addressed would allow provision of a media communications strategy to assist in restoring services and returning to community to a sense of normality. A "Long-term" or recovery phase would support the opportunity to debrief and revise strategies as necessary. And finally, the

"Resolution" phase would facilitate a comprehensive review process to identify policy successes and failures and adjust policy to address any short-comings.

Prideaux (2003, p.296) citing Faulkner, referred to the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, and suggested that the subsequent downturn in tourism numbers and revenue in Australia, more specifically; may have been significantly mitigated had tourism planners and the Australian Government had a tourism disaster management framework in place. Ritchie (2007, p. 344) supported Prideaux' assertions by suggesting, "that a move away from response and recovery to reduction and readiness…will assist the tourism industry to more effectively deal with natural hazards and disasters in the future".

Tourism Disaster Management Framework

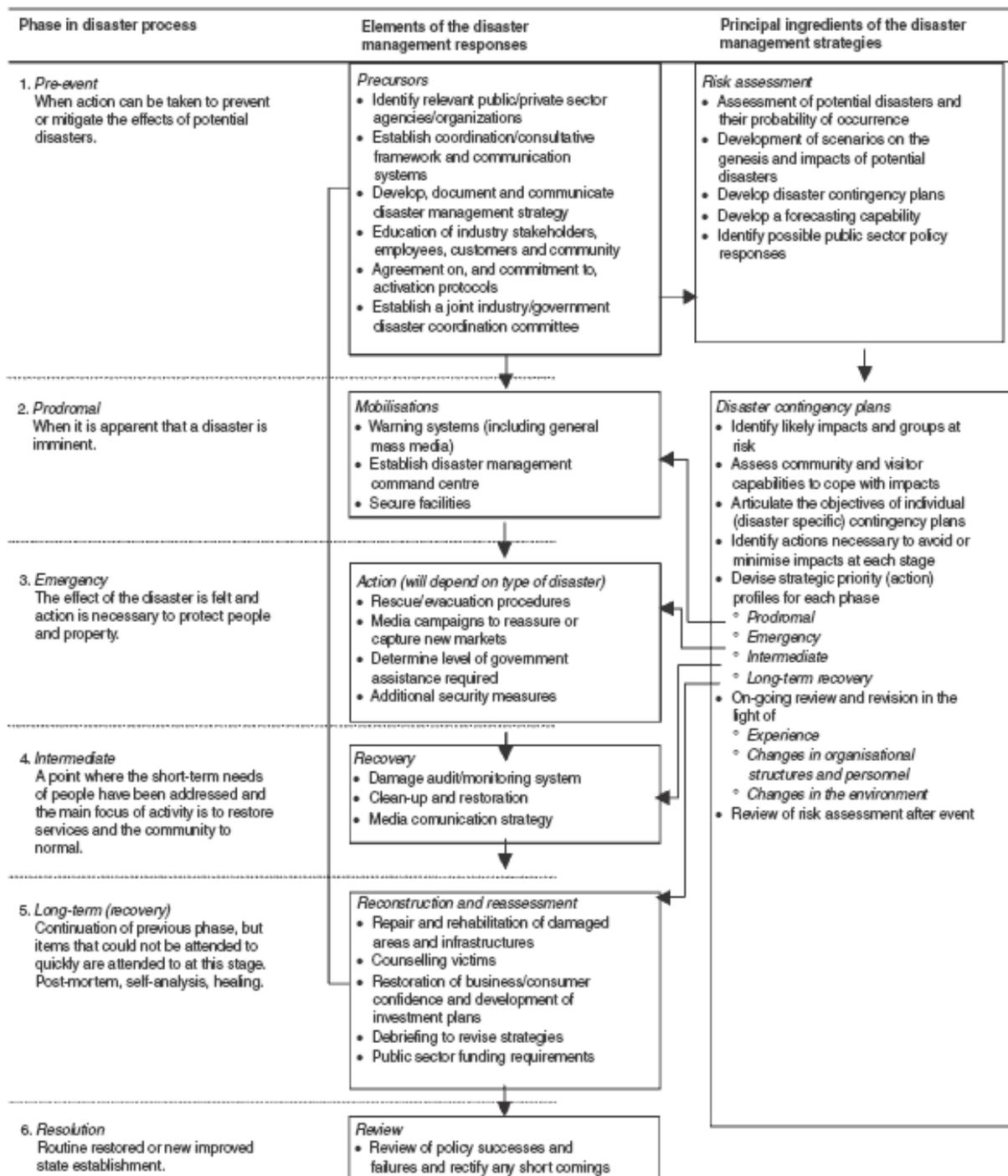| Phase in disaster process	Elements of the disaster management responses	Principal ingredients of the disaster management strategies
1. *Pre-event* When action can be taken to prevent or mitigate the effects of potential disasters.	*Precursors* • Identify relevant public/private sector agencies/organizations • Establish coordination/consultative framework and communication systems • Develop, document and communicate disaster management strategy • Education of industry stakeholders, employees, customers and community • Agreement on, and commitment to, activation protocols • Establish a joint industry/government disaster coordination committee	*Risk assessment* • Assessment of potential disasters and their probability of occurrence • Development of scenarios on the genesis and impacts of potential disasters • Develop disaster contingency plans • Develop a forecasting capability • Identify possible public sector policy responses
