

Rowan University

Rowan Digital Works

Theses and Dissertations

6-15-2001

Amusement park crisis management

Joe Costal

Rowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd>



Part of the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Costal, Joe, "Amusement park crisis management" (2001). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1555.

<https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/1555>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact graduateresearch@rowan.edu.

AMUSEMENT PARK CRISIS MANAGEMENT

By
Joe Costal

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in Public Relations
Rowan University
2001

©Joseph Costal, 2001

Approved by _____

Date Approved 6-15-01

ABSTRACT

Joe Costal

Amusement Park Crisis Management

2001

Dr. Donald Bagin, advisor

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Master of Arts Degree in Public Relations
Rowan University

This thesis attempts to establish a benchmark for amusement park crisis management through the careful examination of two contrasting crisis response case studies.

The first study, a deadly fire at Six Flags Great Adventure, in Jackson Township, New Jersey exemplifies the causes, components and effects of improper crisis planning. Analysis of the study closely examines all events leading to and resulting from the fire, with most content coming from the memories of professionals directly involved in the tragedy. Designations of the Six Flags case provided the basis of every amusement crisis plan written since.

The second study, a deadly boat ride at Disneyland, Anaheim, offers a contrasting, but equally significant view of crisis management. In this case, critics viewed

the public relations response as too swift and thorough, and thus void of any human regard.

The deficit of public relations was examined in six specific areas: media relations, government scrutiny, public opinion, upper-level management roles and internal communication. All designations were analyzed in light of scholarly works and journalistic accounts to create a functional guide for crisis planning within the amusement industry. A content analysis of the above public relations devices was conducted on a sample of all New York Times and Philadelphia Inquirer articles mentioning Six Flags Great Adventure between May 1984 and May 1985.

The study also explores the case studies in light of their effects on the amusement industry as a whole and its current practices. The study highlights the public relations importance of dispelling rumors, CEO involvement, dealing with victim's families, coping with the press surrounding a criminal trial and maintaining credibility standards.

MINI ABSTRACT

Joe Costal

Amusement Park Crisis Management

2001

Dr. Donald Bagin, advisor

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Master of Arts Degree in Public Relations
Rowan University

This thesis attempts to establish a benchmark for amusement park crisis management through the careful examination of two contrasting crisis response case studies. Analyzing each case in light of testimony from public relations professionals, scholarly works and journalistic accounts, it attempts to create a functional guide for crisis planning within the amusement industry.

This thesis presents a review of all available literature surrounding chosen tragedies at Six Flags Great Adventure and Disneyland.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memories of those whose lives were lost during the crises outlined in this thesis. In death, their spirits live on through the hard work and crusades for change forged by their loved ones.

Joseph Beyrouzey

Nicola Caiazza

Jose Carrion

Valeria Cartwright

Luan Dawson

Tina Genovese

Christopher Harrison

Eric Rodriguez

Lenny Ruiz

Samuel Valentine

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my talented, patient and beautiful fiancé/classmate Shannon Cogan, the source of all my strength and inspiration. Without her love, caring and uncanny ability to put things in perspective, I would be a lost soul. Shannon, you're love and friendship is a blessing! 368 days to go!

I would like to thank Dr. Bagin for his hard work, long hours and constant encouragement.

I would also like to extend special thanks to Kathy Ziprik and Bernadette Kopacz, without whom this thesis would not exist. Their help and guidance was invaluable to this study, and I could never thank them enough for conjuring up so many painful memories.

I would also like to thank William Connolly at the New Jersey Division of Codes and Standards, Ocean County Historian Polly Miller, Seaside Heights Historian Terrence Groffie, Victory Christian School Founder George Riddel, ABC's Richard Rozycki, Paperclip Communication, Texas' best amusement facility manager Joseph Cole, Bret from Laff in the Dark, Nancy at Gunther Hall Limited, D'Ann at the International Association of Haunted Attractions, Doug Higley from Mystery Sea, Eric Nievens from Great Adventure, James Key from the 'hurst and Captain Anderson and Officer Spidell from the Jackson Township Police Department.

Finally I would like to thank my family and friends for their endless love and support.

CONTENTS

Chapter One	
Introduction.....	1
Purpose.....	3
Importance	4
Limitations.....	5
Procedure.....	6
Terminology.....	7
Chapter Two	
Introduction.....	10
Disregard for Planning to Handle the Inevitable.....	12
The Story of Six Flags Great Adventure.....	13
May 11, 1984.....	13
Kathy Ziprick and the “Almost” Plan.....	19
May 11, 1984, 10 p.m.....	20
May 11, 1984, Overnight.....	21
May 12, 1984.....	21
Media Relations.....	23
Government Scrutiny.....	26
Family & Friends.....	26
Six Flag’s Corporate Role.....	31
Internal Communication.....	32
The Investigation.....	33
The Trial.....	34
The Fire Aftermath.....	39
Six Flags Great Adventure Today and “Fright Fest”.....	43
Disneyland Death.....	44
Crisis Management.....	48
Crisis Criteria.....	50
Chronic Crises.....	51
Public Relations Crisis Planning.....	52
Chapter Three.....	54
Chapter Four	
Crisis Communicators.....	56
Dispelling Rumors.....	59
Six Flags and the Six Psycho-Reactions.....	60
Squeaky Clean?.....	62
Back to Business.....	63
The Crisis and the CEO.....	64
Public Relations and the Victims’ Families.....	66
The Trial	67

Chapter Five

The Fire Lives On.....	68
Planning and the Case Studies.....	69
Six Flags Great Adventure and Management Roles.....	72
Six Flags and the Cracked Egg Model.....	73
The Three Ms.....	75
Six Flags Great Adventure and Fink's Cycle.....	76
Effects on the Whole Industry.....	80
Six Flags Great Adventure Content Analysis.....	81
Recommendations and Conclusions.....	82

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On May 11, 1984, eight teenagers stepped into the Haunted Castle attraction at Six Flags Great Adventure (herein referred to as SFGA), Jackson Township, New Jersey, filled with nervous chatter and laughter. Unlike the thousands entering before them, the teenagers would face a horror far beyond the costumed ghouls and exhibits waiting inside. In mere minutes, a cigarette lighter inadvertently engulfed the structure in flames. The fire raged for close to an hour, but SF Corporation and Bally's Manufacturing, the park's parent company, became hopelessly entangled in two years of lawsuits and horrendous press. It would be nearly a decade before the park would shake what locals referred to as the "Haunted Castle jinx," costing the amusement giant its credibility. Eight separate families still suffer the unthinkable and grisly loss of loved ones.

On New Year's Eve 1998, a family of three lost its father when a steel mooring shaft flung loose of Anaheim Disneyland's USS Columbia and fatally struck Luan Dawson in the head. A Disney worker and Luan's wife suffered severe leg wounds. All

were transported to a nearby hospital in an unmarked Disney “ambulance.” When Anaheim authorities were finally notified, arriving on the scene within 30 minutes of the death, the ride had already been partitioned off, scrubbed clean and void of any evidence. Disney authorities said they were protecting the children and families at the park. Critics said they were protecting their image. Anaheim authorities echoed that Disney did nothing wrong. The park stayed open for the balance of that day, the impending case against the media giant did not.¹

While the 1984 tragedy was a landmark case for national amusement ride security measures, it also established paralleled public relations measures. Yet, parks continue to face scrutiny over safety regulations, poor crisis preparation, inept media handling and a general air of inhumanity during disasters. Despite what seems like legions of public relations personnel, theme parks manage to folly crisis management.

The above scenarios share a common internal controversy and public relations tactics perceived as questionable, at best. This thesis intends to explore the amusement industry. Kathy Ziprik, SFGA’s assistant public relations director in 1984, called the fire “a gruesome mess.”² Disney critic and author of The Mouse that Roared, Henry Giroux called the 1999 Christmas Eve event “greed mixed with arrogance.”³ If Disney had done too much and SFGA had done too little, does a balanced recipe even exist in the world of amusement park crisis public relations? Does either cause quicker crisis escalation? Could proper planning have decisively saved either of these parks from a credibility

¹ National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians. (1999). *Disney Covers Up Death at Park*

² Kathy Ziprik. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

³ Giroux, Henry. The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

lapse? Do any amusement park crisis public relations practices communicate a genuine concern for their patrons, or is image king?

Purpose

As people continue to seek thrills, amusement rides continue to get bigger, faster and scarier. Amusement corporations meet the demands of millions seeking an “ultimate thrill.” In 1999, 7, 260 people were injured in amusement park related injuries. The Consumer Product Safety Commission reports that 47, 386 people were injured using golf equipment. One hundred and seventeen people have died on amusement rides since 1972. Yet, considering the number of jam-packed rides leaving their stations annually, many amusement patrons still have good reason to consider the roller coaster “the safest way to travel.” The chance of being fatally injured at an amusement park is one in a half billion.⁴ Bottom-line revenues from the world’s largest amusement conglomerates, Disney and Six Flags, attest to consumer comfort. According to Giroux, the Disney theme parks have often been single-handedly responsible for bailing their parent corporations out of financial trouble.⁵

“Where statistics can be traced, they give only disparate insight into the true impact of crises,” said Chris Woodcock in “How to Face Crisis with Confidence. There are an estimated 15,000 to 30,000 deaths each year reportedly caused by product-related illness and injuries. It can be argued that a ‘successful crisis’ is that which passes unnoticed by external audiences.”⁶

⁴ The Consumer Product Safety Commission. (2000). Amusement Accidents and Death.

⁵ Giroux, Henry. The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. (pp. 53).

⁶ Haymarket Publication Service. Woodcock, Chris. (1994, November). How to Face Crisis with Confidence.

Amusement park corporate conscience is the subject of countless web sites, consumer reports, books and television specials. Million dollar lawsuits, personal vendettas, human-interest accounts and the uncannily disturbing nature of these crises result in press field days. Fearing lawsuits, theme park moguls have made it easy for the press to illustrate them as greedy, cold and downright monstrous. With the rising tide of thrill ride demand, this industry, possibly more than any other, teeters on the constant verge of disaster. Despite the aforementioned statistics, numbers do not comfort the families and friends of amusement park victims. Even worse, case studies show they are seldom comforted by the industry. As industry professionals reveal in this study, SFGA's 1984 fire was the benchmark by which all future amusement crisis management plans were based.

In her article, "Crisis PR," Cathy Bond writes, "one in three businesses don't survive a major crisis, and few ever return to pre-incident trading levels."⁷

Importance

"What did they think we wanted to do, ride the Ferris Wheel?" cried the cousin of Nicola Caiazza, one of eight teenagers who died in the SFGA Haunted Castle fire. Caiazza interpreted these sobbing sentiments from the victim's father, a recent Italian immigrant who spoke no English, but more than communicated his unbearable grief. Caiazza told reporters this outside the gates to GA the day after the tragedy, where with dental records in hand, parents of victims claimed they were asked to pay park admission to identify loved one's bodies. Though park public relations officials claim this was a mistake made by misinformed ticket-takers, and victims' families were later escorted by

⁷ Haymarket Publication Service. Bond, Cathy. (1995) Crisis PR.

security through a special entrance, Caiazza's accounts were picked up by the AP, receiving in-depth front page coverage nationally.⁸

The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission reports that, "information preventing accidents is routinely hidden from the public."⁹ Information scarce to mainstream public relations scrutiny lies within this thesis. It provides an opportunity to uncover the otherwise purposefully hidden. While the public has forgotten many of the tragedies discussed in this thesis, memories will eternally haunt those involved. This study hopes to promote protection of image and credibility through truth and humanity.

Dealing with the sensitivity of life and death in light of corporate survival allows the unique opportunity of conducting a sound business analysis while also cultivating social conscience. This thesis will attempt to create a business benchmark that can make a difference in the lives of those it is intended to serve.

