

## Alligator Attack at Disney: A Case Study

### **Summery**

A two-year-old boy was attacked by an alligator at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort and Spa on June 14, 2016. The boy was getting wet sand to build a sandcastle when the alligator grabbed his head and pulled him underwater. He was found dead 16 hours later. There were two people who reported seeing an alligator before the attack. (Allen, 2016). The Walt Disney Company responded by immediately closing the beaches at the resort and started putting up a wall along the borders of the water as a barrier to try and keep the alligators away. Disney has also put up signs that warn guests of the alligators along with snakes. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation also hunted the alligators that were in the lagoon where the boy was taken. After the incident, Disney responded to what happened. Not only did the Disney company try to make the park a safer place, but also gave personal apologies to the family. According to Nasser (2016), the president of Disney gave a statement of sympathy to the family on the official Disney Parks blog. Other statements of apology from the company executives have also been given. According to Bever (2016), the Walt Disney World Resort Vice President Jacquee Wahler, confirmed to the Washington Post that the crocodiles and alligators were removed from Disney events "out of respect for the family." A famous line told on the Jungle Cruise ride warning parents to "watch your children, or the crocodiles will" has also been removed.

### **Research**

The Disney Company did primary research. The company had to find new information on how people feel about their parks after the alligator incident. They would also use secondary research to figure out how the company is doing after the incident compared to before it. The

company followed current events surrounding the alligator attack. The company also did content analysis. After the incident, Disney made sure to focus on family. Disney is centered on the value of family and made sure to tailor its response to it. Disney also watched social media to see what people thought of them. On twitter, the hashtag DisneyGatorAttack was trending and some of the comments did not benefit the company at all.

The stakeholder groups that were identified were Disney, the family members of the boy who died, the people who were at the resort, and future resort guests. One of Disney's main focus were the family members of the child who died. Disney wanted to show that they cared. Disney wanted to make sure the people staying at the resort still felt safe after the attack along with everyone else who visit the parks and resorts. Disney also wanted to make sure that people did not lose interest in them after the attack. The stakeholders that the company may have overlooked were the employees. A park employee had talked to the Miami Herald about Disney removing an alligator from a show, but remained anonymous (Bever, 2016). Even though the people who were at the resort were thought about, Disney could have done more. "Deputies offered counseling services to" a witness who was still distraught days after the incident happened (Allen, 2016). Disney could have done something for the people who witnessed the attack to help them get deal with the incident.

### **Objectives:**

An attitudinal objective that Disney had was to convince families that Disney is still a safe place for them. A behavioral objective is to keep families coming to Disney. Another type of this behavior is to avoid a lawsuit from the Graves family. An informational objective is to inform people staying at Disney of the crises. The company would need to inform the public of what happened too. Another one would be informing people at the resorts and parks and future

visitors of the potential dangers there. Disney's objectives were appropriate to the situation because the results can be measured. The objectives also focus on the publics and the family involved. The focus is not solely on what benefits the Disney company.

### **Programming:**

Disney's response to the crisis was speedy. Someone who had witnessed the incident said that "response was quick from Disney personnel" (Bevil & Cheney, 2016). Disney also told the truth regarding the incident. Disney made sure to that anyone staying at the resort was informed about the attack in an article in the Orlando Sentinel, Dewayne Bevil and Elyssa Cherney (2016) interviewed a man who witnessed what happened. The man that all the guests in the hotel were "notified of the situation Tuesday night or Wednesday morning" (Bevil & Cherney, 2016). When Disney informed the public of the situation, it made sure to express condolence's the company had for the family of the boy who died. The president of Walt Disney World Resort said that "there are no words to convey they profound sorrow we feel" (Ge, 2016). The company used interactive media to inform the publics. It specifically used its blog as a controlled way to inform people. Disney also had uncontrolled ways of informing the public. The company did not have any control on what the news outlets reported or what people posted their online blogs.

Tactics to keep people wanting to go to Disney are making Disney safer place and convincing people that it cares about the safety of the families that visit the resort and parks. The company also wanted to let the public know that it cares about family in general. To make Disney safer, the company put up new signs warning people of alligators and snakes. It replaced the ones that read no swimming. Disney also built a better barrier around the ponds and lakes that replaced the fences. According to Elliot (2016) the company has "beefed up security, including canine units and 'less visible' stealth security systems throughout the area." He also

wrote that Disney promised a thorough review it's the company's signs and security. To show the public that Disney cares about the Graves family, it made some changes to the shows and events. In the Jungle Cruise and Kilimanjaro Safari, jokes that warned parents to watch their children or alligators might eat them are no longer used. The crocodile, Tic-Toc the Croc from the movie *Peter Pan* was removed from a parade. Louis the alligator from the movie *The Princess and the Frog* was pulled from appearing in the new castle show. (CBS News, 2016). Disney used a one-on-one media approach to reach out to the boy's family and to show its condolences for the family. The Disney Chief Executive Bob Igar, personally "called the boy's family" after the attack occurred. (Richwine & Freifeld, 2016). Executives of the Disney Company also gave apology statements. This also helped the company avoid a lawsuit with the family which was another one of the company's behavioral objective. All of what was previously described had an effect on people so they would keep visiting Disney. During the crises, Disney did not use their social media to talk about the alligator attack, but to talk about new attractions coming to the park. On social media, they were promoting, but outside of it, they were concerned about the attack. The company controlled its use of media.

