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Tourism Strategy responses to Covid-19 Pandemic: Case Study in Air Transport

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is the major influence on the Tourism Management. Airline Industry is another major concern with unprecedented challenges. This research discusses topics in the area of crisis management with specific reference to contribute to the Strategic Plans for the Airline industry by employing an approach supported by qualitative analysis in the form of in-depth interview. The respondents were 8 managers from two different airlines operating at the Suvarnabhumi airport during September-October 2021 to investigate the strategy and the effectiveness of the strategy. The paper then proposes strategic guidelines for the management in the Airline industry. The paper concludes that crisis cannot be stopped but the impacts can be limited by the application and extension of crisis management plans. Insights can help organizations in sectors in Tourism to respond to current situation and drive business to speedy recovery after Covid-19.

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1. Introduction

According to the Covid-19 Pandemic, countries have implemented a range of strategies to minimize the impact of the pandemic in sectors in the Tourism Management. In terms of measuring the effectiveness of the tools, speed in the implementation of strategic responses is the key success factor. However, the crisis of limited resources and constraints of time is binding.

Therefore, each sector in the Tourism Management is needed for the plans and guidelines to prioritize and to recover rapidly for post Covid-19. In addition, the cost reduction practices and the application of strategy of
negotiations are introduced. It is clear that the pandemic affects the overall tourism.

Furthermore, specialists suggested that tourism management to remain the command like “staycations” and “workcations” (Divya, 2020). Moreover, the situation as the border closures, quarantine requirements and fear of spread, has placed difficulties on air transport sector. (Gossling et al., 2020). According to the previous researchers, air travel has been regarded as an accelerating factor for influenza (Browne et al., 2016).

Needless to say, the need for leisure travel and search for hedonistic getaways have been reduced.

As the crisis of Covid 19 Pandemic has posed the loss of business and challenges for the organizations, the researchers raised questions about the competence of the managers to manage crisis and preparedness for post covid-19. This paper investigates crisis management in the Airline Business and the effectiveness of the strategy.

The authors conducted interviews with key industry players as the managers in the Airline Industry.

The questions were asked about the consequences and coping strategies. Previous researches have studied on tourism crisis management; this research is intended to complement the perception of the complicity of crisis management in the Tourism Industry. After a brief introduction of the study framework, the literature is reviewed, then the findings are presented to highlight the implications and recommendations.

2. Literature review

Crisis is extracted from Krisis which is the Greek word. It means discernment or decision (Glaesser, 2003). Researchers in the previous studies applied in assorted ambiances (Laws & Prideaux, 2005; Ushakov, 2018; Kankaew, 2020).

In addition, previous studies mentioned a business crisis as an unexpected event which has the potential to discompose everyday operations. As a result, this requires action from managers (Faulkner & Russel, 2001; Laws et al., 2007; Santana, 2004).

It is noted that appropriate steps can lessen the damage and create an opportunity. In some situations, fundamental change might occur. A number of researchers have studied crises that can be helpful especially in management (Evans & Elphick, 2005).

The various types of concerns of crisis to business are based upon measures such as underlying reasons, gravity, form and scale (Booth, 1993). Previous evidences regarding tourism, Glaesser (2003) applies time pressure criteria to describe potential, latent and acute crises.

It seems that the tourism industry is susceptible to crisis and Faulkner and Russell (1997) mentioned it illustrated chaos theory whereby structures and processes exist on the edge of chaos. Nevertheless, crisis management is the ‘art of removing the risk and uncertainty to allow you to achieve more control over your destiny’ (Fink, 1986). It is suggested that managers should be energetic to envision crisis situations and be prepared for distinct scenarios. In order to cope well with the situations, learning lessons from experiences of crisis is the key success factors especially to future policies of the organizations (Mitroff et al., 1989; Vinichenko et al., 2019; Ushakov, 2014).

The improved preparedness is aimed to tackle future disruption (Cassedy, 1991; Evans & Elphick, 2005; Henderson, 2002; Sonmez et al., 1999)

In Tourism Industry, crisis is considered disrupting the functions and sustainability. However, they are somehow earning the benefits from various sectors in the industry. In tourism, crisis is a source of opportunities. For instance, travellers do not stop travelling, but they may do excursion in distinctive ways. Their fears about visiting a particular place can deliver choices to be more enticing.

The previous researchers suggest that crisis management in tourism is still rather new even though it has been a recognized in research topic in management since the early 1970s (Keown-McMullan, 1997). Author as Santana (2004) characterizes it as a continuing and expanded effort for organizations to take actions in the pursuit of acceptance and halt crisis. In order to manage crisis effectively, the stakeholders need to take into account each and every steps of the activities as planning and training. It is interesting to see the study of Glaesser (2003) mentioned about devising strategies which could handle and calibrate to dodge and handle with crises.

While Henderson (2007) explained that administering the crisis handling from preparedness throughout resolution aimed to minimize damage. Similarly, Dombey (2004) noted that several changes occurred from the impact of circumstance of SARS outbreak in China.

This has increased sense of hygiene at the restaurants, heightened sense of physical activities and reduction of spitting habits for healthy surroundings. Also, this led to the appropriate temperature in schools and health services
in hospitals.

The current pandemic may have similar origin, however unlike earlier SARS outbreak; the impact has been profound that it is still unfolding in current situations in many countries as United States, Brazil and India (Mohanty, 2020; Konarasinghe, 2020; Marques et al., 2020; Yeolekar et al., 2020). Post lockdown indicators and preparations would need a better understanding of the current situation.