Limitations

The level of information afforded to the author restricted this thesis. At time of submission, California had just passed legislation forcing Disneyland, and all other state amusement parks, to release safety statistics. Otherwise, the general sensitivity of safety issues limit the number of industry professionals willing to be interviewed for this thesis. At time of submission, current public relations professionals at both SFGA and Disneyland could not be reached for interviews.

This study also examined crisis public relations techniques without accounting for the major technological differences in communication between today and the time of the

⁸ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It's Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer.

⁹ The Consumer Product Safety Commission. (2000). Amusement Accidents and Death.

accidents. Crisis management is extremely different today from 1984, when practitioners had about 24-hours between a story hitting the wires and the morning newspaper. As Dana James points out, “The Internet, along with 24-hour news channels, has forever changed the news tempo and the public’s access to it. Now it flows like a river, and it just depends where you put your boat in. We didn’t used to have worry so much about the dark part of the day.”¹⁰ This study does not clearly account for differences forged by technological advancements, but instead examines more universal practices of media relations and crisis decision-making.

Procedure

Upon identifying the aforementioned cases as industry benchmarks in amusement park crisis management, detailed research was conducted. Each case needed to translate both obvious and subtle needs for topic improvement. Research was conducted through online and library database searches using the words “crisis management,” “Disneyland,” “Six Flags Great Adventure,” “amusement park management,” “amusement park crisis,” “theme parks,” “Haunted Castle Fire,” “USS Columbia.” The author subscribed to several online amusement park trade journals and news clipping services. Further research was also conducted at the Gloucester and Ocean County Historical Societies. A content analysis of all local and national articles was conducted.

Second, extensive online searches for general amusement/theme park statistics, opinion and resources were conducted. A broad web search, though less accurate or credible, provides a unique topical insight. User-created and managed sites touting variations on projected themes kept the author grounded in public reaction and topic

interpretations. It was a welcomed diversion from the media and professional viewpoints dominating traditional research.

The third step was networking. Pursuing leads from various resources, contacts were made at the New Jersey State Amusement Office in Trenton, Amusement Business Office in Nashville, The National Association of Amusement Ride Safety Officials in Brandon, Florida and the National Association for Dark Ride Preservation in South Dakota. These leads yielded first-hand accounts on chosen case studies, rare literature and public, government documents.

The fourth step involved further expert contact in amusement park public relations. Experiences and ideas on the subject came from a variety of sources and backgrounds. Included were county and state historians, past and present amusement park managers, subject authors and other social commentators.

The fifth step involved research of general crisis management techniques and principles. Amusement park crisis management studies did not exist prior to this work. While this provided a distinct research challenge, it also served a unique opportunity to provide a benchmark in the field. Public relations crisis literature about other industries was also reviewed.

Terminology

The following is a brief collection of terms found in this paper and other public relations, crisis management and amusement park trade circles.

Chronic Crisis: A term used to describe a manager's inability to control aspects of a crisis due to earlier mistakes.

¹⁰ James, D. (2000, November 6) When Your Company Goes Code Blue; How Crisis Management Has Changed. Marketing News. 1.

Crisis: Any situation reaching a critical phase; a decisive moment or crucial time. Any unplanned event, occurrence or sequence of events yielding specifically undesirable consequences.

Crisis Public Relations: An intensive, concentrated form of public relations, usually based on an explicit plan. It uses specific techniques for generating two-way communication. Successful crisis public relations enables organizations to relay information to the public during and after any event drastic to the norm. Includes a rehearsed plan, immediate management, long-term management and image restoration.

Defensive Avoidance: A term describing irrational managerial decision-making during a crisis caused by panic and/or disbelief. These snap decisions usually occur at the onset of a crisis. According to Dieudonne ten Berge, author of The First 24 Hours, defensive avoidance is a major cause of poor short-term decisions during a crisis.¹¹

Echo Effect: A journalistic term describing subsequent feature or human-interest news stories, printed as a result of related breaking news. It can also be used to describe one crisis occurring subsequent or in tandem to another. A lack of concurrent or properly released information from SFGA forced journalists to seek-out echo stories from other sources.

Eeling: A term used to describe journalistic or verbal finagling, sometimes illegally, for the sake of cracking news. Eeling often backfires. See *weaseling*.

Gotcha Journalism: Journalistic positioning in which reporters, sometimes illegally, finagle and insinuate news.

Great Adventure: See "Six Flags Great Adventure."

Haunted Castle fire (tragedy): On May 11, 1984, eight teenagers died in an accidental fire at SFGA's Haunted Castle attraction. It was the largest tragedy in the company's history and to date. The attraction was made up of 17 trailers connected by a central control room and medieval facade. The fire, reportedly started by an unidentified adolescent boy's cigarette lighter touching an exposed, foam "bumper," was eventually ruled accidental. Six Flags owners and Great Adventure managers were eventually absolved of aggravated manslaughter charges in August, 1985.

Internal Communication: A two-way relationship within an organization enabling an exchange of information between employees.

Narrow-minded focus: A term used to describe an organization's dependence on lawyers during a crisis. It illustrates how an organization's fear of lawsuits hinders public relations.

¹¹ Berge, D. (1990) The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Public relations: A management function enabling organizations to achieve relationships with their various audiences through an understanding of public opinions.

Public relations crisis plan: A detailed plan outlining crisis, it enables effective communication internally and externally.

Siege Mentality: This term describes panic-induced crisis management inertia.

Six Flags Great Adventure (SFGA): A 100-acre theme park in Jackson, NJ. The park was independently created in 1974 on farmlands owned by the son of movie mogul Samuel Goldwyne. Originally called Great Adventure, the park was purchased by the Chicago-based theme park chain Six Flags Corporation in 1978. Bally's Manufacturing Corporation parented Six Flags at the time of the 1984 Haunted Castle tragedy, but sold the chain to Marriott later that year. The New Jersey park remained a permanent staple of the 15-member Six Flags chain, which is now owned by Premiere Parks, the second largest amusement chain in the United States behind Disney.

Stonewalling: A term used to describe ignoring or withholding information from the media, especially during crisis. This term takes on an especially sensitive nature when a crisis involves human health or life. Ambiguously drawn lines exist between withholding information and respecting the wishes of a victim's family¹². An organization disguising the sickness of a famous CEO to protect stock prices is an explicit example of stonewalling.

Waffling: A term used to describe a company's dissemination of mixed messages to the media. This is best illustrated when an organization attempts to mix generally bad news with insignificant good news.

Weaseling: Using language to avert, usually unsuccessfully, an ensuing crisis. The most famous example of weaseling may be President William Clinton's "I didn't inhale" line. See *eeling*.

¹² Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press.

Chapter Two

In 1998, a season industry officials describe as a “horrible coincidence, statistical anomaly,” a dozen Americans died on amusement rides. Despite contrasting statistics, including the standard “riding a roller coaster is much safer than driving to the park,” the deadly summer served to skew the industry’s average annual death rate. Since 1978, two people have died on amusement rides annually. The industry has served over 300 million people taking over 900 million rides, with a 50 million increase since the start of the 90s. The industry points to the fact that mortality rates have not raised proportionally to phenomenal attendance escalation.¹³ For the parks facing deaths in 1998, statistics haven’t warded swarming bad press or negative attention. The need for crisis public relations and image reconstruction is not directly proportionate to the industry’s safety statistics, and prospective attendees seem to remember park deaths much more readily than any positive statistic.

¹³ Nieves, E. (1998, August 28). Deadly Summer Raises Concerns. The New York Times.

The gap between amusement safety and the public perception of it can be easily equated to airline safety. According to The AirSafe Journal (www.airsafe.com), airlines have one fatality per every three million flights. Despite this statistic, approximately 30 million people face some form of flight anxiety. “A fear of dying” on an aircraft is the number one cause of this anxiety. Much like the amusement park industry, positive statistics about fatality rates on airplanes do little to suppress public fears. People remember, and are even fascinated by large accidents. AirSafe maintains an electronic, searchable archive of large-scale airline disasters.¹³

According to Bernadette Kopacz, SFGA’s assistant marketing director in 1984:

Since 1998, the industry has taken a beating because of accidents. It has been brought up in legislature especially against Disney, since they are not required to report accidents to the state. The industry, as a whole, has been flat in attendance as a result. In this day and age, consumers really pay attention to the quality of their experiences.¹⁴

One third of all US amusements are never inspected by a state, local or federal official.¹⁵ Of 300 million visitors, 99.9% rode without injury. Of the remaining .1%, 75% of accidents were caused by rider misconduct. The International Association of Amusement Parks & Attractions reports visitors face a one in 22 million chance of hospitalization (138 out of 7,260) and a one in 1.5 billion chance of being killed on a ride. Despite these statistics, AOL reports a 95% rise in amusement accidents since 1996.¹⁶ This statistic is just one of the haunting effects from the 1998 summer. From a public

¹³ Fear of Flying. (2001). The AirSafe Journal, 35.

¹⁴ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

¹⁵ Sally, R. (2000, October, 2). Rider Safety Scrutinized. Business Insurance.

¹⁶ www.aol.com/rides911/accidents.

relations perspective, exposure of such statistics, especially in light of the industrial secrecy about safety measures, damages parks.

Despite all (the industry's) safety first rhetoric, a search of court records turned up hundreds of lawsuits filed by injured guests charging (parks) with negligence. Many cases have been settled and sealed. In all of them (the parks) repeatedly received confidentiality agreements, almost ensuring the public will never hear any of the gory details. In the case files there is an unreported history of inadequate staff training, medical care and disregard for planning to handle the inevitable.¹⁷

“Disregard for Planning to Handle the Inevitable”

According to P.A. Humphrey, author of several amusement park accident exposes for Fort Worth Weekly, amusement park public relations departments share a similar mantra: “all accidents are freaks of nature,” and there is only a problem when the “lines stop moving.

“Most parks hire seasonal employees, usually high school kids, to operate rides,” Humphrey reports. “Emergency training is thus minimal, regulations are non-existent and accountability is left to the courts.” In one particular accident occurring at Six Flags Over Texas, Valeria Cartwright drowned on a “Roaring Rapids” raft. Humphrey maintains the accident exposed “shoddy safety inspection procedures, slow emergency response and guest-endangering cutbacks.” SF maintained the death was an accident. The park agreed to remove visions of the attraction from promotional materials out of respect for the deceased, but adamantly denied guilt, lack of planning or a need to close the attraction. One on-looker told Fort Worth Weekly, “I was appalled by the ensuing chaos. People from SF were all freaking out and screaming.” According to Humphrey, the only thing at SF that wasn't too slow was “their PR machine's initiation of damage control.” When a

¹⁷ Humphrey, P. Why Did Valeria Cartwright Have to Die at Six Flags (1999, July 17). Fort Worth Weekly.

similar death occurred at SF Over New England, SF Over Texas finally closed “Roaring Rapids” for the 1999 season. The same style of ride can be currently found fully operating at SFGA, and a newer version of that ride style has just opened at Disney’s Animal Kingdom park.¹⁸

The Story of Six Flags Great Adventure

Six Flags Great Adventure is a 1,700 acre theme park in the 100 square mile, 26,300 populated town of Jackson, New Jersey, 60 miles southwest of New York City. With a seasonal staff of over 3,500 people, the park is New Jersey’s single largest seasonal employer. Its parent company, Six Flags, the nation’s second largest theme park chain behind Disney, owns 10 parks having served over 22 million patrons. Six of their parks are larger than Disneyland, and SF considers itself the United States “thrill ride” leader, with an average coaster speed of 65 mph.¹⁹ SF had entertained over 190 million patrons between opening in 1961 and their fated 1984 season.²⁰

May 11, 1984

1983 had been a banner season for SFGA; actually it was the theme park’s busiest ever. Drawing three million guests, the park suddenly found itself nationally ranking only behind Disney’s two parks and California’s Knott’s Berry Farms as the most attended park in the United States. The park brought SF \$69 million, up \$13 million from the previous season.

