Article Title

Responding to crisis: severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and hotels in Singapore.

Citation


Abstract

The sudden outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Singapore in 2003 was a grave crisis for the tourism industry as a whole and highlights the importance of effectively managing and planning for such occurrences. This study looks at the particular consequences of the infectious virus for the hotel sector and reactions to the challenges posed. Further health-related crises seem inevitable in the modern world and some guidelines for dealing with these are proposed, based on the Singapore experience and an existing framework for tourism crisis management.

Summary

The Singapore experience of SARS offers a perspective on the demands made of the hotel sector when dealing with rampant infectious disease. Although suggesting the benefits of being in a state of readiness, the study does raise questions about the wisdom of investing scarce resources in formulating plans tied too closely to specific crises. More common incidents such as fire, power failure and food poisoning are relatively easy to plan for, but the uniqueness of certain situations frustrates advance identification and limits the general value of a narrow response strategy. It could be argued that hotels should avoid being overly prescriptive and maintain a flexible approach, giving some attention to drafting a series of protocols that provide broad guidance on structures and procedures to use in order to accommodate the unpredictable. External forces may also be a major influence on the efficacy of any plans, illustrated in this case by the WHO and the impact of its decisions. The imposition and continuation of advisories are likely to have undermined certain aspects of attempts to manage the SARS tourism crisis, not least marketing activity, by setting the pace of recovery. Another striking feature of the virus was that it affected both destinations and source markets, bringing tourism throughout much of the region to a halt. It was consequently beyond the ability of any single business or destination to manage comprehensively and, however competently the Singapore industry and authorities reacted to conditions in the republic, they were partly dependent on the
manner in which public and private organizations elsewhere dealt with their own crises. Individual hotels, alongside other enterprises, were thus relatively powerless within the overall picture of the international crisis and its complicated dynamics.