

---

From The Times

May 12, 2007

## Happy times... but what happens when a holiday turns into a crisis?

### **Holiday companies should have a crisis management strategy to deal with disaster**

Cath Urquhart: Travel Editor

---

We all think of holidays as safe, fun, happy times, so when something goes badly wrong, as it has for the McCann family in Praia da Luz, our shock is the deeper. Holiday companies should have a crisis management strategy to deal with disaster. The tour operator Mark Warner is finding out the hard way whether its preparation has paid off.

As we all know when confronted with the humdrum annoyance of a delayed flight, information is the first thing we want. Mark Warner, after a shaky start (some staff in the resort suggested to journalists that three-year-old Madeleine might just have wandered off), now has clear lines of communication. The company's managing director, David Hopkins, three senior colleagues, four extra nannies and trauma counsellors for the McCanns have gone to Portugal and will stay as long as needed, with Hopkins briefing the press there.

Mark Warner has withdrawn its advertising – it can hardly promote family holidays at this time – and has put a page on its website where wellwishers can send messages to the McCanns.

More than 400 people a day are doing so.

Charlotte Walsh, of the industry newspaper Travel Trade Gazette, says that Mark Warner has responded well: "We can't think what else they should be doing." David Perl, of the crisis management firm Docleaf, agrees, but cautions: "Mark Warner is not in the media spotlight because there cannot be any accountability on its part, so people are not asking questions about its security or childcare. But if the child had been in its care, that could have finished off its business."

Previous incidents show how crucial it is for holiday companies to act fast and communicate clearly. Thomas Cook was perceived to have handled the 1999 coach crash in South Africa, in which 27 of its holidaymakers died, reasonably well. It flew out trauma counsellors, kept the press away from shocked survivors, and trained telephone staff to deal with calls from frantic relatives. The number of bookings with the company increased after the incident.

On a lighter note, P&O Cruises emerged well from the Aurora cruise in January 2005, which, due to mechanical problems, took passengers around the Isle of Wight instead of around the world. Most disembarked professing themselves happy with the way P&O had communicated with and looked after them.

It is significant that in all these incidents, holidaymakers had booked through a holiday company bonded with an organisation such as Abta, meaning that they are protected by EU laws. Companies have a duty of care to their customers, and will help if disaster strikes. By contrast, anyone booking a flight and hotel separately over the internet would find it far harder, if something went wrong, to galvanise the sort of support that Mark Warner is currently providing.

Holiday companies cannot find missing children or prevent freak accidents. But the way they respond to disasters can make a huge difference to the victims, and will help other travellers to decide whether or not to travel with that firm.

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times.

© Copyright 2007 Times Newspapers Ltd

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.