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Using crisis communications planning as part of a sustainable agritourism operation

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Economic viability is a key factor to sustainability for agritourism operations. A variety of challenges, including issues and crises can hinder whether an operation is open, economically viable, and sustainable. A crisis communications plan can help address and minimize any negative business impacts from weather, climate, or inherent risk, therefore, helping maintain the operation's economic viability. Although many agritourism operators have experience responding to an issue or crisis, including the pandemic, many still lack communications plans, and while this is also a problem in other sectors, agritourism operations with plans have increased sustainability potential.

KEYWORDS

agritourism, crisis communications, communications plan, risk management, education

1 Introduction

A crisis at an agritourism operation can lead to economic losses or in some cases, closure (Henderson, 2007; Jaques, 2010; Berbekova et al., 2021; Tung et al., 2021; Valeri, 2022; Irlbeck, 2023). That crisis could be weather or climate-related, force majeure as the pandemic was, due to liability, an inherent risk on the operation, or caused by visitor actions (Beeton, 2001; Tung et al., 2021; Valeri, 2022). Agricultural operations have more inherent risk than some other types of tourism because of the heavy equipment, livestock, and terrain (Moraru et al., 2016). Many agritourism operators, and the practitioners that advise them, routinely engage in farm and food safety risk management (Moraru et al., 2016; Bosmann et al., 2021; Fountain et al., 2021). Despite this practice, a study in the United States found that 82% of agritourism operators cited liability as “somewhat or very challenging” (Hollas et al., 2023). Developing a crisis communications plan can help agritourism operators manage inherent risk and liability, and lead to more sustainable operations overall.

Strong communications practices can help improve outcomes and reduce liability for all industries, including agritourism (Beeton, 2001; Jaques, 2010; Webster, 2013; Zamanillo Tamborrel and Cheer, 2019; Berbekova et al., 2021; Valeri, 2022; Irlbeck, 2023). Crisis communication plans reduce vulnerability in several ways. First, they allow for planning while everyone can clearly and carefully consider all options, minimizing the number of decisions made during the incident, and leading to better overall decisions (Irlbeck, 2023). Second, this preparation leads to a faster response, again, because there is a plan or blueprint in place to begin responding (Harvard Business Review, 2004). The clear and consistent messaging developed during the planning process, along with spokesperson training, allows the business to maintain trust and minimize rumors, because of the transparent and timely communications (Harvard Business Review, 2004). Reputation and brand management generally produce more goodwill among customers, partners,

and the media (Harvard Business Review, 2004). The crisis communication planning process usually helps an operation identify potential legal and regulatory areas where an issue or crisis could occur, and generally prompts stronger levels of compliance (Jaques, 2010). An operation with a plan generally has fewer disruptions or resumes business operations more quickly because they have the plan and resources, and the approach to recovery is less panicked (Harvard Business Review, 2004). It is impossible to prevent issues and crises from ever happening at an agritourism operation (Valeri, 2022). Moreover, each agritourism guest defines an issue or crisis differently, and businesses must respond appropriately to each guest and situation (Beeton, 2001; Jaques, 2010). Therefore, although everyone prefers prevention, there are often instances where an effective crisis communication plan during and after an event can mean the difference between limited economic losses and business closure (Jaques, 2010; Irlbeck, 2023).

Other industries developed issue and crisis communications planning and management, and agritourism operators could use these as blueprints if they had access to them, training, and resources. The adventure tourism industry has inherent risks involved with its operations and decades of experience in planning and management (Beeton, 2001; Morgan and Dimmock, 2006; Henderson, 2007; Wang et al., 2019; Valeri, 2022). Agritourism falls in the adventure tourism definition: “While little consensus is found over what is defined as adventure tourism, the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) describes it as a trip that includes at least two out of the following three conditions: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion,” (UNWTO, 2014). Using the crisis communications planning blueprints from adventure tourism may be the most effective way for agritourism operations to accelerate their preparedness, and is an area where service providers, including those in the Cooperative Extension System, can support operations.

Agritourism operations can adopt the strategies and other crisis communication planning tools these operations use to help proactively develop a crisis communication strategy (Beeton, 2001; Henderson, 2007; Valeri, 2022; U.S. FEMA, 2023). All types of crises, from weather to an injured guest can impact an agritourism operation; others include illnesses, data breaches, and accidents (Beeton, 2001; Henderson, 2007; Valeri, 2022; U.S. FEMA, 2023). The National Agricultural Law Center (2024a) shows numerous examples of liability and inherent risk incidents in agritourism operations, from an injury sustained at a pick-your-own apple orchard in 1986 to a broken ankle at a pumpkin patch in 2020. In these cases, litigation followed the incident, and while a crisis communication plan may not have prevented the injury or lawsuit, it could still help with business reputation and maintaining the operation as the cases evolve (Harvard Business Review, 2004). These crises have direct impacts on the agritourism operation where they occurred and indirect impacts on the agritourism industry in general, as the reputation of the entire industry could be damaged by ongoing cases (Valeri, 2022).

