

Maia Coker

Disney World's Alligator Attack Study

Grand Valley State University — CAP 320

An Overview of Disney World's Alligator Attack

Disney Parks, a division of The Walt Disney Company, has been around for nearly 49 years and is a household name to many. Disney World, located in central Florida, is one of the most visited resorts and is famous around the world. This specific theme park has an average annual attendance of just around 60 million visitors and is well-known for the iconic Cinderella castle in the heart of all the fun and excitement, as well as many new additions that pull even more families towards it. Disney is a family-orientated company that brings visitors from all around the world in order to experience the wonder. However, underneath the magic, there lurks a reptilian danger that many people would not expect to find at such a popular place.

On June 14, 2016, Lane Graves was on the beach at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort and Spa. The two-year old boy was playing in the sand while his parents were talking nearby. They turned around just in time to see an alligator grab their child's head in its snout before pulling the boy into the water. Just sixteen hours later, Lane's body was found close to the shore where a medical examiner stated that Lane had suffered from neck injury and had drowned. The Walt Disney Company (WDC) immediately responded to the news by temporarily closing all of its resort beaches while the WDC Chairman and CEO, Bob Iger, personally reached out to the family to offer his condolences, and The Walt Disney World President, George Kalogridis, flew from China to Orlando to deal with the ongoing crisis. The WDC also followed up on the promise to put new signs warning of alligators and fencing around resort waterfront areas to prevent an incident like this from happening again. Jacquee Wahler, the Walt Disney Resort Vice President, also stated that alligators had been removed from Disney events (parades, shows, Jungle Cruise ride), out of respect for the family. Many safety problems have since been rectified through research on guest safety, social media analysis, and brand perception. Statistics

showed that the incident did not deter tourists from visiting the theme parks and staying at resorts with waterfront areas, rather, tourism increased while revenue decreased. More social media reports showed the multitude of people talking about the case, even after the incident had long since passed.

PR Problem

This fatal alligator attack on the property of a Disney resort is one of the biggest incidents in the company's history. The first step forward was when the CEO, Bob Iger, personally reached out to the family to offer sympathies. While this did portray a better brand image to followers of the company, there was still much to do to ensure that this wouldn't happen again. Disney released several statements to various news outlets (The Washington Post, CNN, and The Wall Street Journal, just to name a few) to let the public know that safety measurements would be taken including roping off beach areas for the time being, create boulder walls along resort waterfront areas, and installing new warning signs. The company also removed references to crocodiles and alligators in its many parades, shows, and rides. While this is a good step towards rectifying the situation, the loss of the Graves' family would still be felt. Concerns had been previously raised about alligators in the water by both resort guests and by employees. At the very least, Disney should have released statements about the removal of alligators and other potentially dangerous wildlife, just to let visitors know that they were there and that guests should perhaps be a little wary. The target audiences of this case study include the family of the victim, the current guests of the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa (current at the time of the attack), and future visitors. I believe that because of Disney's strong reputation and image, the tourism would not decrease, and my research showed that it did increase. In the case of a local theme park with a similar incident, they may have very well been put out of business. Disney is

a household name and strikes a chord within families all around the world, and because this is one of the most notable of a very limited number of incidents, the suggestion that Disney would be “let off the hook” is a strong and well-backed up one at that. This opinion is reiterated in the fact that the Graves family did not sue Disney.

Because Disney did know that alligators were present on resort properties, it is their responsibility to let their guests know about it beforehand, not after a tragic incident. Like I said in the above paragraph, guests and employees had raised concern to management. In this particular case study, I believe that employees are a very crucial public that was overlooked. Disney employees are the very center of the magic that occurs on and off theme park premises, and concerns from employees should be taken seriously in every company. Grounds keepers and some maintenance jobs require outside work. Many would have had to keep the beach clean from litter and make the waterfront area as beautiful as possible to keep up the well-kept look. This attack may have occurred at any given point to an employee, deeming them a large and overlooked public. There was no mention of employee concern in the research below, simply because Disney did not do any in that area. In terms of other publics, there was much research and execution successfully fulfilled.