On May 11, 1984, Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn, New York, and the Victory Christian School in Williamstown, New Jersey, were celebrating spring and their

¹⁸ Humphrey, P. Why Did Valeria Cartwright Have to Die at Six Flags (1999, July 17). Fort Worth Weekly

¹⁹ Bozell Public Relations. (1990). The Great American Scream Machine. www.silveranvil.org.

coming graduations with separate field trips to SFGA. Lane sent over 1,200 students aboard 22 buses. Five of those students would not return.²¹

Kathy Ziprik had been working at SFGA for about a year as assistant public relations director. Heading home this particular Friday afternoon, Ziprik would have never predicted why she would remember this day for the rest of her life.

I had just gotten home and taken off my shoes when at 6 p.m. the phone rang. Our on-duty senior security manager had called about a small fire at the Haunted Castle. He told me not to come back in, but my boss was going to NY for the weekend, so I told him I would anyway. Ten minutes later, as I was getting dressed, the phone rang again. It was another security guard asking me where the ABC news helicopter could land—needless to say, I made the half hour trip in little over ten minutes.²²

At 6:35 p.m., fire swept through SFGA's Haunted Castle. SFGA firefighters joined squads from 15 surrounding municipalities to battle the fire until 7:41 p.m. By then, the fire completely destroyed the structure, leaving eight teenagers dead and seven injured. All four employees in the attraction (a number that would later be greatly scrutinized during the criminal trial) escaped unharmed.²³

The fire was about over when I got there, but the park was a mess. I had trouble getting into the park because of the fire trucks and emergency vehicles. I had trouble getting into the administrative building because of the media mob. News helicopters were hovering overhead way before the fire was completely put out. At one point, I got screamed at by the fire chief, because news helicopters were spreading flames around.²⁴

²⁰ DeSantis, S. (1984, May 17). Authorities Want Boy Who Set Fire to Come Forward. Asbury Park Press p. 3.

²¹ Cavaluzzi, J. (1984, May 12). Previous Fatalities at Park. Asbury Park Press.

²² Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

²³ Sandovi, C. (1994, May 8). The GA Fire—10 Years Later. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

²⁴ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

The Haunted Castle was SFGA's most used single show attraction since it opened in 1979.²⁵ The "castle" was actually a 17 trailer maze behind a medieval facade, filled with costumed employees "jumping out" of dark corners to "frighten visitors" amid "spooky exhibits" filled with coffins, hanging spider webs and giant skeletons.²⁶

"You don't know where you are; it can be very disorienting in there," said a former visitor. "Sometimes it's totally black."²⁷

In 1984, Ziprik told a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter that the house was like "any other in America, staff lurk inside the house, popping out at them from within walls—not touching them, just 'boo.' It was just good, clean fun."²⁸

Seventeen years later, Kopacz remains haunted by memories of that afternoon:

The night of the fire, the marketing department was celebrating our great 1984 season opening and year-to-date attendance at a hotel. My boss was paged about the fire at about 6:30 p.m. We were just starting to come in to the function. When I heard the word "fire" and some casualties, initially I thought it had to do with the band Golden Earring that (my department) had booked to perform that night. Top level management and the PR department returned to the park. The few that stayed at the party asked them to let us know what was going on. No one could enjoy themselves anymore, so we all left. I remember coming home and hearing a report on the radio. I was finding out more from the radio station than from my own company. I called my friend at the station to find out where he was getting the information...to be careful about spreading rumors since we didn't know anything. He said he was getting it from the wire, not some anonymous source.²⁹

Ziprik remembered:

²⁵ Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, June 14). Officials Say SF Did Not Install Sprinklers. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

²⁶ Sandovi, C. (1994, May 8). The GA Fire—10 Years Later. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

²⁷ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It's Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

²⁸ Clay, D. (1985, June 15). Officials Testify on Fire Site. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

²⁹ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

We put the media in our conference room. Glenn (Vallanch, SFGA public relations director) wanted to make sure the police and the fire officials would be the ones making all the statements. We were to acknowledge the fire had occurred, but say nothing else to the media, until we had further information from authorities. We took media in shifts from the conference room to the fire site.³⁰

SFGA immediately set-up a hot line number to answer questions about the blaze and its victims. By 9 p.m. hundreds of people had called to determine whether or not loved ones and relatives were among the victims.³¹

Throughout the metropolitan area, “the story got immediately picked up over the wires,” and six o’clock news broadcasts were interrupted with the “breaking story.”³² The main fire description, coined by the Ocean County fire chief, was as a “fast, hot fire that killed swiftly.”³³ Local television, including New York City, the world’s largest audience market, plastered the fire’s images. Non-visual media compensated the shocking footage with striking narrative imagery.

News accounts at the time said the Castle took on an eerie glow of orange. Spectators watched as the aluminum trailer walls melted like sheets of cellophane placed on a hot stove. Adding even more spookiness to the spectacle was the fact that until flames ate through the wiring and halted it, the haunting sound effects of organs playing, cats howling, wind blowing and sinister laughing echoed inside the castle. ‘The music was playing, and people were dying.’”

The first body was found by 9 p.m. that evening. “It was gruesome,” Ziprik recalls. “Rescuers couldn’t tell the difference between human remains and props. It was 4 a.m. before the bodies were pulled from the wreckage.” News reports, especially the 10 and 11 p.m. major network broadcasts, continued to apply horrific elements by not only

³⁰ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

³¹ Campbell, D. (1984, May 12). Fire Kills Eight at GA Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

³² Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

³³ Campbell, D. (1984, May 12). A Fast Hot Fire That Killed Swiftly Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

pointing out where in the structure the bodies were found, but also adding designations such as “a few feet behind the hunchback” and “right in front of the witch’s cauldron.”³⁴

Glenn (park public relations director) made a press statement for the 11 o’clock news. His statement, handed down from corporate, was just a statement of waiting. A CBS reporter was late and missed his statement, so I recapped it for him. Glenn was very annoyed with me. I thought I was being open and accommodating. I thought I was helping relations. Giving them the statement made it look like we were disorganized and it removed a central spokesperson. I was very young and stupid. I should have never made that statement.³⁵

Discussing media sensationalism of the SFGA fire during a telephone interview with an ABC News Producer Richard Rozycki, “the irony” of the tragedy proved another crippling aspect for the park.

First you have such a reputable place like SFGA, which at the time was referred to as ‘Walt Disney World North,’ on the other hand, this is simply a fire at a haunted house. There is so much that is newsworthy just in the irony of this story. You have people running for their lives one minute from fake goblins and murderers, and the next minute they are running for their lives for real. Viewers are intrigued by that irony, and ratings are boosted.

For what Rozycki describes as “common, lay viewers” horror is intriguing. When the synthetic horror of a haunted house meets the real-life horrors of a deadly fire, the results, however tragic, are marketable. Rozycki admitted that reporters of the fire were probably particularly prone to “play up” images of the fire based on this intrigue.

Viewers, at first, were probably like, ‘wow, this was a haunted house, this could’ve been me.’ Later, as the viewer considers what a haunted house represents to them, a place synonymous with death, they begin to become shocked, even frightened by the fact that, in essence, this house of horrors actually came to life and killed.

³⁴ Sandovi, C. (1994, May 8). The GA Fire—10 Years Later. *Asbury Park Press*. pp. 1.

³⁵ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

Rozycki finally conceded to the importance of ratings in news reporting. From a public relations perspective, the story's "intrigue" compounded into a greater social awareness and remembrance of the crisis. Had eight people died in an arcade, all other facts being similar, a smaller segment of the public would remember the incident today. "Eight people died in a haunted house; people will always remember that. Ask anybody in this area about it today, and they'll remember it, not because eight people died, but because of where they died."³⁶

In three separate issues of the Ocean County Observer striking photographs obtained from former castle employees, depicting various employees dressed as ghouls and other monsters, accompanied fire stories. In the Asbury Park Press, a full, two-page color photo spread appeared on May 17th. The spread contrasted scenes from the fire with scenes from the fully operational attraction. On one side, a cloaked woman, covered in ominous gray make-up, standing in front of the Haunted Castle's drawbridge main entrance, offers a ghoulish look and out-stretched hands toward the camera, while a fellow employee, sprawled on the floor reaches toward the camera as if stopping an escaping visitor. These striking photographs seem to serve no other significance except scaring up readership.

As Marion Pinsdorf, author of Communicating Under Siege points out, such dramatization is no excuse for SFGA's inability to handle media relations. "As broadcasting, and to a lesser extent, the print media become show biz, sheer

³⁶ Rozycki, Richard. (2001, March). Telephone interview.

entertainment, business must learn to work within those parameters, no matter how distasteful and mind-stretching.”³⁷

Ocean County Prosecutor Edward Turnbach put the situation into further perspective: “The fact that this all happened at an old spook house makes it so much sadder for all of Ocean County. We all have so many fond memories of this being such a happy place, a place where screams were followed by laughter. Not anymore, now it will always be a very sad, sad place.”³⁸

Kathy Ziprik and the “Almost” Plan

“I had written a crisis plan,” Ziprik said, “and given it to our secretary who was in the process of typing it up. It had yet to be distributed. There was no emergency crisis plan before me. They never anticipated a disaster like this.”

The story reads like a fable. Ziprik, in her first year as a public relations assistant at SFGA, notices the organization’s desperate need for a crisis plan. She writes one with the assistance of the public relations department at Glassboro State College, her alma mater. The plan sits on the secretary’s desk awaiting distribution on the very day of the largest disaster in the theme park’s history and to date.³⁹

Even if Ziprik’s plan had been distributed, even if it had been implemented for a year, it is possible SFGA would have reacted the same way. According to Chris Woodcock, director of Countrywide Communications, writing and implementing an unpracticed or under-appreciated plan can often serve to only further hurt an

³⁷ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press.

³⁸ Campbell, D. (1984, May 12). Fire Kills Eight at GA Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

³⁹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

organization. “Like most good business disciplines, it requires continuous commitment to training, test exercises, simulations and constant response improvement.” Ziprik describes SFGA as an organization that was trapped in what Woodcock describes as the “it-can’t-happen-to-us” phase of crisis management—the lowest stage.⁴⁰

May 11, 1984, 10 p.m.

Fifteen thousand people were still in SFGA as the Haunted Castle burned. Reports from the night of the blaze describe large gatherings of patrons around the fire scene and at their automobiles. Some patrons reportedly cheered on the blaze, while drinking beer, laughing and joking. Other patrons were angered when officials finally decided to close the park at 9 p.m., two hours earlier than usual. Patrons were evacuated without incident and offered free tickets for their inconvenience.

Three cars were left in the parking lot following the evacuation. Vallanch said the owners of those cars were checked and “it had been determined that they left the park.” This statement would later be disproved by accounts from victims’ families. The car served as one family’s initial premonition that their son had died in the fire. Vallanch and the SFGA public relations department would hear plenty about the 1970 Plymouth Duster that remained in the SFGA parking lot, a graduation gift to one of the deceased. The media would use the car as a potent human interest angle to the story. In the subsequent weeks, the press ran dozens of stories about the car, and its fated maiden voyage to SFGA.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Haymarket Publication Service. Woodcock, Chris. (1994, November). How to Face Crisis with Confidence.

