
Rubbernecking or Rejuvenation: Post Earthquake Perceptions and the Implications for Business Practice in a Dark Tourism Context

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The situation

“New Zealanders have woken to a tragedy unfolding in the great city of Christchurch. The earthquake that struck the Canterbury region at ten to one yesterday has wrecked death and destruction on a dreadful scale. There is no reason that can make sense of this event. No words that can spare our pain. Today I want Christchurch to hear this message: You will get through this. Though your buildings are broken, your streets awash, and your hearts are aching, your great spirit will overcome. This devastating event marks the beginning of a long journey for your city. It will be a journey that leads us from ruins and despair to hope and new opportunities. From great hardship will come great strength. It will be a difficult journey, but progress is certain, things will get better, Christchurch will rise again.”

-John Key, Prime Minister 2011

On the 22nd of February, 2011 New Zealand’s third most populated city of Christchurch experienced a devastating magnitude 6.3 earthquake which shattered buildings, destroyed businesses and took the lives of 185 individuals (Heather, 2012; Stevenson, Kachali, Whitman, Seville, Vargo, & Wilson, 2011). The immediate and immense financial implications have been felt not only regionally, but also nationally with the estimated cost of damage predicted to exceed NZ \$15 billion (Stevenson et al., 2011). Tourism, New

Zealand's top export accounting for 8.7% of national GDP, has been disrupted with the loss of heritage sites and infrastructure, damage to well-known attractions and limited accommodation seen as the main drivers (NZIER, 2011).

In this research we explore how residents of Christchurch, New Zealand negotiate the balance between being the subject of unwelcome tourist gazing and commencing the path towards economic and social recovery from the devastating earthquake. We do this by mapping the residents' perceptions at this point in time (within a close chronological distance to the event) and understand the implications for economic and social recovery. The research has practical implications for business managers operating in this complex environment as they attempt to provide business supply that reduces the inherent tensions of both residents and tourists and meets economic recovery objectives.

The tension

Rejuvenation of the city requires the re-establishment of business as usual. Tourism was a substantial industry within Christchurch and most of the tourist attractions have now been destroyed. Both tourists and residents are motivated to engage with the disaster site for different reasons. Hence, the demand exists to support a purposeful business based upon a tourism product which will generate revenue and move towards regeneration of the city. As a result, a range of services including the recently commercialized resource, the Red Zone bus tours around the cordoned Christchurch CBD have been established. This service provides the specific context for our research. We seek to examine the tensions between residents who feel that any business that seeks to profit from the disaster is unethical and insensitive against recognition of the need to encourage tourism as a means of stimulating the economy and encouraging tourist visitation.

Existing literature concludes that without the provision of purposeful supply, consumers will use their own means in order to engage with the tourism product. Thus, the Red Zone bus tours around the earthquake damaged CBD provide suppliers with a means of managing the tourism product, while simultaneously discouraging inappropriate behavior of tourists; such as breaking through the Red Zone cordon. The Red Zone bus tours were previously

incarnated as the government-established organization, CERA's Red Zone tours which allowed over 30,000 tourists and residents to view the damaged city for merely a gold coin donation. In July 2012 these tours began operating as a commercial venture. Resonating with the citywide theme of rebirth and rebuilding, these tours were designed to give people an insight into the impact of the earthquakes on Christchurch, the support the city received from other communities after the quakes, and the recovery effort (Pezzullo, 2009; Red Bus Ltd., 2012). However, for the tourist industry, reconciling the rhetoric of an extraordinary crisis with that of getting back to "business as usual" is a precarious balancing act (Pezzullo, 2009, pp. 102), and this tension has been well expressed in local media.

Although a rationale to provide a service that meets both the demand and the regenerative agenda does exist, businesses risk the very real dilemma of being accused by the media as insensitive and profiting from misery. Therefore, from a managerial perspective, we hope our findings can be used by businesses as a means of understanding how to best manage supply in such circumstances. It is hoped that the findings from this research project may be useful to the case in question (Christchurch), but also have application on a wider scale.

Findings

Our research reveals the following key findings and their managerial implications. We are not proposing that these findings are fixed and applicable in all scenarios; rather we seek to use the consumer research we have conducted during these turbulent times to create a means of finding balance between the many tensions. The passage of time will modify where unacceptable practice lies, in the interim a thorough understanding of the following factors can aid in minimising the aspects of tension, which currently prevail.

Residents' comments suggest that the provision of tourism services in locations of commercial activity, for instance the CBD of Christchurch are more acceptable than entering areas of human presence such as the severely damaged Eastern suburbs. Whilst engaging with areas of human presence may reflect the reality of the situation which allows outsiders to comprehend the magnitude of the disaster, such activity remains far too sensitive at this point in time. Another obvious application of this research would be an increase in the tour

price to enable a contribution towards earthquake recovery initiatives, possibly contributing directly to the declared Christchurch business objectives of restoring the site, benefitting the community and employing local people. The application of such initiatives also requires clear communication to the polemic audiences, engaging and facilitating dialogue that allows residents to process these initiatives, not just as part of the recovery but part of their personal experience of the disaster and its aftermath.

Residents understood the fascination this might exert over visitors but to represent death in a personal way or as the focus of the service was seen as unacceptable. Tourism managers should refrain from revealing personal details of the deceased as well as information regarding how deaths occurred. However, it is recommended that death should not be ignored as confrontation with death allows for catharsis, acceptance and a means of grieving. Engaging with sites of death, (for example the CTV building) allows visitors to comprehend the disaster and remember the lives lost. Residents and tourists alike are fascinated with this concept and therefore death should be mentioned in an appropriate manner. Identifying what is defined as appropriate, particularly in this time of heightened sensitivity, requires further investigation.

Rather than sensationalising the event, management must focus on portraying the reality of the situation through an unbiased and authentic interpretation in order to engage the visitors and affect the emotional responses towards a site. Tourism managers should utilise multimedia, such as videos and photos throughout the experience they provide. Residents want visitors to observe past infrastructure, for the city is drastically changing through demolitions and rebuilding and the evidence of the disaster is quickly disappearing. Residents are concerned that only a fraction of the situation is presented to outsiders, therefore using visual interpretation would improve the authenticity of the experience for the visitors and enable them to appreciate the magnitude of the disaster. Lastly, managers must control problematic tourist practices such as taking photographs for this is a contentious issue for the host community. Red Bus Red Zone tours must ask participants to refrain from taking video footage at the CTV building and other sites of mass death as this emerged as an unacceptable touristic practice. Managers must continue to assess perceptions and listen

to feedback to reduce the potential conflict at dark tourism sites. The presented framework outlines recommended strategies and provides managers with a guide which may aid in anticipating the potential areas of conflict likely to stem from the polysemia of opinions surrounding the dark tourism product.

We take the stance that our consumer research benefits from having a practical application, as illuminated by our informants in this research who implore that we must **learn** from dreadful events such as the Christchurch earthquake. If this research helps in any small part to Christchurch's recovery, we feel very happy that it should do so.

References

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