2. *Prodromal* When it is apparent that a disaster is imminent.	*Mobilisations* • Warning systems (including general mass media) • Establish disaster management command centre • Secure facilities	*Disaster contingency plans* • Identify likely impacts and groups at risk • Assess community and visitor capabilities to cope with impacts • Articulate the objectives of individual (disaster specific) contingency plans • Identify actions necessary to avoid or minimise impacts at each stage • Devise strategic priority (action) profiles for each phase ° Prodromal ° Emergency ° Intermediate ° Long-term recovery • On-going review and revision in the light of ° Experience ° Changes in organisational structures and personnel ° Changes in the environment • Review of risk assessment after event
3. *Emergency* The effect of the disaster is felt and action is necessary to protect people and property.	*Action (will depend on type of disaster)* • Rescue/evacuation procedures • Media campaigns to reassure or capture new markets • Determine level of government assistance required • Additional security measures	
4. *Intermediate* A point where the short-term needs of people have been addressed and the main focus of activity is to restore services and the community to normal.	*Recovery* • Damage audit/monitoring system • Clean-up and restoration • Media comunication strategy	
5. *Long-term (recovery)* Continuation of previous phase, but items that could not be attended to quickly are attended to at this stage. Post-mortem, self-analysis, healing.	*Reconstruction and reassessment* • Repair and rehabilitation of damaged areas and infrastructures • Counselling victims • Restoration of business/consumer confidence and development of investment plans • Debriefing to revise strategies • Public sector funding requirements	
6. *Resolution* Routine restored or new improved state establishment.	*Review* • Review of policy successes and failures and rectify any short comings	

