

teaching note

Norovirus on Cruise Ships: Should Americans be Worried?

Summary of the Case Study

This case study offers an interesting situation about norovirus, known as “cruise ship virus,” which has become a significant public health issue for the cruise industry over the past decade. The cruise industry is one of the rapidly evolving and most flourishing areas within the hospitality industry, currently serving about 25 million travelers per year in the United States and continues to grow. In 2016, the cruise industry as a whole produced US\$126 billion in economic impact globally, which speaks to the cruise industry’s remarkable contributions to the global economy. The case study highlights the importance of crisis communication and crisis management in the hospitality and tourism industry with special emphasis on the cruise industry. It provides background information of (1) how the cruise industry responds to norovirus outbreaks over the years, (2) the impact of the VSP program operated by CDC, (3) the media perspectives, and (4) the importance of effective crisis communication strategy to restore stakeholders’ confidence.

Although the population of Americans cruising and the revenue from cruise continue to increase, however, many of the potential passengers are concerned about the incidence of norovirus on cruise ships. While the risk of norovirus illness on cruise ships does truly exist, there is a misconception in regard to the amount of norovirus incidences on cruise ships versus similar environment such as resort, workplace, or school (CDC, 2018; Spinks, 2017). The case indicated that one of the reasons that public associates cruise ships with norovirus is because cruise lines are required to report each outbreak of norovirus on each cruise ship, unlike other occurrences of norovirus in a resort, workplace, or school, which are usually not subjected to a public monitoring system. In addition, the media’s common interest to sensationalize the news about norovirus contributed to norovirus nickname, “cruise ship virus.” Due to the above misconceptions, the marketing team of cruise lines is worried that the media’s unfavorable news could negatively affect the cruise line and the industry. The marketing team is considering a public relations campaign that Americans should not be worried about norovirus infections on cruise ships. On the other hand, some of the members of the marketing team believe that such a campaign is unnecessary at this point in time when the cruise industry is booming. The marketing team must make a decision about what to do. The following are the options the team is considering:

- Start a public relations campaign that Americans should not be worried about norovirus infections on cruise ships.
- Consider a public relations campaign that Americans should not be worried about norovirus infections on cruise ships only when demand declines.

- Continue the business as is without any public relations campaign.

Theoretical Frameworks:

The conceptual frameworks regarding the case include the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the ‘Four R’ concept of crisis management. The tenet of the theoretical framework is that the way crisis managers respond to a crisis should match the level of threat faced by the crisis. Bearing the above in mind, the marketing team is aware that in order for the public relations campaign that “Americans should not be worried about norovirus infections on cruise ships” to be successful, the way the campaign is communicated to the passengers, public, and media must match the degree of threat brought about by the crisis.

Teaching Objectives

By the end of this case study, junior and senior undergraduate, as well as postgraduate students in hospitality and tourism management and as business programs should be able to:

- Understand the importance of crisis communication and management in tourism and hospitality.
- Understand the importance of risk and crisis management in tourism and hospitality.
- Have a basic understanding of relevant theoretical frameworks, such as the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and the “Four R” Tourism Crisis Management Model.
- Critically analyze a crisis situation and propose applicable solutions.
- Evaluate and recommend effective crisis communication plans.

Target Audience of the Case Study

This case study provides an opportunity for undergraduate juniors and seniors, and/or postgraduate students in hospitality and tourism management as well as business programs to discuss several management and leadership issues including crisis management, decision making, crisis communication, and stakeholders’ morale during crisis, as well as the implications of health-related crises on cruise ships.

Prior to Class

Prior to class, students will be asked to read the case study and the conceptual framework regarding the case including Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the ‘Four R’ concept of crisis management, and the three sequential categories of crisis communication content. In addition, they will be urged to prepare to answer the questions following the case and discuss the following:

- Situational Crisis Communication Theory

- The 'Four R' concept of crisis management
- The three sequential categories of crisis communication content
- A respond to stakeholders' concerns during an incidence of norovirus on cruise ships
- The need for effective crisis communication during a time of norovirus infection

Class Instruction: The class instruction for this case can take any of the below two approaches:

Approach 1 (50 minutes)

1. Start the class by asking if the students have done the case assignment. Continue with a brief summary of the case and ask whether any of the students have taken a cruise and/or faced the situations in this case (5 minutes).
2. Present a power point presentation about the theoretical concepts that comes with the case. Describe the following concepts: Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the 'Four R' concept of crisis management, and the three sequential categories of crisis communication content (10 minutes).
3. Divide students into small groups (at least 4 groups) and urge each group to answer at least three of the six questions following the case (10 minutes)
4. Let each group present their answers (10 minutes)
5. Reinforce the answers of each group (5 minutes)
6. Class discussion on the implications of health-related crisis on cruise ships (5 minutes)
7. Summary of the case key points (5 minutes)

Approach 2 (75 minutes)

1. Start the class by asking if the students have done the case assignment. Continue with a brief summary of the case and ask whether any of the students have taken a cruise and/or faced the situations in this case. (10 minutes).
2. Then, ask the students to form small groups (at least 4 groups). Ask each group to debrief the case study by discussing the following topics and answer the six questions following the case (15 minutes)
 - a. What is the case study about?
 - b. Background information about cruise ships
 - c. General information about norovirus
 - d. Theoretical concepts regarding the case
 - e. The decision options of the case?
3. Probe the class about the theoretical concepts regarding the case (10 minutes)
4. Let each group present their answers (20 minutes)
5. Reinforce the answers of each group (10 minutes)
6. Class discussion on the implications of health-related crisis on

cruise ships (5 minutes)

