Papua New Guinea tourism crisis management insights: Lessons from COVID-19

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Abstract

Tourism can show a considerable capacity to rebound after a crisis. However, in the short term, the impact of negative events on the sector can be significant. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority undertook a study on the management of the pandemic by the tourism sector and the organizations' role in managing the impacts of COVID-19. The study employed a quantitative research method and used convenience sampling. Data were collected using survey questionnaires, facilitated by Survey Money. Statistical analysis was the approach taken to help draw meaning from the data, this was done with the help of Microsoft Excel. The study found that communications, crisis management strategy and tourism specific support are essential elements for implementation to support crisis management in the tourism industry in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Findings from this study add to the literature by offering a better understanding of tourism destination crisis management in PNG.

Keywords: crisis management strategy, communications plan, communication tools, safety and security, Papua New Guinea.

Introduction

A safe and secure place is an essential factor for a tourist destination (Beirman, 2016; Kordic et al., 2015). The tourism sector has a vested interest in securing travel and mitigating the impact of crises. The economic impact of natural disasters has increased at $335 billion in 2017 and the reach of epidemics has risen, draining $570 billion from the global economy (WTTC, 2019). The perceived level of safety and security is a key decision-making factor for travellers in selecting their destinations. Epidemics and outbreaks have become the new normal; with outbreaks such as H1N1 to the current COVID-19 estimated to have had a global economic impact between $45-$55 billion. The recovery time from disease cases took 19.4 months on average, with a range in recovery from 10 months to 34.9 months (WTTC, 2019).

The implications of crises increasingly require governments to engage with the private sector to improve crisis preparedness, management and recovery plans (PATA, 2020b). The effective management of a crisis requires the rapid activation of emergency plans as well as quick, accurate and transparent communication (PATA, 2020a). Responsiveness to ensure a speedy recovery should emphasize transparency, readiness and confidence; inviting the world back when ready, enticing visitors to return, building on a destination's tourist segments and rebuilding infrastructure strategically and smartly post-crisis (UNWTO, 2020).

Many countries have a national system for disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management, normally headed by a government department (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Where crises affect tourism, these should link tourism-related stakeholders with civil defence and community response groups. Tourism should be integrated with existing systems, strategies and processes of national disaster risk management (COMSEC, 2017). After a crisis, quick actions for the recovery of the tourism sector can secure the employment and the life of community people who work for tourism and eventually lead to the recovery of the entire community from the crisis. A well-prepared tourism crisis management strategy can enable this.

Crisis tourism management in Papua New Guinea

PNG has had a reputation of being an unsafe destination, despite strong natural and cultural tourism products. PNG Tourism Promotion Authority (TPA), the national tourism organization has made significant efforts to communicate with the rest of the world that PNG is a safe destination. The main mandate of TPA is to promote PNG's many attractions to the rest of the world (PNGTPA, 2007). This has been done through various international and domestic market promotions and awareness.

Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, TPA undertook the development of a Crisis Management Strategy to identify, manage and mitigate crises or risks faced in the PNG tourism industry. In particular, sentiments from tourism stakeholders were considered important to determine the role of TPA in crisis management. This will assist the national tourism organization (NTO) to better prepare its' support to the PNG Tourism Industry to cope responsibly with crises and contribute to the sustainable and resilient development of the sector. An NTO can have a profound impact on how quickly and successfully the tourism industry can get back on its feet after a crisis event (Tourism Australia, 2020). Education, preparation, effective response to a crisis and management of the recovery process are critical for a tourism destinations' rapid recovery from a crisis event (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Methodology

The Crisis/COVID-19 Management Survey provided the context to the development of a PNGTPA Crisis Management Strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic has motivated PNGTPA to be better prepared when faced with crises that may have consequences on the tourism industry. As a strategy by PNGTPA to assist in formulating a crisis management plan, a survey was conducted to allow tourism stakeholders to share their views and preferences on how PNGTPA can improve in its response towards crisis management. The survey comprised questions related to pre-crisis/COVID-19, crisis/COVID-19 response and crisis/COVID-19 recovery. The survey aimed to identify in pre-crisis, the tools the industry stakeholders need; to understand industry stakeholders' information needs in response to crisis/COVID19 and to identify what additional resources and support industry stakeholders might require during the recovery period in crisis management/COVID19.

Participants were given the opportunity to share their views from 5th to 23rd January 2021 using Survey Monkey, an online platform used for collecting feedback through a questionnaire. Links to the survey were distributed through email and social media on

PNGTPA channels inviting participants to complete the questionnaire. The responses received were from tourism private and public sectors that self-selected to participate in the survey and not from a structured sampling across tourism sectors. Additionally, paper-based surveys were distributed to participants at the PNGTPA Tourism Master Plan Validation Workshop, January 22nd, 2021. The survey approach used a non-random sample and therefore the results cannot perfectly extrapolate to the entire tourism industry. All results are shown in aggregate form. Statistical analysis in the form of Microsoft Excel (spreadsheet) was employed to categorise and understand the data that was collected for this study.