⁴¹ Monfiletto, M. (1984, May 12). Eight Killed in GA Fire. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

May 11, 1984, overnight

“At 1:25 a.m., one (hot line switchboard operator) put down her phone for an instant and said, ‘That’s the first break we’ve had all night.’ She said she had handled thousands of calls from worried parents.”⁴²

As the Asbury Park Press reported, “GA officials clamped a lid of secrecy on the tragedy, providing few details until late Friday (the 11th) night, when they finally acknowledged that people had died in the blaze. No further announcements were made until 3 a.m.” During this early morning news conference at the park, Ocean County Prosecutor Edward Turnbach pointed out the possibility that the fire did not alarm victims because they “probably thought it was part of the amusement.”⁴³

May 12, 1984

SF Corporate headquarters sealed its park’s fate when it ordered the gates open the following day. Throngs of patrons lined-up outside the park’s gates waiting for the 10 a.m. opening. It had been titled “Christian Family Day,” for the hundreds of pre-sold tickets to organizations on special outings. Various media describe the scene outside the park with contrasting opinions, from “nervous chatter about the fire” to “complete oblivion.”⁴⁴

While the public relations department clamored to face the crisis, maintenance workers erected an eight foot, plywood, barbed wire fence around the remains of the

⁴² Campbell, D. (1984, May 12). Fire Kills Eight at GA Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁴³ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). Call Went Out: Castle Ablaze. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp.

⁴⁴ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It’s Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

Haunted Castle.⁴⁵ They intended to protect patrons from the ominous sight of the structure, local media called it a “cover-up.” The Asbury Park Press, Ocean County Observer, Philadelphia Inquirer and The New York Times all ran an Associated Press echo story with the headline “Yesterday—It Was Business As Usual, Almost” describing accounts from patrons, employees and anyone with an experience involving the fire or the castle. This information was used to fill the news gap left by SFGA officials.

The jovial atmosphere that filled most of the park contrasted sharply with the somber tones around the Haunted Castle, where police officials spent the day combing through blackened ruins. The towers of the gutted castle were visible from many areas of the park. Some riders gasped on the cable cars and the Ferris Wheel, as they glimpsed at the remains from the air.⁴⁶

One woman said she, her husband and her children had completed their tour of the (Haunted Castle) about 15 minutes before the fire started. The house frightened her children, she said, and they tried to leave through a marked emergency exit door. She said the door opened a crack but no further, and they were forced to go all the way through the attraction and out the main exit.⁴⁷

A young boy waiting in line for the park to open the day after the fire inadvertently crippled SFGA by saying: “My father thought (SFGA) was going to be closed, but think about it—can you imagine how much money they’d lose if they closed just cause of this one little thing?”⁴⁸

Ziprik admitted, “We knew opening the park would appear very money hungry. But SF corporate refused to correctly deal with the impact of what had happened. The

⁴⁵ Infield, T. (1984, May 13). The Haunted Castle Fire Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁴⁶ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It’s Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁴⁷ Infield, T. (1984, May 13). The Haunted Castle Fire Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁴⁸ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It’s Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

media reaction, the public outcry and the general impact of the tragedy in the area was so great.”⁴⁹

Cherry Kutac, named in this particular article as a “park spokeswoman,” offered the park’s first official, non-fact based, reactionary comment. “We are definitely devastated by the tragedy. But, SF procedures in the past have been to go ahead and open the park the following day if there is no immediate danger.”⁵⁰

The bodies were positively identified during the late afternoon, as the park reached peak attendance. Five of the dead were from a Franklin K. Lane High field trip from Brooklyn, one was from a Victory Christian School field trip from Williamstown, New Jersey, and the rest were from Passaic County, New Jersey.

At 9 p.m. SFGA’s public relations/marketing staff and managers left the park for the first time since the fire. They showered, changed clothes and returned thirty-minutes later.⁵¹

Media Relations

As Marion Pinsdorf points out, “stonewalling” is not only devastating to a company’s image, it can also cripple management during a crisis. “Problem-solving will become more complex under greater public scrutiny.”⁵²

News stories ran rampant with SFGA’s inability to answer any questions. Even worse, they described “contradictions over exit doors and fire causes.” On the day after

⁴⁹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

⁵⁰ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It’s Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁵¹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

⁵² Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press.

the fire, SFGA Public Relations Director Glenn Vallanch said he had “no idea how the fire started,” Cherry Kutac, an Assistant PR Director said she was “leaning toward a conclusion of arson.”⁵³

Quite honestly, until the fire, I never gave a second thought to the Haunted Castle. It was not a primary attraction at the park at all. We focused a lot on the new rides for the year, what could we do to promote them and thus drive park attendance. I think I went in the castle only once in my entire time there; it wasn't my thing. I personally never knew it was constructed of side-by-side trailers until after the fire. This was not a hidden fact at the park, just something I was never curious about or briefed about. Everything about the castle made it a “back burner” attraction. It was located deep in the park and to the side, and it didn't have a roller coaster attached so it wasn't a big deal to us.⁵⁴

During the night of the fire, park officials released a statement citing that five of the eight victims had died mere feet from an “operable panic door.” Media investigations into the statement revealed trailer #5405, in which the bodies were found actually contained no exit. Officials were forced to retract and publicly claim their inability to reveal information, and ultimately their unfamiliarity with the attraction. Things went from bad to worse as not only did #5405 not have the spoken of exit, but such an exit was suggested for installation into the trailer and ignored by SFGA. Left with only sketchy customer accounts, the public began to draw its own conclusions about the attraction's safety, and ultimately the park's responsibility for the deaths.

By May 14th, SFGA's actions had established a dire verdict. In what many media described as a “dearth of information,” SFGA had coupled poor external/internal relations with poor decision-making to be portrayed in an insensitive, irresponsible light.

Amid the confusion and grief that followed the fatal fire at SFGA, grieving families, an angry prosecutor and a clamoring press corps said they had been abused, stonewalled and misled by the

⁵³ Infield, T. (1984, May 13). The Haunted Castle Fire Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁵⁴ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

amusement park's owners, operators and representatives. The criticism began the morning after the fire, as the park opened its doors in a business-as-usual atmosphere to revenues of at least \$500,000...a near-vacuum of accurate information. Some of the statements issued by the park's public relations representatives proved to be inaccurate. Any reporter who left the park's headquarters was accompanied by a park official who had orders to keep the reporter from talking to park patrons or personnel. The information the park's public relations staff provided was flawed, and it did not come easy.⁵⁵

Everyday I was afraid to open the newspaper to see what else reporters dug up, who they talked to. They talked to the families who lost their children about what a horrible company Great Adventure was. It was heartbreaking and everyday for months there was another negative story. I remember we stopped buying advertising in the Asbury Park Press that season and in 1985 because we told them that their stories about us were overly negative and of all the newspapers covering the story, we were neighbors and they should have been more compassionate.⁵⁶

As Bond puts it, "trying to pick up a crisis' pieces first and leave the talking to later is a lethal thing to do." The central theme of crisis management is effective communication with vital external audiences. Then perceptions change and ineptitude becomes responsibility.⁵⁷

In one of the most shocking examples of an echo-effect story, on Super Bowl Sunday, the Asbury Park Press ran a story entitled "Father Files Appeal in the Death of Youth." The story described Joseph R. Beyrouthey's bittersweet viewing of the big game without his dead son.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Weiner, T. (1984, May 18). In the Fire's Aftermath, A Dearth of Information. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 3.

⁵⁶ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

⁵⁷ Haymarket Publication Service. Bond, Cathy. (1995, January) Crisis PR.

⁵⁸ Parisi, A. (1984, January 27). Father Files Appeal in Death of Youth. Asbury Park Press. pp. B6.

Government Scrutiny

The press wasn't the only group using the term "stonewalling" against the park. Soon, Ocean County Prosecutor Edward Turnbach needed a subpoena to get information. He said he was being "stonewalled" because the park "knew they were going to take (the fire) on the chin."⁵⁹

To Turnbach's accusations SFGA responded by saying they "tried," but the prosecutor asked for "documents" that were "impossible to deliver on time."⁶⁰

Family & Friends

Eight kids had died, and a number of others had been taken to the emergency room. But hundreds of parents whose kids didn't come home that night—for any of a number of reasons, were convinced they had died in our park. A father and mother came to the park convinced their kid was in the Haunted Castle. The kid wasn't, but the father had a heart attack there in the park.⁶¹

Joseph Beyrouzey and Nicholas Caiazza were friends. They went to SFGA together to celebrate spring and one of the last Friday nights they would have together before starting their summer jobs. They attended high school together, intended to attend college together, but instead died huddled together in SFGA's Haunted Castle on May 11, 1984.

"It was the first long trip he planned to take with the car," said Lou Ann, Joseph's step-mother. "We were so worried about him driving down there. We thought he would have car trouble, but we never imagined something like this."⁶²

⁵⁹ Weiner, T. (1984, May 18). In the Fire's Aftermath, A Dearth of Information. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 3.

⁶⁰ Associated Press. (1984, May 16). Park Fire Inquiry Finds System Fell Short. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

⁶¹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

⁶² Kiely, E. (1984, May 20). Mother Mourns. Ocean County Observer.

The Beyrouteys dialed SFGA's special hot line set-up by Ziprik. They were told to come to the park the following day with their son's dental records. The Beyrouteys' first surprise came when they found the park open and bustling with a Saturday crowd. They claimed to have waited in a "three-mile line of cars" before receiving a police escort into the park. A State Police detective told them it would be hours before any news about fire victims, so the Beyrouteys went to a nearby relative's home to wait, but not before noticing the car.

"Once I saw the car in the parking lot, my hopes sank. I knew," said Mr. Beyroutey. In a press release the evening before, Vallanch, the park's PR director, told the Asbury Park Press that the three remaining cars in the SFGA parking lot had been "checked" and contained no leads in identifying the deceased.

Skewed messages would not be the only thing coming back to haunt SFGA management about the Beyroutey car. Depictions of the car, echoing the friendship between Beyroutey and Caiazza, their trip to SFGA and their future plans, would get a huge amount of press time. The car was an early graduation present. Both boys would have finished high school less than a month after the tragedy. The car was two weeks old when Joseph's parents found it fatefully remained in the SFGA parking lot. In one report Beyroutey's mother, on Mother's Day, searched the glove compartment to find an SFGA brochure "touting its slogan: 'We Care About You.'" The slogan "made (her) sick."⁶³

Mr. & Mrs. Caiazza were not American citizens and did not speak English. While the language barrier, mixed with the immeasurable tension of the situation, served to

⁶³ Kiely, E. (1984, May 20). Mother Mourns. Ocean County Observer.

further stifle and confuse the couple on their visit to the park, it did not stop them from relaying their story to the press.

Pat Casalaspro, the victim's cousin and family spokesperson, told the Philadelphia Inquirer about how a security guard at the park's main gate told the visibly grieving Caiazzas they would have to pay to enter. "We were all three crying," he said, translating for Nicholas' father. "Tears were streaming down our faces. What did they think we wanted to do? Ride the Ferris Wheel? It's like, we killed you're son, but don't make a scene. That's the way it was."⁶⁴

Ziprik denied any victim's family actually paid admission. Security guards were to escort parents through a special gate and into the park. As she explained in a special telephone interview, parents were instructed to enter the park through a service gate located about 20-feet from the main one.

They were told to drive-in through an administrative entrance, located past the main entrance on NJ Route 571. This entrance, however, is not as noticeable as the main gate. They went through the wrong gate, and they weren't making much sense to employees (the family spoke little English). Remember that these are 16 year-old kids working in the GA toll plaza, they didn't know how to redirect them, so they sent them through, Since they weren't easily understood, ticket-takers probably had no idea what to do except try and charge them regular admission. A security officer intervened and brought them through the correct entrance.⁶⁵

Six of the families followed Ziprik's plan, and were able to enter the park without issue. The Beyrouteys and Caiazzas did not and blamed the park. Beyroutey reiterated the cold sentiment by saying, "nobody at the park talked to us. Nobody said, 'I'm sorry.'

⁶⁴ Clark, R. (1984, May 13). Grief and Anger over Deaths. Philadelphia Inquirer.