7. Summary of the case key points (5 minutes)

Discussion Questions for Use in Class:

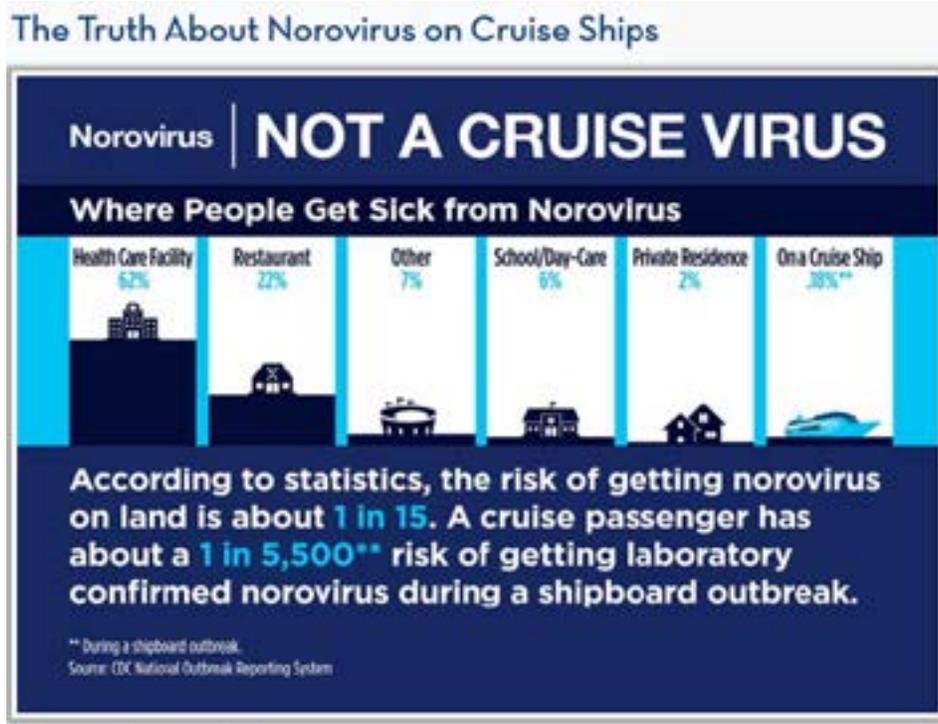
1. Should Americans be worried about norovirus on cruise ships? Why?
 - The discussion can focus on the negative impacts of a norovirus outbreak on the cruise line.
 - The discussion can feature multiple perspectives, such as the media, the passenger, and the cruise line. The discussion can also address the differences between the reality and people's perceptions.
2. Is norovirus a cruise ship problem as it seems? Why?
 - The discussion can address the media effects on people's perceptions and attitudes.
 - The discussion can surround why the efforts taken by the cruise line industry are not as effective as expected.
 - The discussion can address the gap between reality and people's perceptions.
3. Is cruise vacation still safe? Why?
 - The discussion can feature the differences between reality and people's perceptions.
 - The discussion can expand to areas beyond norovirus outbreaks, such as terrorist attacks, and crime.
4. Given the increasing demand of cruising,
 - a. Should cruise lines worry about norovirus on cruise ships? Why? The discussion should surround the potential negative consequences associated with tourism crisis, such as reputational, financial loss.
 - b. How would cruise lines secure public confidence to take cruises? The discussion should surround follow the SCCT guidelines and/or the Four R' model.
5. Should sick prone people not take cruises in order to avoid potential norovirus issues? Why?
 - The discussion should surround the inefficiency of cruise lines' current measure such as pre-screening passengers.
 - The discussion can cover topics such as how to engage the passengers in self-preventive measures.
6. In the case study, three decision options were proposed, which option do you think the cruise line marketing team should take? Why?
 - The discussion can feature a situational approach and then carefully evaluate the appropriateness of each solution under different circumstances.
7. Identify a recent norovirus outbreak on cruise ships, analyze the situation (i.e., how many passengers were infected, how the incident was reported in the media), evaluate the cruise line's

response, and propose a brief public relations campaign.

- Follow the SCCT guidelines.
8. Propose a risk and crisis management plan addressing norovirus outbreaks on cruise ships.
- Follow the Four R' Tourism Crisis Management Model.
9. If norovirus outbreaks occur in other accommodations facilities such as resorts, how would you deal with the situation?
- Follow the SCCT guidelines and the Four R' Tourism Crisis Management Model.

Additional Readings

- Situational crisis communication theory: its use in a complex crisis with Scandinavian airlines' grounding of dash 8-q400 airplanes.
- Coombs, W. T. (2014). Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding. Sage Publications.
- Acute Gastroenteritis on Cruise Ships — United States, 2008–2014
- Everything you need—but don't want—to know about getting sick on a cruise ship
- CLIA fact-sheet about norovirus on cruise ships (<https://www.cruising.org/cruise-vacationer/industry-facts/norovirus-on-cruise-ships>)



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