The survey yielded 112 responses. Of these, 61 were from the tourism industry. There also was a strong contingent of public sector participants related to the tourism industry who participated, comprising 51 participants. The respondents self-selected their sector type; accommodation, hospitality, transport, tour operations, tour wholesalers, attractions, travel agents and meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) (Figure 1).
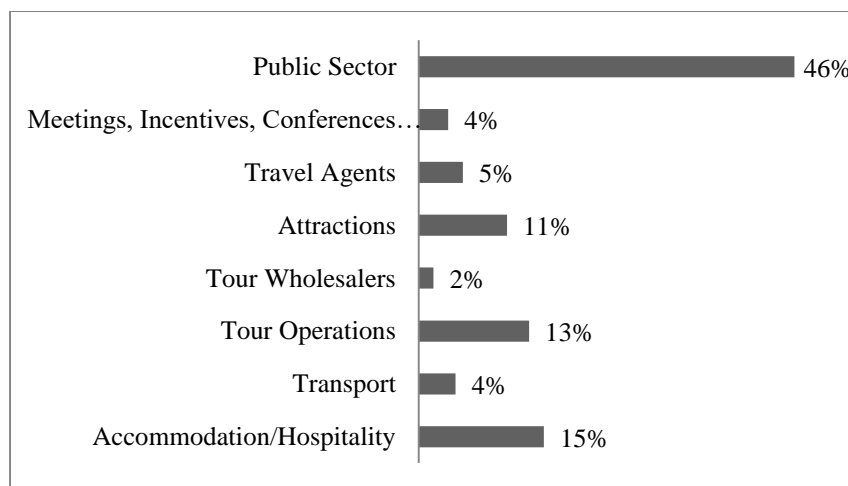

Figure 1: Sector of respondents

The profile of the respondents showed that half of the stakeholders were in the 25-39 demographic. In comparison, the public sector had the majority from the 25-39 demographic, industry stakeholders were mostly in the 40-59 demographic (Figure 2).
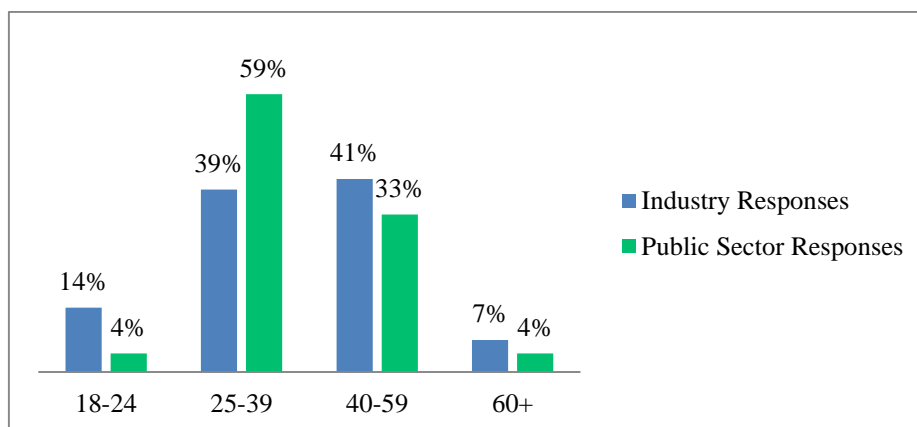

Figure 2: Age of respondents

Overall, there were more female responses with the private sector (55%) than the public sector, which had more male responses (55%). Moreover, half of the respondents were from the tourism private sector (54%) while 46 percent represented tourism public sector stakeholders.

Findings and discussion

The study found that communications, crisis management strategy and tourism specific support are essential elements to support crisis management in the PNG tourism industry. This will help TPA prepare its support to the industry to cope responsibly with crises and contribute to the sustainable and resilient development of the sector.

Key findings 1 – Communications

Many stakeholders did not receive tourism relevant information from TPA in the immediate response to COVID-19. The industry, in particular, received less information during the immediate response to the COVID-19 period compared to the public sector. The majority of tourism stakeholders were aware of the COVID-19 responses of the National Government. However, in terms of tourism specific efforts in COVID-19, stakeholders were more aware of information and initiatives from global tourism organizations. In terms of differences between the industry and public sector stakeholders concerning tourism efforts in the pandemic of national and provincial associations, the industry was less aware of associations tourism efforts compared to the public sector. There is a strong need for the NTO to support its stakeholders in crisis management.

