

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Social media and the Caribbean

Governments, tourist boards, and the travel industry spend millions of dollars each year to create a positive picture of the Caribbean and the visitor experience: a sense that all is well in a country and that a destination and a vacation will provide a happy and memorable time. They also have a network of information services providing news and information locally and internationally.

However, recent damaging coverage about deaths and violent criminal acts against visitors in a number of Caribbean nations has not only caused the media in key tourism feeder markets to question the safety of visitors, but is now resulting in interested parties, from lawyers to victims, disseminating negative messages on social media in ways that cannot be controlled and, if inaccurate, are hard to refute.

For example, in the Bahamas over the last year there has been a wave of serious crime against visitors and residents alike. It has become a national issue that is leading both the Bahamas government and the main opposition party to consider the reintroduction of capital punishment as a deterrent, and more generally much harsher sentencing of those caught and found guilty.

Reflecting local concern, particularly in relation to cruise visitors, the islands' print, broadcast and on-line media have offered extensive coverage and commentary on the issue, and separately the US Government has recently amended its travel advisory notice.

One particularly striking piece reflecting the challenges posed by on-line commentary appeared in the Nassau Guardian. It quoted Jim Walker, a US Attorney and a partner in the Miami firm Walker and O'Neal, as suggesting in his blog that Nassau 'may be one gunshot away' from seeing cruise lines drop the island from their itineraries. The newspaper also quoted Mr Walker as suggesting that the Bahamas had not listened to the concerns of the cruise lines and that the islands may be progressing along a path similar to that which led them to withdraw from other nations in the past. The attorney was also reported as saying that the Caribbean now had some of the most dangerous ports in the world which he named.

To be fair, Mr Walker is also a critic of the cruise lines. In recent months he has questioned a number of developments including the unwillingness of the cruise companies to admit to the scale of problems of on-board illness among passengers, and the way in which they deal with the disappearance overboard at sea of crew or passengers.

Mr Walker, whose views are available on his Cruise Law News blog, is just one of a number of professionals associated with the industry and new media whose opinions are widely read by travellers or those with an interest in the economics or politics of the region.

His commentaries expand on the huge success of sites like Trip Advisor which are causing visitors, quite understandably, to rely more on peer reviews, word of mouth and personal experience, to decide where they will travel to, and less on what national and industry marketing and country branding are telling them.

Whether Mr Walker's views are or are not accurate is not the point. What is apparent is that those countries or companies whose reputation he is questioning are for the most part either silent or have not been able to obtain equal coverage or social media followings for their view.

When it comes to addressing damaging comments in the mainstream media or on social networking sites, few in Caribbean governments or industry so far seem to have developed any viable social media strategy to address or respond to comments that may be damaging or incorrect.

Nor do many Caribbean politicians or business figures yet fully recognise the international power of Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter and how best to develop and use a social media persona to create and most importantly maintain a dialogue when times are easy. Instead, the most common approach is to message for domestic consumption at the time of elections or political events, be silent at almost all other times, and not seize the opportunity to respond rapidly when things go wrong.

A short while ago, Debbie Ransome, the former producer of the now sadly defunct BBC Caribbean Service, wrote in her online site Caribbean Intelligence about how the Caribbean tweets. She found that this varied by country, and was happening in many different ways, with the predominant themes being cricket, travel, politics and community support.

What she seemed to suggest is that despite the Caribbean's high levels of internet and social media penetration, the use of twitter and other platforms is still in its infancy as a method of image building and reputational management.

What this implies is that apart from having a traditional media strategy to address international concerns and reputational damage when rare events occur, such as the recent murder of a British yachtsman in St Lucia, there is a need to develop pro-active social media strategies.

By failing to act in good time to respond publicly to events, allegations or concerns; by not finding ways to remind that similar problems regrettably occur in the US or Europe; and, in the case of tourism, noting that almost all visitors have a safe and happy experience, the greater likelihood is, in relation to social media and blogs, as well as the mainstream media, that the case made by most Caribbean nations will go unheard.

What is clear is that reputational damage and comment is certain to grow, not least in the case of tourism because almost all visitors are on-line, increasingly use social media and say so when the politics, the judicial system, personal safety, and the rule of law are not equivalent to where they reside.

Addressing this will not be easy. What therefore may now be required is for governments and industry to determine and develop strategies that respond rapidly and honestly in real time to the inaccuracies and lack of balance that social media, blogs and on-line citizen journalism are prone to.

A robust, professionally managed response strategy may be expensive, but it is likely to be much less costly than the economic consequences of reputational damage.

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