⁶⁵ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

Nobody even consoled his mother on the day before Mother's Day. They just didn't care."⁶⁶

"We were upset that they didn't close (the park) down for 24 hours out of respect," the cousin of Nicholas Caiazza told the Philadelphia Inquirer. "It belittles Nicholas' death."⁶⁷

"We were inquiring about our son and we were shuffled around like papers," the Beyrouteys told reporters.⁶⁸

SFGA managers often paid for the crisis personally as well as corporately.

Some of the kids that died were from Franklin K. Lane, a rough high school in the Bronx. I mean 'gang violence' tough. I remember CBS did some interviews at the school in New York. Those kids were the cause of many problems at the park, and I was getting death threats at home.⁶⁹

The Victory Christian School, also attending SFGA on a field trip the night of the Haunted Castle fire, lost sophomore Tina Genovese. Pasteur George Riddel, the school's founder and principal, said during a telephone interview in January 2001:

I have ministered the Genovese family since Tina was born. When they went to the park to identify their daughter's body, they were stopped and asked for payment. I don't care what anyone from SF said. The insensitivity and the greed they faced there was horrific in light of what happened.⁷⁰

The park had sold over a thousand tickets in advance for a Christian Family Day. Needless to say this did not help them deflect the "greedy" and "uncaring" accusations. Ziprik told the Philadelphia Inquirer that "(opening) was a hard decision to make. We're

⁶⁶ Clark, R. (1984, May 13). Grief and Anger over Deaths. Philadelphia Inquirer.

⁶⁷ Dwyer, T. (1984, May 14). Park Castle Protection Was Limited. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

⁶⁸ Associated Press. (1984, May 14). Victim's Father's Vows Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

⁶⁹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

⁷⁰ Riddel, G. (2001, February) Telephone interview..

not a cold-stone operation. If it would have brought anyone back, we would have gladly closed.”⁷¹

That was the party line from corporate (SF). It was ‘life goes on.’ That was the line. That’s what they wanted me to say so I said it. (SF Corporate) only saw the short run. They only saw things their way. I knew I was right. I said, ‘let’s fly the flags at half mast, let’s look half human, half decent, but (SF Corporate) felt doing anything at all was admitting guilt.’⁷²

In an Asbury Park Press community column called “A Closer Look,” Anne Brenoff echoed parental rage, “these deaths are not accidents; they’re murders!”

“They killed him,” said Joseph Beyrouthey. “They killed my boy. Oh, they’ll pay. Believe you me, they’ll pay plenty for this. And I don’t mean money. We won’t stop until they pay for this.”⁷³

It wasn’t long before some involved parties realized public apologies were in order. Jackson Township Committeeman Donald Bates apologized to families in the Ocean County Observer, he also called the fire a “monstrous tragedy unequalled in this town’s history.”⁷⁴

The State of New Jersey also responded quickly, not only to apologize for the accident, but to mount an offensive attack on SFGA. Two days after the fire and four days before SFGA would officially comment on the tragedy, NJ Senator Frank Graves, called in to assess the disaster scene, also attended to swarming media at the park. Graves spoke strongly against the park with the Haunted Castle’s burnt-out trailers as a dramatic backdrop. He told the Asbury Park Press: “(SFGA) seems to only be dedicated to one

⁷¹ Clark, R. (1984, May 13). Grief and Anger over Deaths. Philadelphia Inquirer.

⁷² Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

⁷³ Brenoff, A. (1984, May 18). Victim’s Parents Express Anger. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

⁷⁴ Bennet, D. (1984, May 13). A Monstrous Tragedy. Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.

thing...money. The families (of the victims) are interested in living tributes to their children. They're angry, and I am angry. I am officially getting involved in this for them."⁷⁵

SF's Corporate Role

The worst thing was that SF corporate just didn't get it. They didn't think it was very serious, and they still didn't, even when we knew people had died. They didn't and they wouldn't let us do anything that showed we cared about what happened. They refused to close the park, a delayed opening or a moment of silence. They refused to fly in, to make public statements or even fly the flags at half mast. They weren't involved at all. They felt doing those things would be admitting guilt. They stifled information from us and from the public. We were ordered to carry on as usual.⁷⁶

At the time, I didn't know as much about public relations, but I instinctively knew that (corporate) not talking to the press immediately was a big mistake. Corporate did not want the media near the park, but that was a joke because they were buying tickets to get in themselves and helicopters were flying over the sight taking pictures. Employees resented (SF corporate) because they were calling the shots from Chicago and we felt like we couldn't do anything. We were sitting ducks ready to be shot.⁷⁷

It wasn't until May 20th, nine days after the tragedy, that Six Flags President Dean Howells arrived at the Jackson park. During his first official press conference he "admitted no responsibility" for the tragedy and said "SFGA was doing everything possible as far as safety was concerned." In a statement appearing on page three, as opposed to the front page coverage attained by his adversaries, he also added: "We have

⁷⁵ Associated Press. (1984, May 2001). Victim's Father's Vow. Asbury Park Press.

⁷⁶ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

⁷⁷ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

been overwhelmed by this tragedy and deeply regret, in retrospect, that we have not stepped forward before this time to publicly express the grief we share.”⁷⁸

During the criminal trial, Howells called the fire a “terrible tragedy” that still had him “laying up awake at night.” Had the Haunted Castle survived the tragedy, Howells said he “would have torn the place down and taken it out of there in a heartbeat.”⁷⁹

Internal Communications

According to Ziprik, reporters had a field day in the open park. The public relations staff had a hard time keeping reporters in their conference room waiting for answers when, for the price of a \$12 admission ticket, they could enter the park and get all sorts of answers.

Kopacz agreed.

(The media) were talking and interviewing families, park guests, seasonal employees in the park who wanted to be on TV... anyone that would talk. Stories were sensationalized. There was a lot of speculation and the park was pictured as cold-hearted big business, uncaring, uncooperative and totally negligent. We were guilty because of our silence. We all felt sick. We were learning about details through newspaper articles, not our own company. I wanted to believe the company was being wrongly accused, that it was arson, that we as a company could not have been negligent in all this.⁸⁰

Other employees did not share Kopacz’s sentiments, as Haunted Castle workers past and present, spanning over five years came forward to speak with willing media. The employees delivered another devastating blows to the park as they described a myriad of poor conditions. The workers called it “a fire trap,” “a trick to fool patrons into not

⁷⁸ DeSantis, S. (1984, May 17). Authorities Want Boy Who Set Fire to Come Forward. Asbury Park Press pp. 3.

⁷⁹ Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, June 21). Ex-Official Says Park Safe. Asbury Park Press.

⁸⁰ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

realizing they were actually weaving between trailers,” “sprayed with poisonous cyanide fumes” and “so dark you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face.” They also said park management “ignored warnings,” “refused to pay for repairs,” “debated closing the attraction,” “refused to supply even ordinary safety requirements such as batteries for flashlights,” “left fire extinguishers unfilled for days” and “would fire them if they spoke to the press.” They told tales of patrons in the attraction “often flicking Bics,” “slugging ghouls (workers) in the darkness” and “throwing lighted match books.”⁸¹

The Investigation

In a May 14th Ocean County Observer anonymous editorial, the author asks, “How could a park that prides itself on expensive, state-of-the-art attractions, allow a primitive, flimsy façade concealing a dangerous maze of trailers exist?”⁸²

Lovetta Kramer, SF’s director of communications told The Asbury Park Press, “whenever there is human activity there will be accidents and we are very, anxious to find out what happened, too.”⁸³ SFGA’s public relations department, however, didn’t seem anxious to help with the investigation. Kramer referred all press to the park’s Public Relations Director Glen Vallanch, but local papers reported that all personal, phone and written communication with Vallanch were left unanswered.

Everything was happening at once. I couldn’t sleep at night. I was getting threatened at work. I would come home and hear my life threatened on my answering machine. It was such a devastating reality. Every night we had meetings and strategy sessions.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Toms River Press Bureau (1984, May 17). Workers Speak Out About Castle. Asbury Park Press.

⁸² Associated Press. (1984, May 14). It Takes A Tragedy. Ocean County Observer.

⁸³ DeSantis, S. (1984, May 17). Haunted Castle Built Illegally. Asbury Park Press. pp. 3.

⁸⁴ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

The Trial

On May 13, 1985, trying desperately to put the nightmare season of 1984 behind them, SFGA managers entered a criminal manslaughter trial. On almost the exact one-year anniversary of the tragedy, and still facing almost daily front page coverage in local papers, SFGA's billion dollar safety changes and increased public relations initiatives were completely eclipsed by trial coverage. Larry Cochran, the park's general manager at the time of the construction of the Haunted Castle, and David Paltzik, GM at the time of the fire, faced the aggravated manslaughter charges. "The companies are charged with causing the death of eight teenagers by constructing and maintaining an amusement attraction under circumstances showing indifference to human life."⁸⁵

Immediately prior to SFGA's 1985 opening, during jury selection of the trial, The New York Times ran a story citing the general public's belief that SFGA "contributed to the deaths" of the fire. Defense attorneys acquired the services of a Canadian research specialist, who presented dismissed statistical evidence that the "public-at-large had already mentally convicted the park." The motion for postponement was denied. The court refused to delay the trial until "the media firestorm calmed and allowed for a fair trial."⁸⁶ But SFGA was definitely losing the battle of public opinion, and they couldn't separate the trial and its coverage from their 1985 opening.

Trial controversy ran deep. The main issues of the trial were:

⁸⁵ Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, May 13). GA Aggravated Manslaughter Trial Starts Today. Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.

⁸⁵ Sardella, C. (1985, April 1). After Fire, Park Shifts Image. New York Times.

1. The Haunted Castle make-up: Prosecution charged that SFGA knowingly and illegally created the attraction out of highly flammable materials. Prosecutors point to these materials as the reason for the combustible bumper. The Defense claims the fire was intentionally set.⁸⁷
2. The State Codes: Prosecution charged that SFGA ignored structure codes. The defense maintained the codes themselves were inadequate.
3. Benzene Levels: The Defense maintained that high benzene levels from the fire pointed to the use of an accelerate like gasoline or a fire bomb.⁸⁸

Emergency lighting installed by SFGA, and meant to switch on in the case of an emergency power outage did not. In a freakish turn of events, the fire never caused the electricity to go out. This not only stopped emergency flood lighting, but also caused the “music still playing” phenomenon (discussed earlier).⁸⁹

William Connolley, director of New Jersey’s Division of Codes and Standards, dealt personally with assessing state codes in light of the SFGA tragedy. Though Connolley himself was appalled that the Haunted Castle “slipped through the cracks,” in a telephone interview he explained his position on the trial. “Criminal conduct requires criminal intent; even deliberate disregard isn’t necessarily intent.”⁹⁰

“The trial was scary to me,” Kopacz said.

⁸⁷ Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, May 13). GA Aggravated Manslaughter Trial Starts Today. Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.

⁸⁸ Harmon, L. (1985, April 5). Final GA Motions Denied Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.

⁸⁹ Clay, D. (1985, May 17) Witness: Sprinklers Prevent Death. Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.