Receiving tourism relevant information from TPA

Tourism stakeholders were asked if they received information from TPA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Half (51%) of respondents indicated that they received tourism relevant information from TPA prior to the pandemic. However, immediately after the pandemic, there were low levels (21%) of flow of tourism information from TPA. Likewise with tourism in recovery mode following vaccine development and some border relaxations, only 29% stated that they have been receiving tourism relevant information from TPA.

Results were further compared between industry and public sector. Industry responses on information provision from TPA before the pandemic were 51% whereas it was 46% from the public sector. Regarding the information provided in immediate response to the pandemic, there was a big difference from industry compared to the public sector (Figure 3). Likewise, in the recovery phase, 33% of the industry compared to 23% of the public sector claimed that they received relevant information.
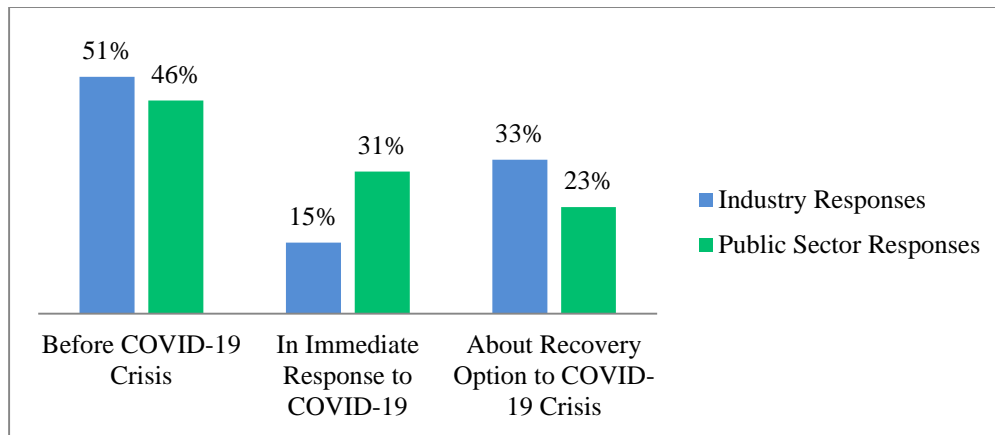
Figure 3: Receiving tourism relevant information from TPA

The results indicate some miscommunication and an opportunity to improve TPAs' communication and information procedures in crisis communication. Half of the respondents received information prior to the pandemic, however, immediately following the pandemic there was limited tourism information flowing to stakeholders. This could be attributed to the lack of a crisis management strategy, which would have detailed the appropriate responses to liaise with stakeholders.

Moreover, a lack of a coordinated communication plan and possibly a lack of information to pass on to the industry could be other contributing factors. Another dimension is capacity development; TPA personnel would need to be trained in the appropriate protocols to liaise with stakeholders in a time of crisis. Information in the recovery phase also needs to be improved from the significant low responses rate. More outreach is needed to the industry. In recovery, it seems more options could be improved to engage the public sector to support tourism industry recovery, likewise to increase information given to industry during recovery. Overall, TPA needs to increase its role in providing information and awareness in times of crisis. A communications plan that outlines protocols and information needed to communicate to stakeholders in a crisis is required including direction on human capacity development in this area. In COVID-19 recovery, perhaps thought to include an industry engagement plan with a focus on communications to reengage industry.

Awareness of the COVID-19 responses
A question was posed to ascertain the most popular group for tourism stakeholders where information flowed from the national government, provincial government, charities and non-governmental organizations, private sector and medical community. The majority (91%) of respondents was aware of the COVID-19 responses of the national government, followed by the medical community (55%), provincial government (52%) and private sector (51%). The least group where respondents were made aware of the COVID-19 responses were charities and non-governmental organizations (32%). The national government responses were more proactive and vocal in their reach. It could be attributed to different communication modes, their outreach or frequency of communication. Hence, the NTO could leverage the strength of national government channels to push tourism-related information and responses and utilize information from the national government to disseminate to industry. An important

consideration for TPA is to provide tourism information to relevant government stakeholders as part of the government engagement strategy.

Awareness of the tourism efforts

Respondents were more aware of efforts by global organizations (69%) such as World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), International Air Travel Association (IATA) compared to TPA efforts (59%). Meanwhile, participants were less aware of the tourism efforts of regional organizations (19%) such as the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) and Pacific Tourism Organization (SPTO), national and provincial tourism associations (19%) and provincial tourism offices and bureaus (17%).