To convince future park goers that the Disney parks are safe, Disney made several changes. Some more changes that the company made were to have the beaches staffed by employees and to close the beaches "at night except for fireworks shows" (CBS News, 2016). Disney also banned fishing at added "No Fishing" signs to several areas. Disney announced that they are "reinforcing training with our Cast for reporting sightings and interactions with wildlife" (Luistro, 2016). They also stated that they will be broadening its communication to guests of the parks and resorts (Luistro, 2016). Disney used the same tactics they used to accomplish its goal for behavioral objective. People who came to Disney saw the changes it made to make Disney

safer than before and told others about the difference. Online news also reports the differences. These can convince people that it is safe.

After the crisis, the Disney Company knew that its audience was an active audience. Disney gave statements and posted on its blog of what happened. The company tailored how it got the message out based on the audience. Disney also made its message seem credible. When the (president) spoke about the incident and apologized, he said, “As a parent and grandparent, my heart goes out to the Graves family during this time of devastating loss” (Ge, 2016). This shows that he is a family-man and people will believe him more when he talks about how much he and the company value family. The company also seemed sincere when the different executives spoke of the attack and how sorry they were for the Graves family. Disney also used repetition in their messages. In every message, a spokesman talked about how sorry the company is and how it values family. This makes the message memorable. In *Think: Public Relations*, it is said “Action (performance) speaks louder than a stack of news releases.” (Wilcox, Cameron, Reeber, & Shin, 2013). Disney used action. The company wanted to let their audience know Disney is a safe place and they can continue to go to its parks. Disney took measures to make the parks and resorts safer. The specific concept of responding to a crisis used was corrective action. The company also showed that they were truly sorry for what happened to the boy. It made several changes to its shows including removing a famous line that has been there for years. When Disney made these changes, the observability factor was used in the adoption process that Everett Rogers lists in his book, *Diffusion and Innovation*. Observability is a factor that affects the adoption process (Wilcox, Cameron, Reeber, & Shin, 2013). Another factor that affects the process that Disney recognized was compatibility. The company was perceived “as being consistent with existing values, experiences, and needs of potential adopters.” (Wilcox,

Cameron, Reeber, & Shin, 2013). Disney also recognized its passive audience to accomplish the goal of having people visit the Disney parks. According to Nasser (2016), Disney's social media did not have any responses about the attack, but did talk about the upcoming attractions for that month. The company used ethical persuasive techniques. Disney was truthful about what happened at one of its resorts. It also did not leave any information out that would deceive the public. It also did not "use irrelevant appeals to divert attention or scrutiny from the issue at hand." (Wilcox, Cameron, Reeber, & Shin, 2013). The company used appropriate techniques to achieve its objective.

### **Evaluation:**

Disney monitored the number of visits it had after the attack. By monitoring that, the Disney Company measured its objective of wanting to have families still wanting to go to Disney. There was not a major change in the company's revenue that could have been directly linked to the alligator attack. Even after the attack, many families were still going to Disney. It can be inferred from this that since people are still going to Disney, most people still feel safe and the parks and resorts. Disney also looked on social media to how people felt. The company also did not get sued for what happened to the little boy.

For the amount of time Disney had after the incident, the company did an appropriate job of measuring the objectives. Now that time has passed, Disney can do a better job at evaluating the results of its objectives. The company can also use more methods of evaluation to get a better result of its objectives. The company can create polls to find out if people actually feel safe when they come to a Disney park or resort. The company can also measure the number of people that attend the parks and resorts to get more accurate data on whether or not the alligator attack affected its revenue.

Disney made several changes to try to accomplish its objectives, but not all of them were readily accepted. People were happy that Disney put up signs that warned guests of the potential dangers. People were also happy that Disney replaced the fences that acted as barriers around the lakes and ponds with walls. The changes Disney made to the shows and events were controversial. While some people thought it was considerate for Disney to do that, others did not like the change. Some people even went to twitter to express their feelings. They did not like how Louis, the alligator from *The Princess and the Frog*, was removed “from the summer Mickey’s Royal Friendship Fair Castle Show at Magic Kingdom” (Bever, 2016).

Before the alligator attack, Disney was warned about the alligators in the lagoon. Miller (2016) wrote in the Washington Post that “according to the FWC report, at least two tourists warned Disney employees” about seeing an alligator right before the attack. Although no one knows how the Disney employees responded to that information, it was also not the first time. After the attack happened some people have been speaking out about seeing alligators and informing the employees about them. Elliot (2016) wrote a former guest at the Disney resort reported to CBS that his son was threatened by an alligator in 2015, but the employee dismissed the complaint. In an article in the Orlando Sentinel, Dewayne Bevil and Elyssa Cherney (2016) interviewed a man who witnessed what happened. The man that all the guests in the hotel were “notified of the situation Tuesday night or Wednesday morning.” With new information like that one, Disney’s good reputation about the park being a safe, family-oriented place might go down.

Disney’s has been building its reputation for many years. According to a public relations specialist, “Disney’s brand is so strong and so ingrained in people’s minds that this is going to be written off as a one-off issue” (Ge, 2016). Disney even mentioned that the incident was the first time in 45 years that an alligator attack had happened. Although Disney’s reputation helped the

company overcome this crisis, how Disney handled it was the main reason for its success. They took the alligator attack seriously and did everything they could. Luistro (2016) said that the company handled the incident efficiently and did all the right protocols. “From reaching out to the victim’s family to dealing with the alligator issues on the premises, it looks like Disney had this under control” (Luistro, 2016). The company knew what it needed to do and did it, including making sure it did not happen again.



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