Research

The Walt Disney Company gathered respect for its immediate outreach, and they performed research by collecting data from visitors, revenue and profits, and social media analysis to see how the consumer perception of the brand varied before and after the incident. Disney collected this data from various target audiences: the family members of Lane Graves, the then visitors of the Grand Floridian, future resort guests, and employees. Because of Disney’s family-friendly basis, the company made sure to emphasize that, as well as safety

measures, especially after the incident. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission removed more than 200 animals from the Disney premises between May 2006 and August 2015 and after the incident, the next year's removals were around 83 in numbers. The company was able to see mentions of the hashtag, #DisneyGatorAttack, on Twitter and were able to closely monitor the tweets that followed. Despite the incident, the number of visitors increased about 0.3% or from about 20.4 million (in 2016) to 20.45 million (in 2017); however, Disney's annual revenue of 2017 was only \$55.137B, a 0.89% decrease from 2016's annual revenue of \$55.632B. It's clear that even though the incident, which was a traumatic experience that went viral on several social media platforms, did not deter people from visiting the parks. In fact, Disney's reputation is incredibly sound and has become such a household staple that Sheriff Jerry Demings had said the incident would be "written off as a one-off issue." It later became known that the family of Lane Graves would not sue Disney.

This crisis communications case study fits strongly with that of The Relationship Principle. As stated in the book, "an organization can withstand crises better if they have established positive, long-term relationships with publics who may be affected by its decisions." By now, I've stated several times that Disney is a globally-known name of which many of the publics have had positive and longstanding relationships with. Disney aims to provide a magical place to not just kids but adults as well. The importance of family can be seen within almost all of Disney's television shows and movies which only stands to reiterate the emphasis Disney places on it. Disney recovered quite quickly from this crisis, as seen above, in the increased number of visitors in 2017. They did not lie to cover the incident up, instead, they properly addressed it and kept working to create positive relationships with its consumers, including the family of Lane Graves.

This research was done remarkably well in response to the crisis situation. While revenue decreased, visitor numbers increased, showing that the incident did not prevent guests from wanting to go to Disney parks. In looking at the research done by the company, I believe more could have been done. Focus groups on the perception of the brand would have allowed them to see what has changed and what hasn't and would provide firsthand indication of consumer confidence. It is now 2020 and research four years after the incident may provide opinions on how consumer perception has changed in the time that's passed. Such research may include how the addition of the boulder wall and new warning signs have affected how guests at the resorts with waterfront areas behave differently as compared to 2016. Many visitors have already come and gone at Disney properties, so gathering their views may provide new insights on how they keep their children safe when near the water.

Objectives and Key Messages

In order to better the company's image, relationships with consumers, and ensure that guests felt safe on the premises, it appears that these objectives were created to do that:

1. Provide safety to guests by means of signs and roping off areas
 - a. Have state wildlife officials remove alligators from the Walt Disney World properties
 - b. Install new warning signs instead of the current "No Swimming" signs
 - c. Fence off the beach at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa as well as several other resorts with waterfront areas and create boulder walls
2. Support the family of the victim by creating a memorial in honor of the victim and support witnesses

- a. Disney placed a lighthouse sculpture near the site of the fatal attack in memory of Lane Graves
- b. Offer support to bystanders of the incident

Given the circumstances of the fatal attack, Disney placed a high emphasis on safety afterwards.

The positive reputation that the company has held for so long still stands and has critically helped them to move on from this crisis. While signs have since been placed along waterfront areas warning of potentially dangerous animals, it would be more fitting to have the first set of objectives go into further depth:

1. Provide safety to guests by means of signs and roping off areas until permanent blockings can be set into place by January 1, 2017
 - a. Have state wildlife officials remove alligators from the Walt Disney World properties the day of and after a report has been made by a guest or employee
 - b. Install new warning signs (instead of the current “No Swimming” signs) every 10 feet to make sure each sign can be easily seen and read by a guest or employee
 - c. Fence off the beach at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa as well as several other resorts with waterfront areas with secure ropes and temporary signs until the creation of boulder walls and permanent signs can be put into place

This set of objectives I’ve just stated would provide more detail in order to protect guests from hazards and ensure their safety until permanent solutions like the boulder walls can be put into place. It also states a timeline, something that the previous objective lacked, and ensures that safety measures would be put into place within the time period (about seven months). The next adjustment I would make to these objectives is to Objective #2:

2. Support the family of the victim by creating a memorial in honor of the victim and support witnesses
 - a. Disney placed a lighthouse sculpture near the site of the fatal attack in memory of Lane Graves
 - b. Offer support to bystanders of the incident and create a program to allow future support and counseling

While this objective lacks a specific timeline, it is arguable that there is no date when it is no longer appropriate to offer counseling to bystanders that have witnessed a traumatic event.