The industry was more aware of global organizations tourism efforts compared to the public sector (Figure 4) while the public sector (18%) was more aware of regional associations tourism efforts compared to industry (14%). Also, the industry was less aware of the tourism efforts on a national scale from associations and provincial tourism offices than the public sector.
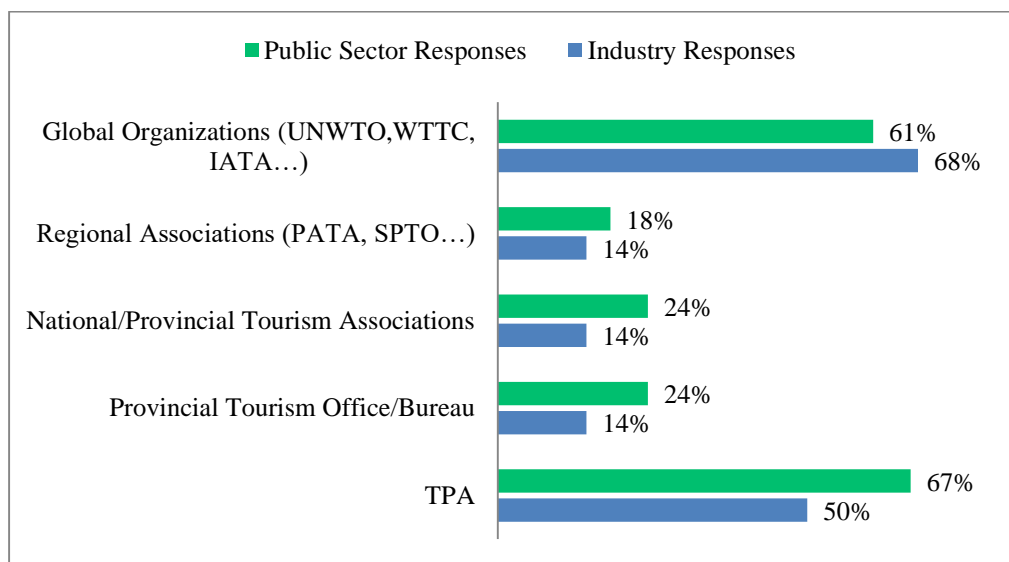

Figure 4: Awareness of tourism efforts

It is positive to note that respondents were aware of the tourism efforts of global entities and likewise on a national scale of TPA. However, it shows a significant disconnect in the outreach of tourism efforts in the provinces and national associations and regional entities. This disconnect could be due to a lack of efforts and initiatives or a lack of communication from these entities. Moreover, it could indicate that many industry stakeholders are not part of industry associations. There needs to be support for national and provincial tourism entities to increase their tourism information outreach. TPA could engage with industry associations to advance the outreach of their initiatives and membership, engage with provincial bureaus to advocate their information and disperse regional entities information to the industry.

TPA's role in crisis response

Respondents were asked to rank from the order of importance TPA's role in a crisis (Figure 5). The majority of stakeholders felt TPAs' main role is to provide links on industry and consumer websites to communicate up to date information about a crisis. The second role respondents felt as important is for TPA to communicate information to the media about visitor safety; this was followed by providing information about the destination including recovery progress. The area of less concern to respondents is in the role of responding to visitor enquiries about future bookings and cancellations.
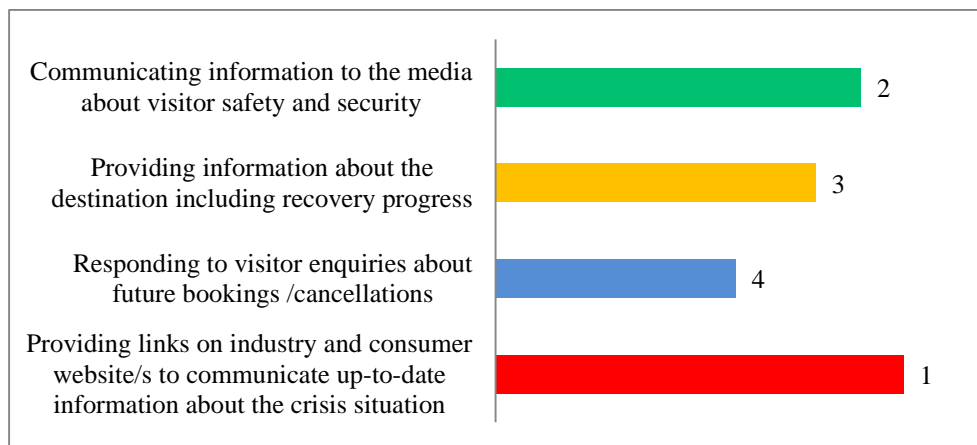

Figure 5: TPA role in crisis response

All stakeholders want TPA to primarily focus on providing links on industry and consumer websites to communicate up to date information about the crisis. Stakeholders need this information to assess and prepare their operations to manage a crisis. Stakeholders felt that the media plays an important role and expect TPA to work closely with them. In addition, as the industry moves towards coping with the pandemic, they are seeking information on recovery. The provision of a communication plan is essential for the implementation of information and awareness including up to date information. Any communication plan must include media engagement.

