HVS

Disaster Management Plan for the Hospitality Industry

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The idea behind India's 9/11 was to do a Marriott at the Taj, i.e. like the Marriott was reduced to rubble in Islamabad, the same was expected to be done at the Taj... To reduce India's symbols of economic strength, even as the country struggles with a slowing economy... To hit hard the visible symbols of pride of the country, which the historic Taj was... To create an atmosphere of insecurity in the country: a visit to the grocer maybe as safe/dangerous as that to the Taj.

Terrorism is a reality in India, today. The Indian tourism industry, considered to be amongst the world's top three performers (behind China) - defined as countries set to grow fastest over 2007 and the decade to come – will be negatively impacted as tourists prefer to visit safe destinations. However, history shows that there are other popular tourist destinations such as New York, London, Madrid and Bali that have also suffered from terrorist attacks. These places and their countries have recovered from the sudden downturn in image that had a correspondingly negative effect on the international tourism industry and the country's economics. There are lessons to be learnt from the experiences of others. While Spain used a 'business as usual' approach in recovering from its terrorist attacks, Tunisia used 'counter messages' inviting tourists to create peace. Essentially, in due course and with correct marketing the image can be changed to a favorable one. It is our belief that there would be a recovery in due course as every destination at some time of its existence faces a threat from either a natural disaster or one through malevolent human action, as was the case in Mumbai.

Perhaps the need of the hour is the formulation of a framework for disaster management for the hospitality industry. A previous disaster that visited the hotel industry was the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami when coastal resorts/ hotels were wiped out or greatly damaged and most literature pertaining to disaster management in this industry deals with such scenarios. However, crises do not emerge just out of natural conditions. To start with, what is a crisis/disaster? Perhaps the best accepted definition is by Selbst who defines a crisis as 'any action or failure to act that interferes with an organisation's ongoing functions, the acceptable attainment of its objectives, its viability or survival, or that has a detrimental personal effect as perceived by the majority of its employees, clients or constituents.' In relation to tourism, Faulkner considers the principal distinction between what can be termed a 'crisis' and a 'disaster' to be the extent to which the situation is attributable to the organisation itself, or can be described as originating outside the organisation. Thus, a 'crisis' describes a situation 'where the root cause of an event is, to some extent, self-inflicted through such problems as inept management structures and practices or a failure to adapt to change', while a 'disaster' can be defined as 'where an enterprise... is confronted with sudden unpredictable catastrophic changes over which it has little control'. The incidents at the Taj and Oberoi certainly classify as disasters. And there is a need to learn from these disasters and not allow them to strike the death knell for the Indian hospitality industry.

There is a need to capture the experiences of the hotel staff and the measures they employed in guiding their guests through this dark hour. Hotel staff displayed tremendous courage and India's famed hospitality in the truest sense even at this hour. Scores of tales have emerged of unnamed workers hiding guests, feeding them, barricading doors, tending the vulnerable and issuing orders. A hotel worker, identified only as Mr Rajan, put himself between one of the gunmen and a family, taking the bullets in his own abdomen. Another example is that of a general manager who was seen assisting guests out of the hotel within the initial hours of the attack, but unable to save his own family. The staff of the hotel has emerged as heroes, reaffirming our faith in humanity, which had been stripped by the terrorists' remorseless and indiscriminate firing. There are many lessons to be learnt through this tragedy and the brave contributions of those who have put their own safety at

Summary

In the aftermath of the carnage in Mumbai, there are critical lessons to be learned. This article advocates for a disaster management plan to be consciously integrated into the Indian Hospitality industry.

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risk to save others should not go in vain.

Hotels - especially those vulnerable to such motivated violence as that witnessed at the Taj and Oberoi - should incorporate crisis management planning into their overall sustainable development and marketing/management strategies to protect and rebuild their image of safety/attractiveness, to reassure potential visitors of the safety of the area, to reestablish the area's functionality/attractiveness, and to aid local travel and tourism industry members in their economic recovery. These lessons should include the following:

Security would obviously be the most important element of this disaster management plan and guests at five-star hotels should expect to be checked along with their baggages. The way luggage is scanned through x-ray machines in airports, it should be also done in hotels. The screening should start at the very entrance where minimum damage can be done. Since this iconic bastion of hospitality has been stormed, hospitality too should sit up and be hospitable to guests who do not abuse their name and premises and threaten their very existence. The terrorists were met with ill-equipped and thus inadequate initial resistance when they stormed in. Hotels, thus, need to have their own effective security systems and intruder deterrents in place so that they can react immediately to the situation before essential time is lost in calling for help from external agencies. The security, especially, at the entry points and perimeters needs to be strengthened so that an easy walk in like at Mumbai is not replicated in future. Security should be supported by latest technology, for example a sensor like system by way of which the general manager would know that the security had been breached and immediate action may be initiated before being faced with terror at such close quarters. Since it was the National Security Guard (NSG) commandos who eventually evacuated the hotel, it maybe prudent to get them on board and learn from their experiences while formulating such guidelines.

Knowledge of hotel layout and who has this knowledge is critical as the recent crisis has shown. The NSG commandoes at the press conference clearly enunciated that the terrorists had a clear advantage as they knew the layout of the hotel well and were able to move about freely creating much destruction. On the other hand, the NSG were disadvantaged as they did not know the layout of the hotel and had to go room-to-room. In such crucial situations where knowledge is power, hotel blueprints should be available with the disaster management team so they can readily brief the security forces/rescuing agency. At the same time, care should be taken to secure them so that they do not fall into wrong hands. Moreover, like emergency fire exits, multiple contingency plans for exit of hotel guests in case of terrorist attacks should be in place. There may even be a need to take this reality into account when constructing new hotels.

A sophisticated **communication system** needs to be in place. Even though the cable network to the rooms where the terrorists were holed in was cut, they had access to updated information with mentors through satellite phones. A superior communication system that could perhaps jam the links of the terrorists and give hotel staff the upper hand in their communication with guests and external coordinating agencies needs to be evolved. The hotel must at all times have access to the most recent communication system. While technology can be made available it is important to practice it in dummy situations for enhanced effectiveness.

A coordinated, team approach is required to be developed, given the range of private and public sector organisations directly and indirectly involved. While in the Mumbai case the hospitality sector was the target, terrorism may be faced by any sector. Thus, it is incumbent to have a well coordinated security cover with a specified person 'incharge' and more importantly 'responsible and thereby accountable'. The government response and guidelines and the regulatory framework to provide the resources need to be put in place. A case in point is the obligation on the Telecom industry to provide the specified inputs to the security agencies. The security agency by itself has to have a person 'by name' made responsible to avoid having a typical fallout of passing the buck.

International security standards and guidelines that are well defined and internationally accepted should be evolved at this juncture by the international community. A case in point is the ISO 27001 and 27002, which are the international best practice information security management standards, defining and guiding Information Security Management System (ISMS) development. These will provide the necessary benchmarking for individual users to know the type of cover and the responsibilities that are defined and provided by that institution for its

guests. Most importantly, training, to staff needs to be regularly imparted in dealing with such situations.

The maxim in preparedness for disaster management is not 'if' a disaster will occur, but 'when'. It is for the 'when' that we must be prepared. Disaster management needs to be consciously integrated into the hospitality sector.