To sum up, specialists suggested the directions as “staycations” and “workcations” to remain effective in near future (Divya, 2020).

3. Methodology

This research conducted to find the responsive strategy in airlines towards Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative method has been used to analyze by applying an in-depth interview. The respondents were managers of the two airlines operating at Suvarnabhumi airport in Thailand during September-October 2021.

The purposes were to gather information in management levels and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy being applied. The respondents will identify the lessons learned from the pandemic and the best response of the strategy.

The advantages of an in-depth interview are the information that one can discover new points in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The interview was structured with open-ended questions, and below are a few sample questions:

1. What are the new changes in operation strategies and procedures of the two airlines?
2. What are the corresponding operating strategies or further investment plan to improve?
3. What lessons can we learn from the pandemic?
4. What are your future plans and strategies?”

The interview with the respondents was conducted via online zoom meeting and lasted for about 40 min. The interview was recorded and then transcribed using a professional transcription service. Main themes were identified and key findings are summarized. This research utilized in-depth Interview involving managers working in the airlines at the Suvarnabhumi airport in air transport.

4. Results

The situation of the pandemic was the time of the study which was the period in September-October 2021, an in-depth interview was completed with the managers in the airline business. Table 1 presents classification of each group of the managers influencing the airlines and Table 2 summarized the information from the respondents which allow the researchers to determine the strategic responses into 3 stages which are during Covid-19, Covid-19 Strategic reaction and Post covid-19. Therefore, Two themes, including “Digital Transformation” and “Mitigate Sanitation Concern” are emerged from the interview and are summarized as follows:

Digital Transformation

It is evidence that human interactions have now shifted to digital experiences. For instance, retailers learn how to create experiences personalized for their customers. In the airline business as well, it is the time now for airline managers to consider taking into account of the travel history, preferences, and behaviours of the passengers.

So, the relevant information of preferred fare class, seats, and new destinations will then be suggested to the right segment of the customers. This can be extended into a real-life example from Covid-19. As the managers shared about the impact of challenged situation such as disrupted flight or cancelled schedule during the pandemic, the coping strategy that the airlines can take advantage of is the information of previous trip interests.

Due to the covid-19 restrictions and customer behaviours, digital has been the important drive during the pandemic to manage communications between customers and airlines. The social distancing continued for an extended period of time, the directions of airlines may need to focus more on digital which is most likely to replace low touch experiences or high-touch access.

The managers mentioned the example of facial recognition to expedite airport check-in. In addition, the authors analyzed the results about the inputs of the best use of Mobile apps. The passengers get the benefits from the security and they don’t have to expose to surfaces that much during their flights. There are possibilities of using digital content instead of in-flight hard-copy. The practice of “bring your own device” strategy has already replaced
some in-flight entertainment.

The relevant information were good lessons learned from the pandemic and could be continually applied in the tourism after the pandemic.

Help to mitigate sanitation concerns

The “things are changing daily” were the comments from airline managers which means monitoring the situation regularly when coping with the pandemic. It has been witnessed that travel restrictions had been continually implemented since 2020.

Therefore, the expectations of the travelers towards airlines are now not only the safety of travel but the sanitation of their health safety as well. The airline managers embraced this by establishing the high-value mobile as the innovations then add these features to their offerings to meet customers satisfaction in this era. The findings also shown that relevant data came from the combination of channels for an impeccable customer satisfaction experience.

The roles of the managers are to monitor or check regularly. For example, temperature check before entering the workplace, wear facemasks at all times during their shifts. The management teams’ roles are constantly making sure that the right airlines policies were communicated throughout the airport.

5. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the researchers aimed to identify how COVID-19 influences the airlines’ day-to-day operations and how airlines coped with these current challenged circumstances. As a result, the researchers discovered the fundamental strategy of surviving pandemics and speed of strategy implementation.

It is concluded that in order to accomplish the best use of strategy, it is needed to address the strategy when disruptions occur. This process required three steps as quickly as possible.

Firstly, to detect the disruption.
Secondly, to implement a plan.
Thirdly, to execute the plan.  
Also, the assessment for airlines to monitor regularly is now the digital capabilities. The roles of the airline managers are to ensure their teams are fully adopting the tools they have. Therefore, it is recommended for organizations to invest in the necessary technology. In this way, Airlines can position themselves to recover rapidly and drive growth after Covid-19.

6. Recommendations

According to the findings of the study, the researchers formulated the recommendations as guidelines for management in the Tourism Industry. This paper set the guidelines for the managers in tourism to consider the context of controlling and assessment.

Regarding “control” strategy, this emphasized that despite uncontrollable situations, organizations in the tourism industry are able to control the response. For instance, the response towards travellers by using the self-service tools, the airlines can control the features of personalized handling customer care.

Next, the assessment term is suggested in relations to monitoring the situations. For example, the accurate communications that organizations need to assess is the channels. The managers should assess the accessibilities to their customers. As a result, Covid-19 has accelerated the innovations. So, this is the opportunities for the sectors in the tourism to come together to work more closely as partnerships to create ecosystem, connect the touch points, and deliver impeccable and safe experiences of customer satisfaction

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The managers should assess the accessibilities to their customers. As a result, Covid-19 has accelerated the need for organizations to invest in the necessary technology. In this way, Airlines can position themselves to recover rapidly and drive growth after Covid-19.

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