I knew both Larry Cochran and Dave Paltzik as real people and they were being charged with criminal negligence. I knew that they could not be responsible for what happened at the Haunted House. At that level of management, you rely on maintenance, operations people to make sure all rides and buildings are up to code. But they were ultimately responsible as managers. There was a very good chance they would wind up in jail. It was the first time I thought from a career standpoint, I wouldn't want to be a manager at an amusement park. It wasn't worth having your entire life turned upside down, besides personally feeling terrible about what happened. They were abiding citizens with families, kids. These guys wouldn't hurt a fly.⁹¹

Ziprick revealed a different point of view. She didn't believe the SFGA managers exhibited any criminal intent or malice, but she also said:

Making the big bucks was the goal of every manager. It was all about attendance numbers and weather. Weather could either make or break the park in a single weekend. Really and truly, the management was obsessed with numbers. Every Monday morning there would be a conference call between managers of SF parks to report weekend numbers. Sometimes, pushing the park to maximum capacity meant bending the rules. Again, numbers were the key issues. Here's an example, the park was crammed one weekend. A huge religious group event overlapped a sunny weekend of strong public attendance. Traffic was backed up for miles. All management was on hand to help out as we could. I ended up loading people onto a train ride. No training, just do it. That didn't last long, unfortunately when I brought a safety bar down on some guests' laps, I pinched a little girl's fingers. No real harm, but I remember how bad I felt. After that I was just called on to count off people into pre-load stalls. If this happened to me, it could have happened to anyone...It's not until after a tragedy like this that everyone starts asking, 'why?' It becomes a matter of self-preservation.⁹²

The SFGA managers of 1984 greatly mirrored what Pinsdorf describes as “the breed of managers: cost, production-driven individuals focusing on nothing less than economic survival. They eschew warm fuzzy communications, for what it can do for them. They want results not systems.” Pinsdorf's executives, much like SFGA's only

⁹⁰ Connolley, W. (2000, September). Telephone interview.

⁹¹ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

⁹² Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

wanted public relations “as a means to an end.”⁹³ This philosophy leaves little room for vital crisis preparation, and shows a similarly dangerous, cavalier attitude toward planning.

After three months, the managers were acquitted. Their saving grace was a 1980 safety report, which documented that SFGA executed nine of the 10 recommended precautions. Number 10 was a sprinkler system for the Haunted Castle. Prosecutors informed “there has not been a fire in a sprinklered building in the last 90 years with more than one death,” and a similar attraction at a St. Louis Six Flags was ordered to install sprinklers or be shut down.⁹⁴ SFGA countered with proof that sprinklers may not have saved the teenager’s lives. Juries agreed that SFGA’s decision was not illicitly negligent. Many jurors left the courtroom saying, “the wrong people were on trial.”

The “right people,” according one particularly vocal juror Katherine Marks, would have been Jackson Township inspectors with their “slipshod and ineffective enforcement of fire safety and construction codes.” Marks claimed after the trial that she believed local inspectors were “trying to hide something.” In an Ocean County Observer editorial, an author claimed when Jackson inspectors “deemed the Haunted Castle safe, they overlooked the most basic fire protection.”⁹⁵

So if SFGA were the “wrong people,” why were they the “tried people.”

⁹³ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press.

⁹⁴ Clay, D. (1985, June 15). Officials Testify on Fire Site. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

⁹⁵ Associated Press. (1984, May 14). It Takes A Tragedy. Ocean County Observer.

To answer this, Marks points to “public anger.” She said, “the tragedy angered people. The deaths of eight young people who died in the fire made us want to get our claws in somebody, but SF and GA weren’t those people.”⁹⁶

With blame for the fire quickly falling on SFGA’s shoulders, the pivotal moment in this case can be described as “the race.” Legislative inadequacy may have begun with Jackson Township, Ocean County or even the State of New Jersey. There was no controversy surrounding the Haunted Castle inspections. The structure steadily and continually passed. Since the now defunct Haunted House Company of Toms River created and drove the wheeled structure onto the park for October of 1978, the township initially designated it a “temporary structure.” These structures are free of all occupancy restrictions and fire codes and are generally built on wheels. “Temporary structures” become “permanent structures” after six months. When SFGA, happy with the success of the attraction signed a longer lease for the 17, 40-foot structure, it somehow remained a temporary structure. Jackson inspectors did not have the insight to re-designate the castle. It could’ve been a lack of insight, but it also could’ve been the free admission tickets fire inspectors received. During testimony, George Mahana, CEO of Toms River Haunted House Company, who received \$165,000 annually for the castle, said he recommended sprinklers and at least 17 live actors in the castle. SFGA maintained it removed actors because the attraction was “too frightening.”⁹⁷

It was SFGA who was blamed for the reasons listed above and indicted. Former inspectors were able to fully point their fingers at park management during the trial. They attempted to prosecute GA. Even after the juror’s public remarks, the township received

⁹⁶ Gallotto, A. (1985, July 21). Jurors Leave Courtroom Different People. Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.

⁹⁷ Clay, D. (1985, June 9). Castle Installer Says Park Never Asked for Sprinklers. Ocean County Observer.

little to no public criticism. The reasons for this may rest exclusively in the park's lack of public relations.

The Fire Aftermath

The trials may have ended SFGA's legal issues, but they in no way ended the tragedy's backlash. 1984 culminated in a 17 % drop in attendance, which translated into \$3.3 million loss. Officials estimated the park lost a net profit of \$10 million dollars during the 1984 season.⁹⁸ SFGA managers attributed it entirely to negative press surrounding the fire, which was not quelled after the acquittal. Local papers have since marked all significant anniversaries of the tragedy. On SFGA's opening day of their pivotal 1985 season, The Ocean County Observer ran an article about the park's grounds work on the site of the old attraction. SFGA planting trees on the site of the Haunted Castle garnered a front-page story with a lead that read: "The cover-up at SFGA is not yet complete."⁹⁹

Other professionals in the haunted attraction industry provided little help for SFGA. In several local newspaper articles, New Jersey haunted house attractions were spotlighted echoes. Some highly profitable attractions fell victim to surprise, emergency fire inspections, like The Haunted House in Wildwood and Gateway to Hell in Seaside Heights, incidentally also built by Mahana's company. Suddenly, these attractions were permanently closed. New Jersey amusement mogul Kenneth Wynne, Jr., general manager of Seaside Heights Casino Pier, had a similar lease with Mahana for the Gateway to Hell attraction, a structural twin of SFGA's Haunted Castle. Even similar business ventures didn't evoke empathy for SFGA. Wynne reported closing the attraction so "the same

⁹⁸ Sardella, C. (1985, April 1). After Fire, Park Shifts Image. New York Times.

thing won't happen here," but was sure to add, "I couldn't imagine a tragedy of that size happening here. Our attraction is done by guided tour, so employees can keep visitors from lighting matches or lighters."¹⁰⁰

Other attractions, like Brigantine Castle in Brigantine, NJ and the Haunted Mansion in Long Branch, NJ, were able to showcase their own technology in a parade of free publicity. William Shiel, manager of the Haunted Mansion especially profited, providing reporters with exposes of his permanent wood, multileveled attraction, which was twice the size of SFGA's. Shiel's attraction also came complete with sprinklers, emergency lighting, intercom systems, security guards and a staff fully trained in crisis management and crowd control. "I can't imagine anything like that could ever happen here; we're just too careful," Shiel told the papers.¹⁰¹ In 1984 and 1985, as SFGA lost millions, the Long Branch Haunted Mansion turned their nightmare into publicity and did a booming business. Incidentally, fire did destroy the Long Branch Haunted Mansion on June 8, 1987. Shiel was right; the fire, occurring during peak, summer operating hours, leveled the structure and caused \$8 million in damage—but no one was hurt. Whether by fire or fire provisions, all but one of New Jersey's walk-through haunted attractions have been closed (There were eight prior to May 11, 1984).¹⁰²

For SFGA, with the fire echoing in the press, every aspect of running the park became an uphill battle. "A second story increases risk and criticisms geometrically," Pinsdorf explains. "Avoiding echo effect dictates an immediate risk-assessment of operations." The press, politicians, victims' families and even their own former

⁹⁹ Gallotto, A. (1985, April 5). Fire a Fading Memory. Ocean County Observer. pp. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Parisi, A. (1984, May 20). Haunted Houses Inspected. The New York Times.

¹⁰¹ Schroth, T. (1984, May 16). Long Branch Haunted House Double-checked. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.

¹⁰² Parisi, Al. (1987, August 23). Resort Recovers After Fire. The New York Times. Pp. 11NJ.

employees rallied the public against the park. Bernadette Kopacz, former assistant marketing director, remembers:

“Bottom-line, we tried to pull ideas for promotions out of our hats in 1985, but nothing moved the mark. The way the park handled our PR crisis seemed it would permanently tarnish GA’s image. We couldn’t give tickets away.”

SFGA mounted a promotional and advertising campaign covering the following points:

1. Make no mention of the tragedy, but do clarify that its causes have been clearly addressed.
2. Direct mail campaign informing past visitors of the park’s \$5.2 million computerized fire detection system, the industry’s finest.
3. Change the promotional thrust of the park from “thrill rides” to family rides.
4. In the past, SFGA’s community involvement has been ignored. Beginning in 1985, the park would address involvement with the press.

The main thrust of the park’s direct mail campaign was intended to target area school principals, school boards, school clerks and administrators. PR Director Glenn Vallanch acknowledged schools as their largest canceling special groups after the fire. Five of the eight victims were on field trips. Vallanch also brought in high-profile fire experts to provide safety recommendations for the park. Whether this campaign was flawed, or just too little too late, it did not address sorrow or increased customer sensitivity and the public didn’t buy it. SFGA faced attendance drops in 1985 and 1986.

SFGA’s suffering was doing more than allowing other haunted attractions to

capitalize. Other amusement parks nationwide vicariously adapted to SFGA's mistakes. The incident not only affected safety regulations, but also the function of public relations management. Kopacz and Ziprik both recall a time when amusement park public relations was wholly based on devising strategies and special events that would give the media an opportunity to report on spectacles at the park. Public relations was based on promotion rather than relationships. Amusement park public relations prior to the Haunted Castle fire more closely resembled press agency. "This incident put crisis management at the forefront of our public relations departments. Before, it was just a bullet point," Kopacz pointed out.¹⁰³

Ziprik added: "Six months after the fire every SF park received full-day, out-sourced crisis and spokesperson training. Everyone became very aware of the laws. Are they being followed? Has the park acted correctly? I was haunted by the question, 'If we had, would this have happened?'"

Ziprik left SFGA for a public relations director job at a new SF park in Flint, Michigan. Kopacz was laid off during one of the park's major managerial upheavals at the end of the 1985 season. SF corporate was considering closing the park.¹⁰⁴ Kopacz immediately got a marketing director position at Annheuser Busch's Sesame Place in Langhorne, Pennsylvania. In that position she immediately learned that her experiences at SFGA had taught the entire amusement park industry a hard lesson.

Later, at an Annheuser Busch park, crisis management became everyone's responsibility. Understanding how important safety was to the park was the first concern, not only from the standpoint of taking care of our guests so they don't get hurt, but from a profit standpoint. I starting working at Annheuser Busch's Sesame Place had a crisis plan that had just been re-evaluated after the GA fire. Managers used to say what

¹⁰³ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

¹⁰⁴ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

happened at SFGA taught them if the public doesn't trust your company with their safety, if they believe we are uncaring, cold-hearted or negligent, they will not come. We went through intense media training annually with a media advisor. We had to role play in front of a camera, giving responses during a crisis situation, and then having them critiqued. Needless to say, even though it was fake, it was torture. It felt "real" all over again. Corporate would set up drills every couple of years at the park, a bomb scare, a fire, a child's death, a kidnapping. These drills kept us prepared for a crisis situation. We had a crisis management book in each of our desks. Annually it was updated with new phone numbers, personnel, etc. A press room and specific spokespeople were designated. GA taught them all this.¹⁰⁵

Kopacz's interview specifically described a myriad of other functions developed by Anheuser Busch theme parks in the wake of the SFGA crisis. But during the course of our interview, it seemed SFGA taught the industry an even more important, new lesson. The Haunted Castle fire acted as a wake-up call to the theme park industry on the value of being sensitive.