Available participatory forums or information to identify and meet your operation/organization needs in response to the crisis

The majority (74%) of respondents were not able to find any participatory forums or information to identify and meet their organizational needs in response to the crisis. While those that were to find (26%), did so through forums on social media as well as on global and local platforms and through online through various Websites.

There were many forums and platforms providing tourism relevant information which stakeholders were not aware of. They could have lacked the information to find these forums. Another possible consideration is that TPA was not aware of industry operational needs in the initial response to the pandemic to better support the industry with the relevant information they required. Moreover, for those that did find participatory spaces and information perhaps

TPA could look into partnering with or sharing information from these platforms. Further research needs to be conducted into industry operational needs post-pandemic.

Receiving crisis updates

Results show that there are preferences for the different modes of communication; social media (76%), email (73%), press release (63%) and website updates (59%). The next popular method of communication is newsletters (44%), meetings (30%) and videos (30%). In terms of other modes of communication, respondents mentioned the use of SMS, person to person, call centres and information booths.

Upon further analysis of responses from the industry and public sector, there was some variation in the preference of receiving crisis updates. The industry felt email communication was the most preferred method as opposed to the public sector preference for social media updates (Figure 6). In addition, another variation was in the importance of press releases, where the public sector (76%) felt that they were a more important tool for communication of updates as opposed to the industry (46%). Moreover, the industry felt a newsletter is a more popular form of communicating updates compared to the public sector.
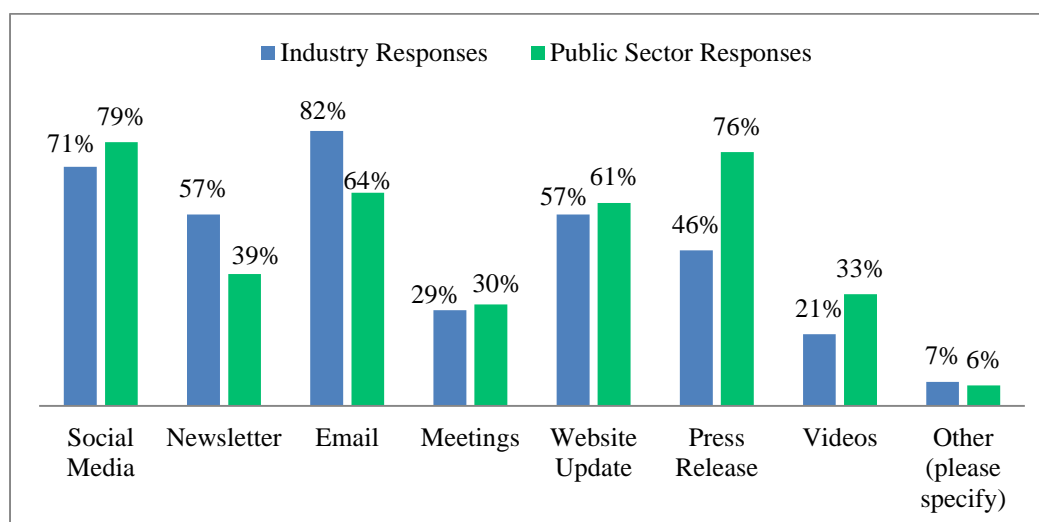

Figure 6: Receiving crisis updates

The general preference for social media means additional short real-time updated information provision is needed. Hence, TPA needs to focus some of its social media updates on crisis updates. Preference for email communication indicated that most industry operations regularly check emails. Moreover, the popularity of press releases as a mode of communication indicates that stakeholders want official statements from TPA. The variations in responses demonstrate that there need to be specific communication tools for specific sectors. For instance, the top four modes of communication the industry prefer is email, social media, newsletter and website updates as opposed to the public sector, which prefers social media, press releases, emails and website updates. TPA would need to update industry email listings as well as newsletter listings. Social media updates may consider including hashtag # on crisis updates to assess all crisis-related responses. Specific information can further be channelled to a COVID-19/crisis management page on the TPA website; likewise

ensure that templates on social media, email, website updates, press releases and newsletter templates are included in a TPA Crisis Communication Plan.

Key findings 2 – Crisis management strategy

From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many industry operators now have a risk management or crisis management plan. However, just over half of tourism operator respondents do not have a cancellation policy. All stakeholders advocated for the NTO to have a crisis management strategy.