Statistics show that recovering from a crisis or issue is challenging for a business. The National Agricultural Law Center (2024b) states that the majority of small businesses do not recover

from a food safety outbreak, and other research documents this too (Ma et al., 2017). Similarly, the U.S. FEMA (2023) statistics show that 25% of businesses fail to reopen after a weather-related disaster. The goal of crisis communication planning is to lower these statistics and help businesses maintain their sustainability.

Altogether, these create a strong case for agritourism operations to create issues and crisis management communication plans for their operations. Furthermore, communities coming together during and after an issue or crisis strengthens agritourism (Holladay et al., 2019; Fountain et al., 2021; Mahmoodi et al., 2022). Political support is important for agritourism success at all times (Bosmann et al., 2021; Mahmoodi et al., 2022), and even more so during and after an issue or crisis.

This perspective paper offers four processes for agricultural operations to follow, and for the service providers who support them to help implement. First, we provide an overview of issues and crisis management and further expand on why it is critical for agritourism operations. Second, we will review planning factors, followed by responding in real-time, and finally, best practices for agricultural operations.

2 Overview of issues and crisis management

Effective communication strategies can bolster economic and social sustainability, during prosperous and challenging times (Tung et al., 2021; Irlbeck, 2023). Moreover, good communication should already be part of the business strategy and guest experience on any agritourism operation (Bosmann et al., 2021). Good communication practices bolster a business's economic and social sustainability (Harvard Business Review, 2004). Economically, communications build trust with partners, consumers, and the community, leading all to invest in the business either financially, or with time and promotion (Harvard Business Review, 2004). Effective communication also builds trust and relationships, leading to social capital, and this in turn helps the operation become a community leader, creating a more inclusive space where diverse voices are represented (Valeri, 2022). Many factors influence business success, including policy, consumer support, and community engagement, and effective communication strategies support all of these and bolster economic and social sustainability.

Good business practices recommend preparing for issues and crises, however, in the agritourism sector, many operators are either working alone, or with a team that has multiple roles in addition to the agritourism operation (Moraru et al., 2016). This heavy workload is often necessary in developing operations for economic viability, however, often leads to delaying creation of issues management planning, including communications (Moraru et al., 2016). Networks and agritourism associations can help individual operations understand the benefit of planning and provide motivation and support during the planning process (Li and Barbieri, 2020; Traskevich and Fontanari, 2023).

Issues and crises are two different topics for agritourism or other business. A crisis demands immediate attention and

is an extreme situation that can have serious ramifications for those involved (Jaques, 2010). An issue can be ongoing and without negative impact, however, it can also expand over time and become or cause a crisis (Jaques, 2010). For example, the person with a broken ankle at the pumpkin patch in 2020 (The National Agricultural Law Center, 2024a) was an issue, however, this could have become a crisis if the cause of the broken ankle was something likely to injure other customers as well, such as soft wood on a bridge where multiple people fall through. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a crisis because all businesses immediately shut down, there was limited information, and operations may not have had the necessary cash flow (Traskevich and Fontanari, 2023). While issues management does not always require a multi-faceted communications plan, professionals advise strategically managing issues and conducting appropriate communications because it can help prevent crises long-term (Jaques, 2010).

Many agritourism operators have training as agricultural producers and may not be hospitality or issues management professionals (Moraru et al., 2016). Training and professional development through hospitality or agritourism associations, local universities, or Cooperative Extension Systems can provide additional expertise in numerous categories (Hollas et al., 2023; Irlbeck, 2023).

2.1 Planning factors

Once agritourism operations understand the importance and value of crisis communications management, they can begin the planning process. First, it's important for them to understand that starting with a plan, even a simple plan, is better than having no plan (Beeton, 2001; Valeri, 2022; Irlbeck, 2023). Next, they must consider all the factors of their operation and the various stakeholders that might be involved while enacting a crisis communications plan (Irlbeck, 2023; Morrison et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted all agritourism operations in business at the time to implement crisis communications in real-time, whether they had a plan or not (Mahmoodi et al., 2022). Research is ongoing on the long-term impacts of the pandemic on agritourism viability. However, individual operators can analyze their own response, and draft a plan based on how they communicated during the pandemic or another crisis, making changes where desired (Traskevich and Fontanari, 2023). Using one of the blueprints for crisis communications planning from the adventure tourism or other sector is helpful. Research, implementation, and evaluation identified the core components for an agritourism operator or the service providers working with them to include.