SFGA Today & Fright Fest

SFGA never rebuilt the Haunted Castle. They never rebuilt anything similar to it. It wasn't until 1995 that the park began participating in "SF Fright Fest," an autumn, Halloween-esq. festival which breathed new life and profits into its sister parks late-season. In 1998, the park added the "Brutal Planet" attraction to its "Fright Fest" activities, carefully described in one park literature as a "spooky walk-through." Visitors are hard-pressed to get a written description of the attraction from the park, which is basically fashioned after the Haunted Castle, except it is conducted predominantly outdoors. Ziprik responded to the addition of "Brutal Planet" with outrage:

(SFGA) should never have a haunted anything at that park again...ever. Ever! They should never, ever have any haunted attraction. There's just no need for it! The amusement park industry has too many other possibilities. The industry is too multi-faceted to take a risk like that. Plus, who would

¹⁰⁵ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

ever want a visual reminder of the tragedy. They should also never, ever use trailers for that type of attraction again, ever!¹⁰⁶

Pasteur George Riddel, principal of the Victory Christian School, attending SFGA on a field trip when student Tina Genovese died in the Haunted Castle fire, said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they built another one of those Haunted Castle things, exactly like it was 1984. To be quite honest, I am completely surprised they haven’t built a new one already.”¹⁰⁷

In e-mail correspondence with Joseph Cole, the manager of an unnamed Texas amusement park, it was stated that most traveling amusement parks across the country still use trailer-based haunted and fun house attractions.¹⁰⁸

Disneyland Death

When Luan Dawson’s life was taken by a flying metal cleat torn off the *USS Columbia* on Christmas Eve 1998 at the “Happiest Place on Earth,” Disneyland was quick to answer to the crisis. Luan, who died later, was taken with his injured wife, daughter and a Disneyland employee to a local Anaheim hospital in an unmarked Disney emergency vehicle. Management’s crisis plan was executed within one half-hour of the fatal accident. According to the AP, “blood and debris were cleaned up before investigators could arrive and look at the scene.”¹⁰⁹

According to Disneyland, no one has ever died on park property. Critics claim that to preserve such claims, Disney conducts overly speedy accident responses.

According to an Orange County prosecutor, Disneyland did nothing wrong. But Disneyland claims many members of the current Orange County police force as former

¹⁰⁶ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

¹⁰⁷ Riddel, G. (2001, February) Telephone interview.

¹⁰⁸ Cole, J. (2000, November). E-mail interview.

employees, including a chief and two captains. According to critics, the park is held to a much different standard than most area businesses. In a telephone interview, amusement park historian and author of Scary Dark Rides Doug Higley, pointed out, “Without Disneyland, there’d be no Anaheim, and (Anaheim) know(s) that.”¹¹⁰

Anaheim, claiming that no foul play was suspected, has since closed the case on a corporation described by city spokesperson Bret Colson as their “most excellent citizen.” Yet, the accident could have been caused by an allegedly untrained employee’s use of the cleat designed exclusively for mooring for stopping the boat.

According to two separate, \$6 thousand citations from the California Division of Occupational Safety, “the employee never performed a docking on the ship prior to the one” that killed Luan Dawson.

Despite these facts, experts describe the tough time Dawson’s wife will have suing the park. “She will have to do so in Orange County where officials are particularly sensitive to Disney which employs approximately 12.5 thousand county citizens.” The Disneyland tickets contain a statement requiring all claims to be settled in the county.

Disneyland spokesman Ray Gomez said the mess was cleaned up quickly ‘because it was in a very visible location in the park. It could easily be seen from several viewpoints. It was Christmas Eve and there was a huge number of children in the area.’ But to some, the quick clean-up illustrates a corporate arrogance and an extreme desire to preserve the Disneyland illusion of innocence, even at the expense of accountability.

Accountability was the driving force behind California 1999 legislature forcing fixed-site amusement parks to publicly report all accidents. California and Florida, home of the Walt Disney World resort, were previously two of only ten states without such

¹⁰⁹ Associated Press. (1998, December 28). Disney Covers Up Death at Park.

¹¹⁰ Higley, D. (2000, November) Telephone interview.

provisions. Dawson's tragic death, and Disneyland's handling of the incident became indirectly responsible for support of the legislation.¹¹¹

Diane Fackler, whose son lost all his toes and nearly his entire foot in 1997 on Disneyland's Big Thunder Railroad, crusaded for the cause after reading an article on Dawson's 1998 death. In the article, a park spokesperson called it the first "serious injuries to visitors in four years." She recalls the park's insistence on her signing a confidentiality clause (she refused), and their adamant refusal to provide her with other park information. This included the written testimony of other visitors. Fackler merely wanted to thank the Samaritans who stopped to assist with her son's rescue from the ride.

Disneyland's desire for secrecy made Fackler uncomfortable. The park conducted its entire investigation of the accident without interviewing (Fackler's son), his parents or any of the visitor witnesses. Disneyland's guest claims department even resisted informing the Facklers of the improvements they were making to Big Thunder Railroad in response to (the) accident. 'My son was in a wheelchair, and they told me I had to drive to the park, buy a ticket, stand in line, and see for myself!¹¹²

Orange County lawyer John Luetto claims to have filed the only successful suit against Disney in its 42 year history. His client bled to death after being stabbed at the park, when Disney emergency services brought him to a hospital without a trauma unit. Even in this situation the lawyer revealed, "Disney never contacted the police, they were intent on assessing all situations themselves."¹¹³

Disneyland's desire for secrecy can be seen firsthand with a phone call to their administrative offices. Three calls were placed to the Disneyland publicity office, none was returned. All were re-directed to other departments, revealing that only way to receive answers to simple questions like the size of the park was via fax. The process

¹¹¹ Associated Press. (1998, December 28). Disney Covers Up Death at Park. Los Angeles Times.

¹¹² Hill, N. (1999, April 18). Mom Asks Legislators to Climb on Board. Los Angeles Times. pp. 1.

included a two-week wait. Representatives also informed me that there were no official information web sites or hot lines.

According to Robert Brown, amusement industry expert and host of About.com's theme parks sites, Disneyland's attitude toward open information is not uncommon. "With the competition that exists between parks, no company is going to reveal any more business information than it absolutely has to."¹¹⁴

"Couple Disney's greed with their arrogance," points out Giroux.

and there's no reason why they should be accountable to anyone. For adults, Disney's theme parks offer an invitation to adventure, a respite from the drudgery of work, and an opportunity to escape from the alienation of daily life. Disney's power lies, in part, in its ability to tap into the lost hopes, abortive dreams, and the utopian potential of popular culture. Such utopia shouldn't involve human remains scattered all over one of their attractions.¹¹⁵

"Disney often seems pestered by some evil public relations gnome bent on mocking its alleged magical status," said Disney historian Joe Flowers, author of Prince of the Magic Kingdom. "Sometimes (they) seem to shoot (themselves) in the foot."¹¹⁶

"Disney's reputation is no longer as cuddly as its cartoon characters," quotes David Churchill in his article "Making the Magic Work for Disney." He says, "It has ruthlessly pursued its financial goals in a way that many feel is contrary to the ethos Walt Disney instilled into the company he founded. The Disney publicity machine is a Byzantine affair, running a very tight ship."

Disney's problem may be best illustrated in the difference between publicity and public relations. But Disney's skewering of the two has become evident to many, as

¹¹³ Associated Press. (1998, December 28). Disney Covers Up Death at Park. Los Angeles Times.

¹¹⁴ Brown, R. www.about.com/amusementparks.

¹¹⁵ Giroux, H. (1999). The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of the Innocence. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 5.

illustrated by countless articles claiming to tout the company's "dark side." Churchill points out the company's willingness to give the media "what it wants, when it wants it," but despite Disney publicity efforts, journalists still find ways to produce slanderous copy. If there is such a thing as over-protecting an image, is Disney guilty? Millions of annual park visitors may not think so.¹¹⁷ "Visitors find themselves in a place where nothing could possibly go wrong," Giroux writes. "It is precisely such editing out of conflict, this concern for control, this over-determined emphasis on the familiar and the uniform that appeal to visitors."¹¹⁸

Crisis Management

Crisis is clearly defined by Dieudonnee ten Berge in his book The First 24 Hours. While he admits descriptions are vast, the conditions are standard. "Crises are bad news, but decision-makers in the company should not equate these incidents with bad management. A bad crisis can attack a very good company."¹¹⁹

To fully understand these case studies, one must first develop an understanding of crisis management itself. Defined in many ways, it is most universally an uncontrollable event or circumstance with specific outcomes and effects.

For the purpose of this thesis, the author will adopt a public relations revisionist philosophy toward the definition of a true crisis. For this purpose, a crisis, and its subsequent planning and management, must involve the organization itself. For example, though it is mentioned in over 33 textbooks, and has won the two highest awards in the public relations field (the Public Relations Society of America's Silver and Gold Anvil

¹¹⁶ Flower, J. (1991). Prince of the Magic Kingdom. New York: J. Wiley Co. pp. 128.

¹¹⁷ Churchill, D. (1992, January 16). Making the Magic Work for Disney. PR Week.

¹¹⁸ Giroux, H. (1999). The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of the Innocence. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. pp. 48.

Awards), the 1982 Tylenol murders do not fit this study's definition of a crisis. Herbert Schmertz, hailed by O'Dwyer's PR Services Report as the nation's most visible corporate spokesman, shares this sentiment. "Tylenol is not an example of a true public relations crisis. Johnson & Johnson (J&J) did nothing wrong and the press knew this. The company was a victim rather than a party to creating the crisis. J&J was very open, cooperative and available but it's easy to be open when no one is going after you."

For this thesis, accidents at Chernobyl, Bhopal and even the recent Firestone recall better fit the parameters of a crisis. Unlike Tylenol, these organizations created victims; they were not victims themselves. Schmertz makes the point that the media, the victims and all other affected internal and external publics had different intentions in the Tylenol crisis.¹²⁰ In other crises, such as the Exxon Valdez accident, SFGA fire and Disney ship accident, the public had no "trigger-man" to blame. A May 17, 1984 article by the AP makes a direct comparison between Johnson & Johnson and SFGA.¹²¹ Schmertz points out that dealing with and addressing fault is the true test of a crisis plan. This holds especially true when human life is on the line.¹²²

As Pinsdorf says, "the most effective way to mitigate the risk of a crisis flood is to ask again, and again, and again, what a particular flaw or fault would look like if publicized widely; to question information before rushing to action and orders."¹²³

¹¹⁹ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. pp. 8.

¹²⁰ Tylenol Not 'True Crisis' says Schmertz. (1989, December). O'Dwyer's PR Services Report. pp. 8.

¹²¹ Associated Press. (1984, May 17). Park Workers Mum after Fatal Fire. Ocean County Observer. pp. 3.

¹²² Tylenol Not 'True Crisis' says Schmertz. (1989, December). O'Dwyer's PR Services Report. pp. 8.

¹²³ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. pp. 98.

Crisis Criteria

Crises attack a company's most vital assets, "credibility and reputation," says Berge. These attacks come from a standard of crisis conditions:

1. There is a need for quick decisions.
2. Inaction produces undesirable consequences.
3. Options are limited.
4. Groups with conflicting objectives need to be dealt with equally.
5. An escalating flow of events will cause damage.
6. Time is not on your side.
7. The news media will descend in large number.
8. Rumors will run wild.
9. The CEO is always directly involved.¹²⁴

According to Stephen Fink, author of Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable, crises are defined by their potential damages.

A crisis is an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending—either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome.

Crises escalate in intensity, receive close media or government scrutiny, interfere with normal business operations and otherwise jeopardize a company's "double bottom line (image and profit)."

¹²⁴ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. pp. 8.

Fink also describes a “crisis life cycle,” documenting a crisis’s evolutionary stages. In a “prodromal” or “warning stage,” a company is responsible for contingency planning and other anticipatory actions. The “what ifs” explored by organizations in the prodromal stage must account for the organization’s personal stakes and ties to all possible crisis situations. An organization is technically always in a “prodromal stage” unless they are actually in crisis.