Risk/crisis management plan

Tourism stakeholders were asked if they had a risk management or crisis management plan. This question lies at the heart of crisis management. Respondents (63%) stated that from COVID-19 their operations now had a risk management or crisis management plan (Figure 7). About 37% stated that their operations still do not have risk management or crisis management plan.
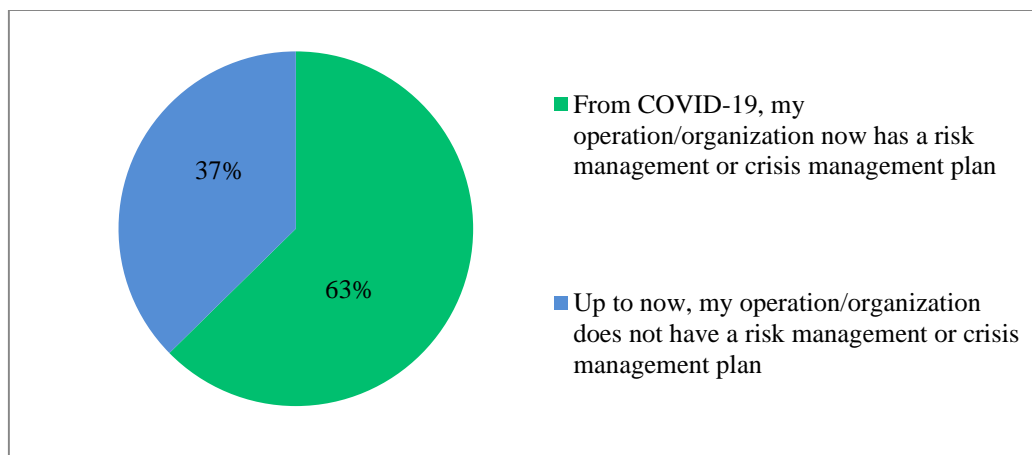

Figure 7: Risk/crisis management plan

All tourism operations need to have a risk management or crisis management plan to help identify the potential risks and seek a holistic approach in managing a crisis. The impact of the pandemic caught many operators unable to deal with the immediate closure of borders and the risks associated with the pandemic and how to manage it. There needs to be support to provide access to crisis management workshops or similar training. Likewise, the inclusion of crisis management tips on various communication channels such as websites, as well as regular information such as articles and case studies on aspects of crisis management is necessary.

Cancellation policy

In the event of a crisis, tourism businesses may be required to close such as through flight cancellations or access to their businesses may be closed such as roadblocks. This was the case in the recent global pandemic. In such cases, businesses are legally obliged to refund deposits for bookings that fall during that time. Hence, tourism businesses need to have reference to a cancellations policy or statement as part of their operations. From COVID-19,

less than half of respondents (47%) now have a cancellation policy (Figure 8) while 53% still did not have one.
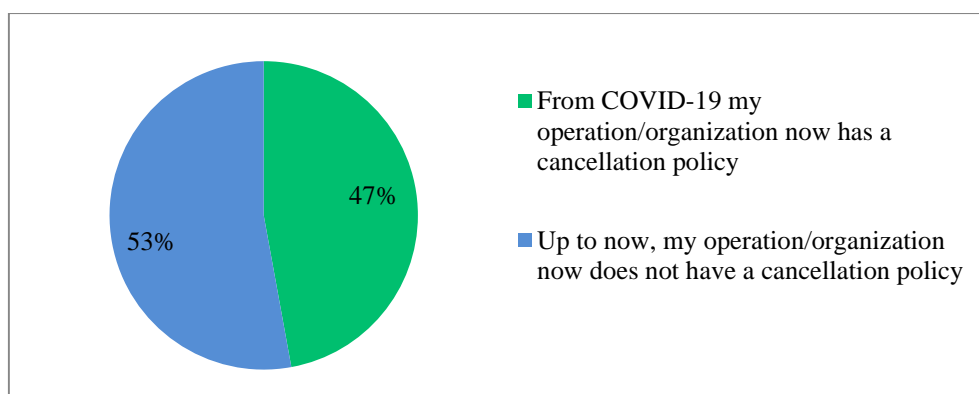

Figure 8: Cancellation policy

COVID-19 brought border closures and thus travel cancellations. There was also the closure of tourism sites and attractions, flight restrictions and postponement of festivals and events. The PNGTPA COVID-19 Tourism Industry Business Impact Survey from April 14th 2020, showed that 1,606 plus bookings were cancelled between March 2020 to January 2021. How businesses manage their cancellations may have an impact on visitors' perceptions and satisfaction with a business and consequently the wider country. Advocacy is needed, especially for local operators and tourism small to medium enterprises to have cancellation policies. It is important to encourage businesses to have a cancellation policy, which should clearly state the refund terms for a deposit and is communicated to tourists at the time of booking to mitigate any risks associated with future cancellations. Likewise, it is important to incorporate cancellation policies and contingencies for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) events such as popular cultural festivals. The responses indicate that additional work needs to be done to educate the industry about cancellation policies and contingencies.

