

How to stop fake news ruining your event

21 November 2019 by Andrew McCorkell

False information travels much quicker than the truth so make sure you're ready to act fast, says expert at IBTM World in Barcelona.



At IBTM World in Barcelona, Steff Berger gave a talk entitled ‘Fake News, False Alarms and Facebook: Real stories from the world of Crisis Communications and Management’.

Berger is the managing director of VOBE, a consultation and crisis management company for the MICE industry.

We caught up with her to find out more about the perils of fake news for event professionals.

How can event planners prevent false news and protect an event, its people and reputation?

Social media can spread both misinformation and painful truths – and reactions on social media are online in minutes. This is definitely one of the biggest risks in communication today.

In the MICE industry, false news tends to develop out of a personal experience, and reflects the poster’s own opinion. By their nature, reactions on social media can only show one person's viewpoint, and tend to be emotional.

Therefore, while you can plan a preventative strategy, once false news is out on social media, it is much harder to stop. There is a very high risk that people will jump on the emotional bandwagon and spread inaccuracies without checking the information first.

If misinformation, damaging opinion or fake news about your event is being posted on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram, then you need to move fast because fake news spreads faster on social media than the truth.

Find the channels being used, monitor hashtags, respond accordingly and put out your own engaging messages to counteract it.

A team at MIT in Boston found that false news was re-tweeted around 70% more than the facts, and that it took the truth about six times longer than falsehoods to reach 1,500 people.

How should marketing teams handle crisis communications?

Communication is one of the most important tools you can use in a critical situation or crisis. Therefore, it is important that you define a crisis communication strategy in advance.

Marketing teams should have statements prepared for all foreseeable events, with hidden web pages or pop-up windows ready for any critical situation. FAQs in an emergency are helpful as well.

We recommend the following points for an effective communications strategy:

- Facts, facts, facts. Transparent communication - and admitting mistakes, if there were mistakes - shows that you are looking for solutions
- Set up monitoring of all channels - social media, email, website comments, messenger, texts, etc – to stay on top of what people are saying
- Prepared statements, to be approved by a lawyer. But remember – you need to show not only the facts, but also emotions. Put yourself in the shoes of those affected by the situation. If this affected you, what would you like to read?

Respect your audience's intelligence, take responsibility and provide helpful, factual information. Even if what has happened isn't your fault, you are now responsible for how the audience/readers/public feels about it.

If you behave honestly and seem to be proactive, you will earn the respect of people reading, and go some way to diffusing the tension around a situation.

When do you need to react quickly on social media, and how?

When it comes to social media, you probably know speed is everything. You should always have an immediate response. Clearly, this is the best way to take control of communication and to steer the conversation going forward.

You need to get ahead of a crisis, and never let yourself run behind, always trying to catch up. If something happens that you know will hit your reputation but it's not yet wider public knowledge, then it's better for you to send out a statement before anyone else gets the chance.

This means you are leading the conversation and have control of information, which people will react to, instead of you scrambling to react while people dive deeper into their own opinions instead of the facts. Be proactive, not reactive.

Why should you introduce a 'MICE crisis management culture' into your event team, and what is it?

The MICE industry, as well as the tourism industry, can be influenced by political, economic, climatic and environmental conditions that are independent of our events - such as riots, demonstrations, climate changes and more.

In addition, participants are focused on an event right then and there, and if something unfortunate happens or is not to the satisfaction of the participants, then a wave of concentrated emotions or displeasure, in the form of face-to-face questions and social media, can come back at all your employees.

There has to be a strategy for who is allowed to inform people, how you can filter information and where participants can get the actual information they need. Then it's all about concentrated emotions, which we have to contain personally on site, as well as online and in the media.

We have developed a crisis management strategy especially for the MICE industry. While it has many parallels to classic crisis management, MICE Crisis Management allows event teams to manage a crisis with fewer in-house resources.

Having a 'crisis culture' doesn't mean we are constantly in a crisis, or always anxious – it just means we are confident and ready for anything.

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