Objective #2b adds more by stating the creation of a program that would offer future support to those that would need it. This would allow for bystanders to receive the counseling that they may still need and not limit it to just after the incident. This next objective that did not show up in research would also help rectify concerns about dangerous wildlife:

3. Create online guest and employee reports by August 1, 2016, so they can report sightings of alligators or other dangerous wildlife immediately

This new objective would implement an online configuration that would allow guests and employees report sightings of dangerous animals on the hotel properties by the start of August in 2016, almost 1.5 months after the attack. An online report feed such as this could be made available on each hotel or resort website so that it could be easily accessible to each guest and employee. This would be available to management of each hotel or resort, so they can take the necessary precautions for guests and alert officials to remove what has been reported.

In fixing and adding these objectives, they provide a timeline so that guest safety can be made a priority, and they add detail to make it clear what is being done. The publics (the family of Lane Graves, the then visitors of the Grand Floridian, future resort guests, and employees)

have been appropriately addressed based on the original objectives and my changes: the addition of timeline and detail when needed.

Strategies and Tactics

The strategies included the creation of boulder walls and implementation of new warning signs ultimately help guests to stay away from waterfront areas. The importance of Disney telling the truth regarding the incident also cannot be overlooked. Such statements as this. “As a parent and a grandparent, my heart goes out to the Graves family during this time of devastating loss. My thoughts and prayers are with them, and I know everyone at Disney joins me in offering our deepest sympathies” was from Bob Iger, CEO, and reach towards the publics. Other statements account for what happened while not sweeping minor details under the rug. Telling the truth is in accordance with the crisis communications theory of corrective action (William Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory) and apology (Situational Crisis Communication Theory). In this strategy, the company fixes the problem and commits to change. They have done so by fulfilling their promise to create boulder walls and installing warning signs that express more than just saying “No Swimming” to guests. In addition to the above-mentioned theories, Disney has also used specific strategies for response by identifying the situation and done something, share news of the crisis and Disney’s response, communicate the facts, acknowledge the event, create empathy, approach the situation, and commit to a solution going forward, as per the book. Going back to the addition of walls and warning signs, these preventative measures are physical barriers between guests and the waterfront areas. The new installed signs include messages that say, “Danger,” “Alligators and snakes in area,” “Stay away from the water,” and “Do not feed the wildlife.” These new signs detail what could be lurking in the waters rather than before the incident, when signs only read “No swimming.”

These strategies and tactics are meaningful and make safety a priority. However, employees are still a critical public that is being overlooked. In order to address this public, a strategy such as, “Implementing one-on-one employee and management meetings in order to address concerns about potentially hazardous wildlife” would be a way to make sure that that public won’t be overlooked. This incident was four years but it’s not too late to create strategies about the alligator problem. This leads into the next strategy: the removal of alligators from the premises. While state officials and wildlife specialists have been a crucial part in removing animals, that can only do so much. Wildlife can continuously come back to the same areas they were once removed from. Having this new strategy, regarding employee concern, will allow for immediate action in making each hotel and resort as safe as it can be for guests and employees while allowing employees to feel as though their voices are being heard.

Evaluation

In order to better understand the evaluation of the objectives at the end of the case, we examine them again:

1. Provide safety to guests by means of signs and roping off areas
 - a. Have state wildlife officials remove alligators from the Walt Disney World properties – **More than 95 alligators were removed from Disney grounds in a 15-month period, June 2016 to September 2017, including euthanizing five alligators that may have been responsible for the fatal attack, although authorities can’t know for certain**
 - b. Install new warning signs instead of the current “No Swimming” signs – **Signs that read, “Danger,” “Alligators and snakes in area,” “Stay away from the water,” and “Do not feed the wildlife,” were installed around waterfront**

areas in resort premises that warn about potentially dangerous animals in more detail (stating that alligators and snakes may be present) rather than advising to not swim in the water