Should TPA have a crisis management strategy?
Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that TPA should have a crisis management strategy. This question lies at the heart of the survey; where crises can cause significant challenges for the tourism industry and the need for TPA to adequately support the tourism stakeholders to identify, manage and mitigate crises or risks. Such a strategy will help TPA better prepare the industry to cope responsibly with crises and contribute through this means to the sustainable and resilient development of the tourism sector. It is recommended that TPA develop a crisis management strategy.

Key findings 3 -Tourism specific support
Stakeholders feel that TPA's main priority in crisis recovery should be in prioritizing destination communications in recovery efforts. The tourism industry in particular felt that the NTO should prioritize training and upskilling in recovery efforts compared to the public sector, which felt that the priority should be in domestic tourism support and health and

safety protocols. Most stakeholders expect more support and information from TPA than before the pandemic.

In recovery efforts what should TPA prioritize?

This question from the survey looks into the role of TPA in crisis recovery and asked respondents to share their views on where TPA should concentrate resources in recovery. The respondents were asked to choose only one priority area. Generally, the top areas of priority for respondents were destination communications (24%), health and safety protocols (22%), training and upskilling (21%) and domestic tourism support (19%). Lesser areas of priority were support incentives (6%), recovery marketing (4%) and travel facilitation (3%). Travel insurance support was an area of priority listed but respondents did not feel this was a priority.

A further comparison was undertaken between industry and public sector responses (Figure 9). There were some variances where the industry's main priority is training and upskilling (36%) compared to the public sector, which felt both domestic support (27%) and health and safety protocols (27%) were the main priority. However, both agreed that destination communications were the 2nd priority area. It is also interesting to note that the industry does not feel that travel facilitation is the main priority area, which could be alluded to the fact that this area is not within the TPA mandate. Considering the close results, it can be said that the main priorities are in the top four areas of destination communications, health and safety protocols, training and upskilling, and domestic tourism support.
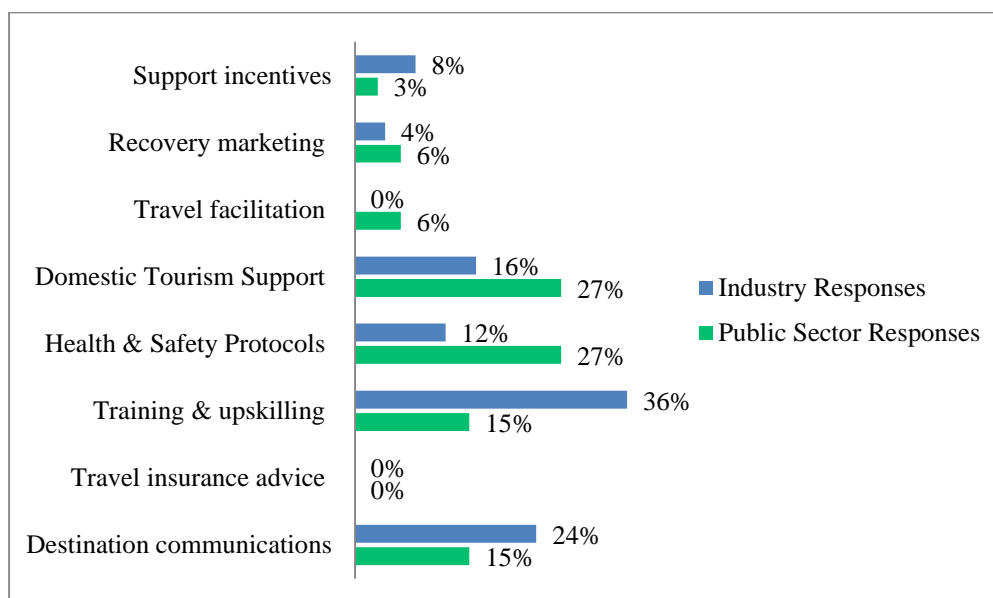

Figure 9: Tourism support

While domestic tourism support could encourage operators to develop, customize and promote domestic packages to revive travel within the local market, the development of destination communications plans, industry health and safety protocols, domestic tourism action plans, local product knowledge and digitization training initiatives and recovery marketing plan needs to be considered.

For the lesser areas of priority, TPA could consider working with tourism operators to ensure that they plan for a reduction in volume and greater personalization of service/new business models. The recovery marketing could work with operators to support marketing campaigns and marketing communication support. The respondents felt that travel facilitation to ensure an efficient and smooth opening of borders and travel insurance advice looking at supporting businesses with financial and legal advice are priority areas.