There are six steps in crisis and issues management planning (Irlbeck, 2023; Morrison et al., 2023). They are:

1. Identify the target audiences.
2. Create plans for potential situations.
3. Review the potential situations and policy with the insurance company.
4. Determine legal responsibilities and adapt the plan as needed.
5. Build relationships with community partners and leaders before they are needed and understand what is important to them and the target audiences.
6. Practice.

Each agritourism operation has several target audiences for their communications plan, including guests, vendors, neighbors, local officials, and prospective clients (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Irlbeck, 2023). The operator should list all potential situations and create plans for each, adapting the initial plan as needed for other situations. Review is important, especially with insurance administrators, as they can provide recommendations to further mitigate loss (Irlbeck, 2023). Laws and regulations also impact how crisis communications are conducted (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Irlbeck, 2023).

Most agritourism operations already have positive relationships with their community, and this political and other support is often critical to overall viability (Li and Barbieri, 2020; Bosmann et al., 2021; Fountain et al., 2021). Business relationships include municipal leaders, agricultural and tourism associations, the media, and partner businesses. These relationships are also helpful when responding in real-time because they can offer additional support and resources during the response, including providing damage control (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Irlbeck, 2023).

Having a plan is just the first step; implementation follows. Each agritourism operation should identify a spokesperson; often it's an owner or manager but select the person that can best respond to media inquiries or those of client family members in a professional and succinct manner (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Irlbeck, 2023).

Develop key messages and supporting information for the spokesperson, and tailor these to the situation when it arises (Irlbeck, 2023). The messages should be clear, concise, and consistent, as good communications practices recommend (Harvard Business Review, 2004). Having core value statements and crisis related draft statements that can be adapted help facilitate a timely and respectful response (Webster, 2013; Zamanillo Tamborrel and Cheer, 2019), while the core value statements are also beneficial in other business communications. Numerous research studies show that simple messages work best in regular and crises communications (Webster, 2013; Yeh, 2018; Zamanillo Tamborrel and Cheer, 2019; Irlbeck, 2023).

Training and preparation help ensure that poor communication does not contribute to the issue or crisis (Irlbeck, 2023). This training should include all employees who will have a role in the crisis communications implementation, and effective communications training is beneficial, whether it is related to crisis management or not. Therefore, the spokesperson should receive media training and have an opportunity to practice with the key messages and those of the potential situations an agritourism operation could face. Media training can include practice with cameras, answering questions, and redirecting an interview (Harvard Business Review, 2004). Practice crisis communication plan implementation annually at a minimum (Irlbeck, 2023). As a rule, spokespeople should always be honest in every communication (Valeri, 2022). Although most operations can imagine all sorts of crises or issues that may arise, they should also plan for if the host or a key team member is ill or otherwise unable to contribute, as this could constitute a crisis or issue

depending on staffing levels, operation location, and other factors (Irlbeck, 2023).

There are also some issues that naturally occur on an agritourism operation, for example, the prevalence of disease-carrying ticks or other insects. Agritourism visitors from urban centers or geographic locations without ticks may not be prepared to protect themselves or children from the hazards (Yeh, 2018). This is a prime example of where planning and an agritourism issues management plan can help the operation ensure that their visitors have a safe and happy experience, combining communications methods including signage and safety talks (Yeh, 2018).

Having a crisis communications plan is a best practice and agritourism operations can also take steps to mitigate their risks (Fountain et al., 2021; Hollas et al., 2023). Actions include ensuring all team members have basic first aid certifications and skills, having a plan in place with the fire department, and using appropriate signage and barriers to protect visitors.

2.2 Responding in real time

Responding in real time is when the agritourism operation implements all the planning, training, and practice. Again, each situation is unique, and the operation will tailor their response to the situation, using the crisis communication plan, including the key messages, as a road map for successful mitigation and recovery.

The people involved always come first in any issue or crisis, whether that is victims, guests, or the family of those affected (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Valeri, 2022; Irlbeck, 2023). The next step for responding in real time is to communicate early and often with internal and external partners and stakeholders (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Valeri, 2022; Irlbeck, 2023).

