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Moving on After a Crisis

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A "crisis" is defined by the dictionary as a turning point, a decisive moment, usually involving a tragedy. Anyone involved in the amusement industry who has experienced the accidental death or serious injury of a patron understands the meaning of a crisis beyond any dictionary definition. A serious accident or fatality in an amusement park, carnival, FEC or water park is more than just a single decisive event; it sets off a chain of events that, even when professionally managed, can still leave institutional scars and a lingering mark on an otherwise excellent public image -- making it difficult to move on.

You can prepare in advance to manage a crisis, but nothing will prepare you for the emotional toll that it will take on you and your employees. An accident related crisis can be compared to the death or serious injury of a family member in that it can generate feelings of grief, shock and uncertainty in your park family. That is because an amusement facility is made up of more than rides, games and cotton candy; an amusement facility is usually a family-run business with an institutional memory, many long-time employees and a positive image in its community. A serious accident in a park or FEC can be a blow to the psyche of everyone involved regardless of who was a fault in the accident.

Experience has taught us that immediately after an accident you will need help in dealing with many aspects of crisis management. Many operators turn to

their attorney or trusted family advisor to help them handle questions from the media, initiate a confidential preliminary investigation and interact with investigators on the scene. For example, as soon as an incident occurs, immediate action must be taken to obtain emergency assistance for the patrons involved. The scene of the incident must be isolated and preserved as evidence. State regulators and your insurance carrier must immediately be put on notice of the incident. You should meet with all of your employees to emphasize the need to remain calm and focused on their jobs. Employees should be instructed to direct questions and requests for interviews to a designated company spokesperson. The operators who were working on the ride and the time of the accident and the team members who actually witnessed the event should be identified and given special attention to help them deal with possible post-traumatic stress. You must decide whether to open your park or to stay closed for a respectful period of time.

Your pre-crisis planning procedures should insure that important business records are readily available. Investigators will ask for complete documentation of the ride, including sales agreements, operator's manuals, training manuals, inspection and maintenance checklists, downtime logs and records of all telephone and written contact between your park and the ride manufacturer. The media will be asking questions and conducting their own investigation. You must answer their questions. Do not respond until you are ready to do so, but recognize that ignoring the press will not make them go away. Refusing comment will only lead to more persistent questioning and more intrusive behavior by reporters looking for a headline.

Even after the initial fear calms down, the crisis will continue to affect your business and your employees. As with any incident involving a serious injury or death on an amusement ride or attraction, outside investigators will be on the scene. Manufacturers' representatives and your insurance company's inspectors will also spend a lot of time pouring over the ride, examining your business records and talking to your employees. This process may take months to finally complete. As time goes on, you may find that your team members, especially the younger ones, are in need of additional counseling by a psychologist or grief counselor. You will also find that the ride involved in the accident cannot be used

or removed from the premises, and must sit there as a constant reminder of the incident. You will not be permitted to negotiate a removal of the ride until all the investigations are concluded.

You will also discover that while a crisis can be managed and minimized, the emotion surrounding the accident or injury will always be remembered. You probably thought that something like this would never happen in your park, and now that it has you wonder whether it will ever happen again. The best strategy is to move on. Delve back into your business, evaluate your standard operating procedures and make changes as necessary in order to provide for the continuing safety of the public. Remember that you and your team have patrons to keep happy and that you are still part of the best business in the world.

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