The nature of the pandemic and its unprecedented impact on tourism has meant that the industry is facing challenges in dealing with this unmatched event. In times of crisis affecting the tourism industry, the stakeholders expect more support from the NTO. To improve the expectations of stakeholders, more awareness of the role and responsibilities of NTO in crisis management should be done.

Human resource support in COVID-19
Stronger advocacy and promotion to mobilize resources and business advisory and information during times of crisis is required. The respondents want TPA to work with tourism operators to ensure that officially recommended protocols for health, hygiene and management of tourism operations are locally feasible and effective and support their implementation including initiatives, certification and waivers. In terms of training and upskilling, TPA could look into creating schemes and training to redistribute local product knowledge and skills and support innovation and digitization training initiatives.

The tourism sector needs immediate support to maintain employment. Due to a lack of resources, very few businesses are using this downtime to support the upskilling of their staff to improve the overall quality of tourism. TPA can liaise with the industry while staffs are idle to use this opportunity to work with universities, technical colleges, international organizations and training institutes to offer subsidized training programs. Consideration is given for mentoring services, especially for SMEs.

To support the burden on the tourism private sector employers, consideration to a program, supported by development partners, with specific interest in skills development, including certification, during the border closure would ensure consistency of standards across the sector. Likewise, when TPA creates healthy and safety guidelines for the tourism industry in COVID-19, support the industry is required to train their staff.

Recommendations

In light of the results from this study, the following actions are recommended for implementation to support crisis management in the PNG tourism industry from the experiences in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, this will lead to overall tourism destination improvement in building consumer confidence and maintaining markets in the overall PNG destination.

Communications campaign

Many stakeholders are unaware of the COVID-19 tourism information and initiatives to support their organizations. It is important to implement a clear and detailed communications program around the resources and guidance on application to enhance tourism business knowledge. TPA with relevant stakeholders could conduct outreach campaigns and provide vital information on COVID-19, its impact on the tourism sector, and on resources available on online platforms, with links to key statutory agencies and industry associations. This also provides an opportune time to utilize digital technology and advocate for its use by the industry as part of its recovery plans.

Provincial linkages

There are many operators in the provinces with little exposure to the information they need to support their operations. Additionally, as domestic tourism opens up, this will become an even larger and more urgent concern to ensure local operators are aware of the particulars of the pivot to domestic tourism. Domestic tourism is an opportunity for the industry to pilot and refine tourism offerings before international tourism resumes when borders are safely open. TPA should consider working with provincial offices and industry associations to identify appropriate linkages.

Crisis management strategy

Crisis communications is an essential element of a good crisis management system. It supports limiting the negative impact of a crisis by addressing the information needs of all industry stakeholders in an efficient, timely and responsible manner. A TPA crisis management strategy will support the organization in its roles and the lead up to, during, and after a crisis event. There needs to be support to provide access to crisis management workshops or similar training. Likewise, the inclusion of crisis management tips on various communication channels such as websites, as well as regular information such as articles and case studies on aspects of crisis management should be implemented. There needs to be provision for crisis management workshops or similar training that include elements on cancellation policies.

Crisis communications plan

A crisis management strategy should include a communication plan that outlines the protocols and necessary information to communicate to stakeholders in a crisis. TPA should increase its role in providing information and awareness. In COVID-19 recovery, an industry engagement plan with a focus on communications to reengage the industry should be included and engage the public sector in crisis recovery. TPA should participate in all government-wide forums, committees related to COVID-19 and crisis management, and provide tourism information to relevant government stakeholders as part of a holistic government engagement strategy. There needs to be support for national and provincial tourism entities to advance their tourism outreach. Further, engage with industry associations to advocate their information and membership to the wider industry and disseminate regional entities information to stakeholders.

Communication tools

The provision of a communication plan is essential for the delivery of information and awareness. Any communication plan must include media engagement. Further research needs to be conducted into industry needs in COVID-19 and crisis, promote and develop participatory forums for industry and improve communication and information access. TPA should consider updating its industry email listings as well as newsletter listings. TPA social media updates should consider including hashtag # on crisis updates to assess all crisis updates and responses with the TPA website to have COVID-19/crisis management page. Templates on social media, email, website updates, press releases and newsletter templates should be included in a TPA Crisis Communication Plan. Likewise, the provision of toolkits be included in crisis management strategy and for the provision of training in these tool kit areas.

Conclusion

The tourism sector has the potential to support the government in its effort towards COVID-19 recovery, especially PNG's long-term economic recovery and future growth. The tourism industry in COVID-19 is seeking advice on strategies to diversify and communicate. Support can be improved through close coordination by TPA, other relevant government agencies, development partners, provincial tourism officers and industry associations. Finally, the industry needs to ensure from a tourism perspective, that PNG is ready for a crisis so it can return to business as soon as possible.

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