- c. Fence off the beach at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa as well as several other resorts with waterfront areas and create boulder walls – **The Wednesday after the attack, Disney closed all of its beaches in resort areas as a precaution; Disney workers also built boulder walls along waterfront areas in an effort to keep alligators away from guests**
- 2. Support the family of the victim by creating a memorial in honor of the victim and support witnesses
 - a. Disney placed a lighthouse sculpture near the site of the fatal attack in memory of Lane Graves – **A lighthouse memorial for Lane Graves was erected near the site of the attack at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa**
 - b. Offer support to bystanders of the incident – **One witness lost consciousness after the attack and one bystander remained distraught days later; deputies offered emotional support and counseling to those that needed it**

Disney has met its objectives set in response to the crisis. Employees worked diligently to provide a safer area to current and future guests, including new staff training on how to report sightings of wildlife; Disney also worked on expanding communication to visitors about wildlife. Although each objective was appropriately met, now we look at the suggested changes to examine how Disney should evaluate them:

- 1. Provide safety to guests by means of signs and roping off areas until permanent blockings can be set into place by January 1, 2017

- a. Have state wildlife officials remove alligators from the Walt Disney World properties the day of and after a report has been made by a guest or employee – **A logbook of each alligator removed from the properties should be kept in accordance with the employee or guest that made the claim; in a year, the company should revisit the logbook to see how many alligators have been removed compared to previous years**
 - b. Install new warning signs (instead of the current “No Swimming” signs) every 10 feet to make sure each sign can be easily seen and read by a guest or employee – **Signs that say, “Danger,” “Alligators and snakes in area,” “Stay away from the water,” and “Do not feed the wildlife,” been placed every 10 feet that can be easily seen and read by a guest or employee; these signs provide more detail as to what guests may prepare themselves to see near the waterfront areas and to dissuade them from approaching the water**
 - c. Fence off the beach at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa as well as several other resorts with waterfront areas with secure ropes and temporary signs until the creation of boulder walls and permanent signs can be put into place – **Roping off the beaches will be as a precaution to prevent more guests from approaching the waterfront; boulder walls will create a physical barrier between guests and wildlife while signs tell them what to expect in the water**
2. Support the family of the victim by creating a memorial in honor of the victim and support witnesses

- a. Disney placed a lighthouse sculpture near the site of the fatal attack in memory of Lane Graves - **A lighthouse memorial for Lane Graves was erected near the site of the attack at the Grand Floridian Resort and Spa**
 - b. Offer support to bystanders of the incident and create a program to allow future support and counseling – **This program can be tracked by the number of views and guests helped and will give statistics to Disney on how to better provide services to guests that witnessed a traumatic experience on Disney property, in the event that a case such as this occurs again**
3. Create online guest and employee reports by August 1, 2016, so they can report sightings of alligators or other dangerous wildlife immediately – **Online reports will track the amount of reports and visits to the site to determine the number of alligators seen on the premises and compare those numbers to the amount of alligators removed on later days**

Based on the objectives and how they were fulfilled, Disney's evaluation of the objectives was appropriate for the case; each objective was met. I examined my own additions to the objectives and feel as though Disney could reasonably evaluate them based on the square footage in which the signs are placed, the impressions and views that the counseling program and online reports gather, and the comparative numbers of reports made versus the number of alligators removed from the property. Output and impact is measured here as well, seen in how Disney statements reached the victim's family and other guests (through means of news outlets). Public opinion was impacted in the short-term, seen in how the attendance numbers of Disney parks. As a family-based company, Disney should perform further research and analysis on my suggested objectives even after the crisis has long since passed. Doing this will provide better

understanding of what the company needs to focus on in crisis strategy, especially considering that this is one of the most major crises in the history of the company.