Tailor the media and communications channels used to different guests and stakeholders (Valeri, 2022; Irlbeck, 2023). Training during the crisis communications planning phase or offered by Cooperative Extension and other professionals can help operators identify the best channels for their business. Agritourism operations should also strive to provide their own story, as others will fill communication voids if the business does not. Positive relationships with media prior to an issue or crisis means they are more likely to reach out to the agritourism operation directly, rather than seeking information from other sources. It is always important for agricultural enterprises to be responsive to media, and even more so during an issue or crisis (Irlbeck, 2023).

The final aspect of responding in real time is following up with those affected and the community, if the crisis was specific to their operation, after the event or issue is over. Again, we focus on people impacted first, as they are most important. Next, the communications should address internal and external stakeholders, community members, and other potential visitors (Harvard Business Review, 2004; Irlbeck, 2023).

2.3 Best practices

Agritourism operations can use best practices for creating and implementing a plan, and this is another area where training

offered by Cooperative Extension or other professionals can help build capacity among operators. Similarly, best practices for daily operations will help minimize the need for an issue or crisis communications plan. The efforts in adventure tourism and other sectors of the hospitality industry provide a roadmap that agritourism operators can use for planning, and tailoring the practices to their operations further supports success.

The six best practices for issues and crisis communications management strengthen agritourism operations and allow them to maintain viability despite any challenges they may face (Valeri, 2022; Morrison et al., 2023). Best practices include:

1. Practice due diligence (signage, biosecurity, have a plan, train employees),
2. Conduct a safety talk with each group of guests that arrives.
3. Know your guests' skills (medical professionals, etc.).
4. Have community partners that you can rely on for assistance.
5. Review your crisis and issues management plan often and after any event.
6. Conduct a tabletop exercise and adjust the plan as needed.

Practicing due diligence often requires extra effort, as it is human nature to become lax when there is not a crisis or issue (Valeri, 2022). However, remaining vigilant implementing these best practices can help minimize future incidents, and it is always better to spend time with unnecessary preparation than regretting the lack of preparation later.

3 Discussion

Most agritourism operations have experience responding to a crisis, whether it was the pandemic or something else. This real-time experience is valuable in creating a formal plan and adjusting actions based on communications success and reflective analysis. While previous experiences are helpful in future issues and crises, it does not negate the need for a plan.

A proactive crisis communication plan can bolster the sustainability of an agritourism operation by potentially reducing financial risks and improving stakeholder communications, while also mitigating loss and prompting a more efficient recovery. Agritourism's goal is the long-term sustainability of operations, and planning can help. There are examples from communities that became more resilient after facing a crisis or issue. Utado is a municipality in Puerto Rico and their case study, Tetuan Reborn (Holladay et al., 2019) documents how Hurricane Maria devastated the mountainous municipality in 2017, and how the community members used agritourism and agrotherapy to help rebuild socially and economically. The long-term implications include improved public health and disaster resilience, among others (Holladay et al., 2019). While Utado's residents did not have a plan before Hurricane Maria, the ongoing sustainable development included planning, and it helped the community recover more quickly from the pandemic (Holladay et al., 2021).

Additionally, opportunities exist for agritourism associations to provide individual operations with resources and a network, bolstering social capital (Li and Barbieri, 2020; Bosmann et al., 2021). These benefits could be invaluable in promoting the development of communications plans for crisis management. The

social network and capital among agritourism operations promote shared learning, leverage the experiences of other members, and provide ongoing feedback and support to all involved.

Crisis communications plans intend to make business operations easier during stressful situations and contribute to the long-term sustainability of agritourism. Good communication practices cannot prevent or solve every issue or crisis that arises, but they can facilitate more successful and sustainable outcomes.

4 Conclusion

All businesses have inherent risks, however, these risks can be more serious in agritourism operations because of the activities involved and the farm-based locations. Naturally, operators prefer minimizing risk through best practices for business sustainability and viability, but agritourism operators also need to understand that issues and crises outside their control may happen. A crisis communication plan can help minimize damage, provide a narrative for the operation, and ensure guest and stakeholder confidence in the agritourism operation. Good communication is already part of every sustainable agritourism operation's business, and crisis communication builds upon this foundation through a series of planning steps that create an outline and procedures for addressing communications in these situations. Sustainable agritourism operators will tailor their plan to the specific situation, whether it is an extreme weather event or an injured guest. Although a crisis communication plan is not the only aspect of a sustainable agritourism operation, is part of the large picture that allows the business to thrive, serving both the owners and employees of the operation and the community.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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