

DMOs Unexpected Roles and Responsibilities During Crisis Times

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If you heard that 'Tourism Australia', Australia's national destination marketing organisation (DMO), had a new role or responsibility in Australian tourism, what would be your first thought? Perhaps, marketing Australian tourism experiences to potential international visitors. That would not be a surprising response since "[Tourism Australia](#) is the Australian Government agency responsible for attracting international visitors to Australia, both for leisure and business events". Another response, following the heavily reduced international mobility due to the current COVID-19 situation, might be a new branding or marketing campaign focusing on Australian domestic visitors.

You would not be wrong either as Tourism Australia has partially refocused, for now, on urging Australians to visit parts of Australia that were initially focused on communities and visitor industries impacted by the 2019/20 Bush Fire emergencies. This campaign has been recently expanded whereby the 'Holiday Here This Year' "campaign encourages Australians to support tourism operators and communities around the country by booking and planning a domestic holiday". Likewise, Tourism Australia is providing an [information portal for tourism operators](#) of "a range of Australian Government relief assistance, support and resources... available to help tourism businesses deal with the impacts of the on-going COVID-19 crisis".

However, would an active crisis and disaster management role and responsibility, including active 'first responder' role for destination marketing organisations be the first thought you had? Perhaps, perhaps not. We intend to argue that DMOs do have an unexpected role and responsibility in times of crisis and disaster management that goes beyond their main Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) role. This unexpected role comes about because "DMOs have a central role in the tourism knowledge networks of their regions" ([Blackman, Kennedy and Ritchie, 2011](#), cited in [Singh, 2014](#) p.53). The DMO's centralised tourism knowledge network role is ideally placed in obtaining new 'tourism' related knowledge to incorporate with their existing knowledge. If these DMOs can then exploit this knowledge, it can result in the DMO possessing capabilities and capacities with regards to assisting other agencies associated with crisis and disaster management planning, response, and recovery. Therefore, in this article, we highlight a need for DMOs to be acknowledged as having 'expertise' and assigned roles and responsibilities in the tourism crisis and disaster management's planning, response and recovery.

Finding an overarching homogenous description of a 'typical' DMO is hindered by the plethora of types and primary functions of a DMO. A DMO's functions are to market their representative destination, stakeholder management, collaborative marketing facilitation, development advice and facilitation of visitor-related sectors such as attractions and accommodation. Additionally, 'tourism sustainability' or 'sustainable growth' is now frequently mentioned as a mandated responsibility of a DMO which directly influence economic sustainability. To meet this responsibility, some DMOs are [incorporating social, community, and environmental sustainability](#) functions in their primary responsibilities, mission, objectives, and values statements.

Therefore, DMOs invariably have a common primary economic-growth role and responsibility of marketing the destination they represent ([Singh, 2014](#)) regardless of the spatial scale of the destination. For example, "in order of spatial scale, a destination can be a country, state, island or region, city or local authority area and even a self-contained tourism infrastructure site" ([Singh, 2014](#), p.55). Regardless of destination scale or ownership structures, "destination marketing is the distinguishing feature of DMOs, there is a trend to consider these organisations as destination management organisations because their operations have moved beyond their traditional role of 'selling' to 'managing' of the destination)" ([Singh, 2014](#), p.55). Although claiming that a DMO manages a destination's tourism resources are contentious; on the one hand some scholars suggesting their role is still defined as 'marketing' places (Pike, 2008 cited in [Singh, 2014](#)). On the other hand, active management of tourism tangible and intangible resources (including knowledge), has also been noted as a distinguishing feature of DMOs (Blackman, et al., 2011; Ford & Peeper, 2008; Line & Runyan, 2014; Pike, 2008; Shaw & Williams, 2009; UNWTO, 2007 cited in [Singh, 2014](#)). In summary, while DMOs do market destination, stakeholders expect that the DMOs are also responsible for crisis and disaster management.

Crisis and disaster management frameworks have a common series of phases ([Ritchie & Jiang, 2019](#)):

1. Prevention and planning,
2. Response and recovery, and
3. Resolution and Feedback.

In the prevention and planning phase, advanced planning is a fundamental role and responsibility ([Ritchie & Jiang, 2019](#), p.8):

Advanced planning forms the basic foundation of crisis management (Santana, 2004). It is argued that although it is impossible to predict a future tourism crisis, organisations are prone to these uncertainties and it is feasible to expect an occurrence at some time (Ghaderi et al., 2014; Pike, 2008). The importance of proactive crisis management planning has been justified in past research, helping businesses to return to normal operations quickly (Barton, 1994).

Undoubtedly, there have been rapid changes in tourism business environments for the last 12 months. For example, in [bushfire affected destinations in Australia and California](#); international tourism is still severely negatively impacted by [COVID-19 cross-border travel restriction as raised in the first issue of AIB Review](#). Prior to 2020's COVID-19 travel-related crisis and disaster, Australian Government planning documents make clear that first response, such as visitor evacuations are the responsibility of States/Territories and the tourism industry. Although the Commonwealth of Australia Government assistance can be sought by affected States/Territories.

Long term planning for the recovery stage is the most crucial aspect as an [uncertain road is ahead for the Australia tourism sector](#). In the time of crisis, the level of impact determines the recovery time and procedure. For example, Australia's domestic tourism is on the restoration path, while international tourism is still suffering due to the COVID-19 increase in other countries. Recovery strategies in Tourism Australia are projected in:

- [Government communication and guidelines](#) for both [travellers](#) and [tourism operators](#) in terms of health and safety, operation and support,
- Government [relief assistance, support and resources](#) for tourism businesses
- Hosting [industry webinar](#) series for knowledge exchange and transfer

These informative webinar series are essential as responses to the rapid changes during and after crisis mean tourism managers acquiring and exploiting destination management knowledge to develop adaptive capabilities ([Dwyer, et al., 2009](#)), with this new knowledge proving challenging to obtain ([Pennington-Gray, 2018](#)). DMOs operate in distinct communities of practice which may differ from those of tourism operators, government and academics making knowledge transfer difficult and this may explain the challenges they have in absorbing and transferring knowledge ([Cooper, 2006](#)). Here we have found that general local community advice has been extended to visitors in some States and Territories, for example, the Queensland State Government has had web-based resources for [visitors](#).

In conclusion, DMOs can be conceptualised as institutions containing significant individuals, resources, and capabilities that provide institutional leadership for interest groups, balancing stakeholder interests to effectively represent the administrative bureaucracy of destination government and entrepreneurial cultures of tourism firms at the destination ([Mykletun & Gyimo'thy, 2010](#)). Therefore, they have little control over change but have the power to influence the direction and response to change via destination marketing and management through the knowledge and capabilities they possess – regardless of their primary purpose being destination management or marketing.

DMOs can therefore be regarded as knowledge users, knowledge generators, and knowledge intermediaries, with the particular selection of each of these three knowledge exchange modes depending on the context of each situation and the DMO's relationship and position in the knowledge exchange system with other organisations and individuals at their boundary. It is the unique organisational capabilities and resources DMOs possess, and their central position in the destination knowledge system, which form the source of their advantage and ability to overcome challenges caused by multi-attributed destinations in diverse, dynamic markets (Fyall, et al., 2012; Line & Runyan, 2014; Pike, 2004, p. 3; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014 cited in [Singh, 2014](#)). Therefore, it is this knowledge that assists the destination to adapt if effectively utilised within and across the DMOs boundary especially in crisis times.



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