Figure 2. Prideaux (2003, p. 285), Source: Adapted from Faulkner (2001).

Pro-active & Reactive Strategies

When early warning indicators are identified through the provision of a marketing communications and/or an incident management planning framework, actionable responses may be more effectively executed. Pro-active strategies include preparation efforts and awareness creation. Reactive strategies include disaster communication, resource management, stakeholder collaboration, and resolution (Xu & Grunewald, 2009, p. 121). de Sausmarez (2004, p.167) cited Milo & Yoder (1991) suggesting that media reporting may significantly influence the public's perception of an incident. Effective public relations management is necessary to ensure that media coverage is accurate and is not unnecessarily exaggerated. de Sausmarez also referred to Luhrman (2000) who argued that "credibility and transparency of information and strategy are crucial factors in recovery (post incident)". Furthermore, clear, open, and honest communication throughout the duration of an incident may assist in reducing fear and anxiety on behalf of the public as well as support more efficient information transfer between relevant stakeholders (de Sausmarez, 2004, p. 168; Massey, 2005, p. 101). Fall (2004, p. 242) suggested that the tone of PR communications should shift from an emphasis of advertising and promotion pre-crisis to an emphasis on public relations during and following a crisis event.

As stated earlier, mega-events predicate a substantially larger and more complex matrix of multiple stakeholder agency involvement with a correspondingly challenging communications environment. Adding to this the multitude of factors which influence the core attractiveness of a destination, or in this case, a mega-event; indicates the necessity to conceptualize the scope of interactions beyond just the destination or even the mega-event itself. Massey suggested that the interconnectivity of our global economy results in increasingly broad-based global impacts of significant incidents. Massey continued to advise that planners should be cognizant of the potential global repercussions of significant incidents and incorporate planning strategies with a view towards industry-wide and multi-sector outcomes (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003, p. 120-122; Massey, 2005, p. 112). This larger or global view also suggests that the resources, influences, leadership, and leverage that governments can provide are absolutely necessary to facilitate larger-scale communications management capacity (Xu & Grunewald, 2009, p. 122; Prideaux, 2003, p. 296) and thus justify the development of public-private partnerships.

Knowledge/Experience Sharing

Ford (2005, p. 1-2) advised that the United States Government, as analyzed by the US Government Accountability Office (GOA), that the coordination of multi-agency resources from the US to support and enhance security posturing for the 2004 Athens Olympics required significant strategic review of past mega-events as well as early initiation of planning. The major security-focused agencies from the US alone included: the Department of State, Department of Justice, Homeland Security, Defense, Department of Energy, as well as intelligence agencies. Ford identified key lessons learned following the Athens Olympics to include: the importance of assessing a host country's security capabilities to assist in determining the level of resources necessary for (the US) allocation (and to manage costs, as expenses tend to increase closer to Games time); and the importance of appointing a primary point of contact agency to coordinate and manage communications (p. 3). Specific to communications coordination is the process, structure, plan, and capability to share communications with all relevant stakeholders, not just the US's agencies. This would include the host country as well as

allied agencies from six other countries, in this case (p. 10).

Conclusion

Public relations, media communications, and marketing communications strategy planning for mega-events requires considerably more planning and coordination than standard events due to their complexity, size, scope, and logistics. In the case of an Olympics Games event, and for the purposes of this paper, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Whistler and Vancouver; the public relations implications of a significant incident, crisis, disaster, political event, or media story may have negative impacts well beyond the event and host nation. Unexpected natural disasters may occur anywhere at any time, therefore indicating the importance of emergency preparation, particularly when gathering together many thousands of participants and spectators for an Olympic Games. More evident, however; is the potential for an intentional incident, or more specifically, a terrorism event, designed to disrupt a mega-event with far-reaching, global implications.

Destination management organizations and participating organizing committees hold the responsibility for taking a leadership role in planning and coordinating an effective marketing communications plan to facilitate positive media communications management and public relations outcomes. The complexity of effective mega-event public relations communications, especially in consideration of the large number of agencies, regions, governments, and countries involved in an Olympic Games, necessitates the use of best-practices planning management frameworks to ensure that event organizers are basing strategic marketing communications decisions on lessons learned from past mega-events and other Olympic Games. Organizers also need to be cognizant of global-scale political and cultural trends in order to ensure that PR contingency plans are developed to address contemporary issues. This will more effectively position organizers to be better prepared to identify and respond to incidents as they emerge, potentially mitigating or at least lessening negative impacts and expediting recovery. As Ritchie (2007, p. 344) advised, "a move away from response and recovery to reduction and readiness… will assist the tourism industry to more effectively deal with natural hazards and disasters (and other significant crises) in the future".

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