

Interview with MICE Crisis Manager, Steff Berger

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Ahead of her webinar, we sat down with Steff Berger to get to know more about the world of crisis management and communications, as well as pick up a few extra tips and tricks.

You have been working as a conference manager in the events industry for many years. What has triggered you to become in addition a MICE - crisis manager?

In short, it was Eyjafjallajökull – the Icelandic volcano that erupted in 2010 and kept us all in suspense for weeks. At that time, I was attending a congress with 10,000 participants in Vienna. The feeling of helplessness and not being able to assist people who were stranded was a terrible experience.

But it took another 7 years – filled with many learning opportunities and events – before I found the right training for me. I became a certified crisis manager in 2017 and have taken additional courses focusing on anti-terror strategies.

What is MICE- crisis management?

Crisis management is primarily designed for large companies and works especially well in a closed organisation. But it is not necessarily suitable for the MICE industry, where we usually have fewer staff resources and often talk in terms of incident management.

Over the past few years, I have worked with experts and crisis management colleagues to develop a tailor-made concept that helps our industry to better prepare for critical situations and incidents. It combines our 19 years of experience with congresses for up to 20,000 participants with conventional crisis management. In the MICE sector, the focus is on resource-oriented crisis management.

Many event organisations consist of smaller teams. During the event, each member of the team has a function, a specific role to play. We cannot afford to have anything unforeseen happen. And if something unforeseen happens, then the question arises as to how we can take on a new role – without resources.

This is unlike conventional crisis management, where there are sufficient resources and usually a self-contained organisation with internal and external stakeholders. The situation is different for an event, where there are different stakeholders with different interests from different organizations.

As part of the MICE crisis management concept, all parties join together to form a crisis team that jointly manages critical situations, incidents and crises. This means that we create different teams from previously non-existent resources.

What are the different MICE- crises?

MICE crisis management deals with ad-hoc incidents before and during the event while ‘conventional’ crisis management focuses more on economic and political crises.

Therefore, I would differentiate between ‘external crises’, such as riots, demonstrations or a storm, which are independent of the particular event but can have a major impact, and ‘internal’ critical situations that can develop into a crisis if they are not detected early by the event team or are not responded to appropriately. These include accidents or, in the worst case, deaths at the event, complaints from participants and fake news.

The participants on-site are focused on the event. If something happens and insufficient information is provided, this can lead to insecurity or displeasure, both in person and via social media. MICE crisis management has a stronger focus on damage to reputation and incidents which, if not handled appropriately, can quickly turn into an economic crisis.

What makes the current pandemic so challenging?

A pandemic is managed by the respective government agencies and is not something we can control. All we can do is plan various measures that will enable us to resume ‘normal’ operations as quickly as possible once the official orders are relaxed.

The current pandemic is a challenge for all of us, both professionally and privately. At this point, we are faced with an economic and financial crisis – not only for our industry but for the entire world. This crisis is a result of the current measures to contain the pandemic, which makes it so difficult to control. The pandemic drives the acute crises we are experiencing in the event world and we are dependent on future measures.

We are also dependent on the measures taken by other countries. When will our participants, customers and exhibitors from other countries be allowed to travel again? This will depend on the form in which events will be permitted to take place. Event venues in various countries are currently being converted into hospitals and other necessary institutions; this must be taken into consideration when it comes to the question as to when normal operations will resume.

Your webinar focuses on post-COVID crisis management strategies. Which strategies are important?

When we talk about POST COVID-19 strategies, it is clearly advisable to prepare for the following three scenarios: Staging the event, postponing it, or cancelling it. For each of these three scenarios, it is important to conduct a risk analysis and to develop corresponding measures that include a communication strategy.

For the period after the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be a lengthy transition phase leading to a new normality. This will likely entail setbacks that will again require stricter measures, such as another lockdown. Crisis management involves analysing a crisis situation quickly, reacting to it, and taking effective decisions. This also means being able to resume 'normal' operations as quickly as possible.

It is therefore advisable to prepare now for the time after COVID-19. If one of the three scenarios, or perhaps an unforeseen scenario occurs, teams of organisers can react faster. And as we say in crisis management, it would enable them to 'get ahead' of the situation. In today's world, this would hardly be possible without suitable crisis management structures.

At IBTM World and at IBTM China you spoke about MICE crisis communication. Why is communication so important?

Crisis communication is one of the most important tools in a crisis.

Communication is what makes everything work! Our staff, participants, speakers, exhibitors, service providers and partners want to be informed.

In today's world, it would be hard to imagine communication without social media. This is what makes it so important to use these media outlets for our information strategy. At the same time, we should keep an eye on the reactions

to our messages and events. Social media can spread misinformation as well as painful truths and the reactions are online within minutes. This is definitely one of the biggest communication risks.

Prof. Christian Drosten from the Institute of Virology at Charité Hospital in Berlin Germany said this on a German talk show back in February: “A population that, for several few days now, has been fluctuating between fear and coolness.” I have also experienced this in our industry, in social media, in event communications, in personal conversations and in reactions from customers.

On one hand, there are people who react sarcastically or ignorantly and play down the situation. On the other, there are people who are reflective, concerned and cautious. Everyone is entitled to have and share their own opinions. But, for a company or event organiser involved with any form of crisis management or crisis communication, personal assumptions and opinions should be taboo.

Crisis management, especially in terms of communication, is truthful, concise, appropriate, transparent and fact-based. And this is also my recommendation. Crises are dynamic and we never know what will happen next. Therefore, we can only incorporate the current state of affairs and facts into our crisis management plan and take decisions that seem reasonable at this point in time.

How have you, as an agency, experienced the current pandemic crisis?

Unfortunately, like many other agencies, we have been affected. We staged two events in Berlin at the end of February and the beginning of March in compliance with the measures taken at the time. Our first event had to be cancelled in early March. One of our congresses in another European country wasn't cancelled but will now be presented on a digital platform. I have experienced two of the three scenarios as an agency and can now integrate this experience into the MICE crisis management concept.

But, every crisis has an impact along with an opportunity for new developments. We are currently working on crisis management webinars and seminars as well as other conference topics that could be interesting for the industry as well as for our clients. Our hope is to have everything ready so that we can get off to a successful start after the pandemic.

One final question: do you have any recommendations for our industry?

Yes, we should all use our resources to develop new processes – and I don't just mean digital concepts. Events bring people from all over the world together. And I hope this will be the case again after the pandemic when we can continue to meet face-to-face. Every agency should prepare now for the three scenarios:

staging the event, postponing it or cancelling it. This will enable us to take the initiative to act and react in the post-COVID-19 period.

Crisis management is as relevant for our industry as digitalisation. And no future event concept will be imaginable without both of these factors.

Steff Berger is a consultant in the conference and events industry and acts as a BCM-Certified Crisis Management, specialising in the MICE sector, with her agency [VOBE – Inspires People GmbH](#).

If you'd like to hear more from Steff on the subject of Crisis Management and crisis communications, join her in her webinar on Wednesday 6 May at 3pm UK Time. You can register to attend [here](#).