



The Potential Impact of Coronavirus on Travel Industry Customers

- *Your response to a traumatic experience*

The Potential for Psychological Trauma

It is characteristic of the travel industry that events outside the control of travel businesses can have a major impact on customers and colleagues. Events such as poor weather, civil disturbance or industrial disputes can create delays, the unexpected closure of attractions, or other last-minute changes. This might lead to anger, disappointment and frustration amongst the affected customers. Anybody who was working in the travel industry at the time of the Volcanic ash emergency of 2010 knows what this is like.

Troublesome though they are, these events are not the same as psychologically **traumatic** incidents. A traumatic experience will cause distressing and disruptive reactions that may last for weeks, months or even longer. If your customers experience something traumatic and you fail to recognise it, or show little concern, or appear ill-prepared or unwilling they are likely to also experience Secondary Trauma.

Secondary Trauma is best described as the anger, bitterness and resentment that arises when people feel that they haven't been properly looked after. Secondary trauma generates the anger that fuels complaints, litigation, higher costs and reputational damage. And it isn't good for the people who are angry to be carrying that anger with them for a long time.

What causes Psychological Trauma?

The best indicators of an event being traumatic are the presence of intense **fear** and/or **helplessness** and/or **horror**. These reactions are completely **subjective**. It is irrelevant whether or not **you** objectively think that your customer's experience doesn't seem frightening. If it is very frightening to them that is an indicator of likely traumatic reactions.



Let's unpick what that means.

It means that your response should be guided by the customer's subjective experience.

Sometimes this isn't difficult to interpret.

Imagine you knew that your customer had been tied up and held at gunpoint for hours whilst their belongings were ransacked and they were repeatedly threatened. You'd know that their experience was very likely to be traumatic, and that you should therefore be urgently expressing care and concern for them, and doing whatever you could to help. You wouldn't need to make a carefully considered calculation based on expert guidance first.

But there are many occasions when it isn't so clear cut whether or not a customer's experience is likely to be traumatic. And of course, you can't read your customer's mind. You can only make an informed decision.

Here is a question you should ask yourself to help with that decision...

*Based upon what you know so far, do you think that your customer
is likely to have felt intense fear and/or helplessness and/or horror
when (it) was happening to them?*

You may not have much information available to help you answer this question. You may feel it isn't possible to come to a definitive decision ...yet. But rather than delay whilst you await further information it is usually best to err on the side of caution. Waiting is likely to be perceived as an unwillingness to help, or an inexcusable lack of preparedness.

Coronavirus Quarantine (COVID-19)

Let us use the information above to interpret the experience that some of your customers might have during the COVID-19 epidemic.

You might be tempted to think that a medical examination by trained professionals, leading to treatment or precautionary quarantine under medical supervision could be reassuring to your customers. But it is reasonable to imagine that in fact it would be very frightening. Enforced and lengthy quarantine is also very likely to produce a feeling of intense helplessness.

So, although customers might also witness something **horrific** this is less likely. Instead it will primarily be **fear** and **helplessness** that we should expect.

Other aspects of this experience that would make the situation more traumatic include:

- Being far from home
- Little or no understanding of the local language (and poor availability of interpreters)
- Poor communication links with home
- Scant or no contact with reassuring local representatives such as consular officials

An experience like this is very likely to result in the distressing and disruptive set of reactions called psychological trauma. These reactions may be persistent, lasting long after people are released from quarantine and allowed to return home.

When people suffer something traumatic far from home, such as during a vacation, they often find that their recovery doesn't even seem to begin until they finally get home, even if they may have been safe for some time before they returned home.

What should you do?

Any of your people who have attended one of Clarity's Defusing Workshops or Crisis Management Workshops will remember learning about the Principles of Defusing. It will also be helpful if they can take a little time to scan over the manual entitled "The Role of a Defuser" that Defusers were given.

These four simple Principles should underpin your response throughout any event thought likely to cause psychological trauma to your customers or colleagues.

Principles of Defusing:

- Show care and concern on behalf of yourself and your organisation
- Show that you are taking the event seriously
- Offer help, support and information – as much as you reasonable and realistically can
- Let them know what support is available or is going to become available

How?

Don't waste time. Establish contact with your customer(s) by whatever means are realistically available as soon as you can.

Be proactive. Don't wait for them, or for someone on their behalf, to come asking for help. Once that happens it is likely that you will have already lost goodwill that you can never fully retrieve.

Be personal. Try to avoid communication that is worded as if it is being sent to many people or is phrased in 'corporate' language. Whenever possible take care to refer in your communication to the specific circumstances of the individual you are concerned with.

Say "sorry". Saying sorry doesn't mean it is your fault, or that you are accepting liability. It simply means that you are sorry that this has happened. Why wouldn't you be?

Provide practical help if you can. A cellphone with a local SIM card can be incredibly helpful; as can be reading material or some clean clothes.

Don't forget family members. Even if you know that the affected individuals have been able to contact their relatives it will usually be a good idea for you to do so as well, as long as this doesn't infringe confidentiality.

What else?

Don't hesitate to get in touch if you think we may be able to help or advise. Our contact details are at the bottom of the page.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Martin Alderton".

Martin Alderton
Managing Consultant

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mark Bradley".

Mark Bradley
Associate Director