Further Recommendations and Suggestions

Social media is a critical tool that reaches millions of people daily. Although Disney did release several statements, the majority appeared to only be to news channels. Everyone will find out this information in a different way, but social media reaches even those that least expect the news. Impressions and interactions can be easily tracked through these various platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn) and will give Disney a better understanding of consumer confidence. In doing so, this portrays the image that Disney cares about its consumers and is working to keep building those meaningful relationships, which are essential in PR. Using social media as a part of research and objective strategy would also allow Disney to measure the brand image during the crisis, at the end of the crisis, and in following months or years after the crisis. In the afterthought, consumer confidence appears to have not changed, as the number of visitors rose almost 0.3%, despite revenue decreasing. We can also examine the revenue in the years following the attack: 2018 showed a 7.79% increase in annual revenue (two years after the attack), while 2019 showed a 17.05% increase in annual revenue (three years after the attack). Disney's brand is strong, yes, but they should have also put focus on addressing consumer concerns on social media, most notably monitored through the hashtag #DisneyGatorAttack. Followers of the company raised concern about the lack of safety measures and how Disney could have avoided the incident by installing more signs. Though they did this after the incident, it does raise the question of how quickly things can be prevented. Compensation is a response type in Situational Crisis Communication Theory. In utilizing this theory, Disney could have shown even more support to the Graves family by covering funeral costs or likewise. On a final

note, the company reacted remarkably fast in addition to taking up new safety precautions immediately after the incident. This quickness was remembered by their brand followers and stakeholders and shows just how much Disney cared about the situation; this can even be seen when the CEO flew from Shanghai to Orlando to offer his condolences and create the appropriate strategies and solutions to the incident.

References

- Allen, S. (2016, August 22). The horror of alligator attack on boy at Disney World resort is detailed in new reports. Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-gator-attack-disney-world-20160822-snap-story.html>
- Almasy, S. (2016, July 21). Disney alligator attack: Family of dead boy won't sue. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/20/us/disney-alligator-attack/index.html>
- Bever, L. (2016, June 30). Disney's Magic Kingdom has made its gator and crocodile characters disappear. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/06/30/disney-world-is-erasing-evidence-of-alligators-crocodiles-after-toddlers-death/>
- DeForest, M. (2017, November 1). Number of alligators captured at Disney doubles since toddler's death. Retrieved from <https://www.clickorlando.com/news/2017/11/01/number-of-alligators-captured-at-disney-doubles-since-toddlers-death/>
- DiPietro, B. (2016, June 28). Crisis of the Week: Disney Responds to Alligator Killing Boy. Retrieved from <https://blogs.wsj.com/riskandcompliance/2016/06/28/crisis-of-the-week-disney-responds-to-alligator-killing-boy/>
- Disney Revenue 2006-2020: DIS. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/DIS/disney/revenue>
- Fears, D. (2017, November 3). Disney knew its property had alligators. It caught hundreds before a boy was killed. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/Animalia/wp/2017/11/03/disney-knew-its-park-was-full-of-alligators-it-caught-hundreds-before-a-boy-was-killed/>

- Ge, L. (2016, June 16). How Much of a PR Nightmare Is Gator Attack for Disney? Retrieved from <https://www.thewrap.com/how-much-of-a-pr-nightmare-is-gator-attack-for-disney/>
- McLaughlin, E. C., & Shoichet, C. E. (2016, June 16). Disney alligator attack: Resort to add warning signs, source. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/16/us/alligator-attacks-child-disney-florida/index.html>
- Ortega, J. (2018, June 16). What safety measures is Disney taking 2 years after gator killed boy? Retrieved from <https://www.clickorlando.com/theme-parks/2018/06/16/what-safety-measures-is-disney-taking-2-years-after-gator-killed-boy/>
- Porte, A. L., & Shah, K. (2016, June 18). Disney installs alligator warning signs. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/17/us/florida-alligator-attack-disney-signs/index.html>
- Russon, G. (2019, June 14). As memory fades of 2016 Disney World gator attack, the charity formed in its wake grows. Retrieved from <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/business/tourism/os-bz-disney-alligator-attack-20190614-rty4r4rfsfbn5a7lsmkeujray4-story.html>
- Smith, C. (2020, May 14). How Many People Visit Disney Parks Each Year? Retrieved from <https://disneynews.us/disney-parks-attendance/>
- Strutner, S. (2017, August 8). Here's How Disney World Is Honoring The Boy Killed By An Alligator. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lane-graves-disney_n_5989f169e4b0449ed505d5cc?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAABIITPZaiPGP-q1dtX7wzAziRopiCQ0yEhlntykHaELGlzvFs8YpsQh3m3sRshQe42cxOUbZgTQxseNmNTqHdWfBoqNpZCuD2FzBOJzMXq_BaOF1vNM9cjdHP5G_8k8BjLI-Bw2cUSxf1GAi4sbYJYU_MOIqFNcoqUzZ-UBmb9a_7