When the actual crisis hits, Fink calls it the “acute” stage. “Only swift, sure management can minimize the damage to the organization.” This management or lack there of, directly effects the organization’s passage into the “chronic” crisis stage.

Chronic Crises

The SFGA fire reached what Fink, describes as a “chronic crisis” status very quickly. A chronic crisis is one escalated by the management designed to absolve it.¹²⁵ According to Berge, management in a crisis must base all decisions on previous ones. This builds a public relations pyramid of solid media relations, most importantly based on openness, honesty and validity. In other words, initial reactions become most important. Yet, when every decision is made on previous misconceptions, management faces a chronic crisis, which could potentially last for months, if not years, and often comes full circle, once again becoming an acute crisis.

Once external perceptions are established, it is very difficult to shake them. Striking similarities exist between the driver wandering through a strange city who doesn’t want to admit he’s lost, and a company facing a crisis. For some reason, it seems extremely hard to get off the wrong track once you’re on it.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Fink, S. (1986) Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable. New York: AMACOM. pp. 15.

¹²⁶ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. pp. 2.

As is the case with SFGA's fire, once a crisis becomes entrenched in the features of a chronic crisis, the "resolution stage" or return toward normal operations, can take months or even years. No crisis resolution period lasts very long, however; as most organizations quickly return to the prodromal in anticipation of another crisis.

PR Crisis Planning

"Planning is crisis management," stated Chris Woodcock, author of the article "How to Manage with Confidence. It requires continuous commitment to training, test exercises, simulations and constant response-time improvements."¹²⁷

According to Berge, "it is imperative a plan be not only written, but implemented when the company is running smoothly. It is a matter of consistent and persistent communication on a permanent basis. Day in, day out. Year in, year out." Such implementation makes for quick reactions, which is a crucial component of crisis management. Berge warns that the trend of a crisis is established within the first twenty-four hours. "An unexpected crisis must be expected. The greater the anticipation, the better the opportunity for a successful resolution when problems come your way."¹²⁸

"The worst moment of any crisis is the one when you realize you are unprepared. Once you can remove the unexpected quality, any crisis becomes manageable. It is the unexpected quality that is so unnerving."¹²⁹

"The traditional, off-the-shelf crisis plan is simply not enough," according to Richard C. Hyde, managing director of Hill and Knowlton's U.S. Crisis Communications Asset Group.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Haymarket Publication Service. Woodcock, Chris. (1994, November). How to Face Crisis with Confidence.

¹²⁸ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell.

“People need to be well-informed, not just planned, in order to successfully encounter crisis. People who are well informed are less prone to overreact. Knowing what to do and what to avoid (enables) calm and measured success.”

The first 24 hours are a crisis’ most pivotal. Whether or not management “will gain control over the crisis is usually determined within a day.”¹³¹ In SFGA’s case, management was forced to base future decisions on previous mistakes. As Ziprik told me, “there was definitely a communications breakdown.”¹³²

¹²⁹ Haymarket Services. Rudolph, B. (1999, February). Crisis Management Becomes the New Corporate Discipline.

¹³⁰ PR News Association. (1999). Hilton & Knowlton Present Virtual Crisis. PR Newswire.

¹³¹ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. pp. 30.

¹³² Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

Chapter Three

Research Method

Information about the 1984 Six Flags Great Adventure fire was obtained from many sources. Initially, the New York Times Annual Index, New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer provided a national, general review of the tragedy. The most concise printed accounts of the fire were obtained from the Ocean County Historical Society's Bishop Library. The Bishop Library clipping service contained files on SFGA from its inception to the tragedy, and beyond. Complete accounts of the event and its legal and corporate aftermath, were obtained from a sample of ten years coverage in the Ocean County Observer and the Asbury Park Press. Additionally, microfiche at the Gloucester County Historical Society provided supplemental feature and opinion pieces from the Gloucester County Times. This local paper was chosen for articles centering on the death of a local teenager in the tragedy, instead of the tragedy itself.

Content exists more vividly in the memories of those who experienced the fire first-hand. Industry professionals provided the greatest deal of advice and information via

telephone conversations and e-mails. Among them are a former SFGA assistant public relations director, a former SFGA assistant marketing director, a current manager of a Texas fair, a school principal and the author of Scary Dark Rides, a historical account of haunted attractions in America.

A trip to SFGA uncovered some contrasting facts about the park's current practices from park employees and postings. The New Jersey Division of Codes and Standards, the Jackson Township Police Department and the National Association of Amusement Ride Officials provided additional first-hand accounts and written reports. The Haunted Attractions Associations, National Historical Society for Dark Ride Preservation, Amusement Business Magazine, the International Association of Amusement Park Attractions and Gunther Hall Limited Amusement Park Publications provided a myriad of information. Trade information, facts and background provided through conversations, e-mails, as well as electronic and print newsletters were included. Additional print amusement park information was obtained from searches on Rowan University online databases, especially ABI-Business, About.com's theme park section, www.ridezone.com, www.rides911.com, www.laughinthedark.com, www.airsafe.com, www.wdwinfo.com and www.sixflags.com.

General public relations information, especially facts and information in the field of crisis management, were also obtained from various sources including seven texts from the Rowan University library and a series of articles from www.findarticles.com.

Chapter Four

Crisis Communicators

A company's communicator can follow some specific steps for crisis conscious communicating. These steps are outlined by Marion Pinsdorf in Communicating When Your Company is Under Siege:

1. *Involve communicators when major decisions are being made.* Implications addressed during interviews with former SFGA management point to the fact, upper-level management's nay-saying of public relations during the fire. Opting to remain truthful to their policies for "opening in the absence of immediate danger," and dismissing cautionary, public relations advice as do-goodism, set the park up for its greatest fall. Nothing indicates Disney did not consult their communication experts in crafting a message of remorse for the Columbia crash.
2. *Imagine the worst-possible scenarios, ultimate disasters, then prepare as much as possible for handling them.* Pinsdorf warns organizations to address

their own potential problems with more vehemence than any other company. Very few of SFGA's comments in 1984 showed ownership to the problem. In 1983, SFGA management chose to ignore a capital improvement calling for sprinklers in the Haunted Castle. Considering the sheer popularity and amount of people passing through the attraction, the decision illustrates a lack of foresight for "ultimate disasters."

3. *Initially be more candid with the press. They should be understanding of how hard it is to gather accurate facts under pressure.* The parks' contrasting misuses of this tactic are equally disturbing. On one hand, SFGA seemed completely ill-prepared to handle, identify or work with the media. Disney seemed unwilling. The result for SFGA is total annihilation in all local, state and national papers. Disney used their heavily branded image, however as leverage. The media was still attracted to their message, and public opinion was kinder. Neither was able to base the crisis on long-running relationships with the media.
4. *Run operations to minimize emergencies and to be sensitive to surrounding conditions and national practices.* Here Pinsdorf calls for the clarity of 20/20, hindsight vision. SFGA's lack of communication proved the park never asked itself how a fire killing eight would look on the front page of newspapers across the country. After the fire, the Haunted Castle was viewed in much the same light as Union Carbide's Bhopal plant. Company President Anderson admitted the conditions in the plant were so bad, it should've been closed

down. Former attraction employees came out of the woodwork to say the same about the Haunted Castle.¹³³

David Lloyd, CEO of London crisis management agency Golley Sleater warns of the antithesis to Pinsdorf's fourth tactic.

A lot of companies tend to make the same mistakes. It is much more fun to imagine the worst of what could happen. Crisis managers often get carried away and their plans end up being unworkable. They lack credibility. It's too easy to only plan for the obviously large risks, crisis communicators need to think more laterally.¹³⁴

Losing credibility is a surefire way to lose control over a crisis. As Dieudonne ten Berge points out, along with speed, accuracy and consistency, credibility is vital to any good crisis plan.

During the crisis, many different SFGA communicators seemed to "shoot themselves in the foot." Troubleshooting did not lead to effective analysis. According to Pinsdorf, communicators become most ineffective when they begin to "prevent" crisis while the crisis has reached an acute or even chronic stage.

The communication officer must be a harbinger of change, demonstrating in a farsighted way how changes and trends will affect the company. He may find himself the designated scapegoat, particularly in media relations, but that risk comes with the turf. Only those battle-tested in corporate warfare or in the more treacherous and dangerous areas of public perceptions can even begin to guide managers safely across the mine fields laid to constituencies, media, advocates and sometimes disgruntled employees.¹³⁵

¹³³ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. p. 13.

¹³⁴ Haymarket Publication Service. Bond, C. (1995, January) Crisis PR.

¹³⁵ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. p. 43.

Dispelling Rumors

Berge warns that rumors will “run wild” in a poorly managed crisis. Ocean County locals considered SFGA “haunted” for many years. In an interview with James Key, a resident of Jackson Township and former SFGA employee, “people in our area talked about the Haunted Castle jinx for years. Some honestly believed all those accidents were caused by angry spirits.”

While ghostly interventions are hardly quantifiable, and the exact amount of people forwarding the “haunted castle jinx” rumor is far from determinable, the park’s subsequent attendance rates did suggest public fear. SFGA seemed to adopt a stance described by Berge as “above it all,” in which managers view gossip as unmanageable and thus should be ignored “till it goes away.”

“The elusive character of rumors is difficult to deal with,” Berge points out. “But the fundamental role of public relations is to protect the credibility of the corporation and its CEO.”¹³⁶

Discussions with several Anaheim reporters and Californian amusement park historians suggest no similar rumors about Disneyland. This may also be because no one has ever died in their Haunted Mansion attraction.

It’s the simple fact that people love gossip and rumors. Smoldering rumors often affect the reputation of an organization. They, must therefore, be heavily countered. The public relations professional has to be analyst and interpreter, interlocutor and intermediary—the corporate philosopher.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 6.

¹³⁷ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 10.

SFGA & the Six Psycho-reactions

“The stress of being thrown into a crisis can be devastating for an executive unprepared to handle the swirl of events and his/her emotional reaction to them.”

According to Berge, there are six psychological reactions made by managers during the initial 24-hours of a crisis. These reactions, if uncontrolled, can serve to negatively impact a manager’s decision-making and clarity. While his reactions are all natural human instincts, Berge promotes preparing managers by addressing these negative reactions in a plan. At some point during the SFGA Haunted Castle fire, managers demonstrated each of the author’s six reactions: disbelief, siege mentality, panic, narrow-minded focus, blame and hurt feelings.

Disbelief: This initial psycho-reaction describes a manager’s propensity to “freeze” and initially refuse belief. Especially in a crisis as gruesome as the SFGA fire, managers’ inability to avoid this stage reveals a lack of planning. The manager can no longer use what Berge describes as the “it can’t happen here” defense. This paralysis in analyzing the situation at hand causes enough of a decision-making stutter that subsequent decisions are often too late. The crisis can already produce crippling effects. “Disbelief then leads to defensive avoidance, a panic-like state causing the executive to accept the first option that comes along, offering immediate relief, even if it impedes the long-term solution.”¹³⁸ SFGA used the possibility of arson as defensive avoidance, because, according to Ziprik, it made the “unthinkable more manageable.” When this crutch was subsequently removed, the officials were unable to recover.

¹³⁸ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 19.

Siege Mentality: This term basically describes management inertia. “When poor judgment takes the upper hand, managers may do nothing, say nothing, because they underestimate the importance of their audiences.”¹³⁹ SFGA was barraged by external audiences like police, fire officials, politicians and victims’ families. As Berge points out, and as is the case with SFGA, underestimation of the media’s role often proves most devastating.

Panic: SFGA, the amusement industry, legislators and the public equally panicked over the Haunted Castle fire. While this luckily resulted in some hefty amusement safety legislature, it also marked the theme park’s failure to successfully manage. Death threats, possible lay-offs and other internal and external stimuli caused “irrational behavior and a clash of values.” It wasn’t long after the acute stage of the crisis that many park managers, especially those with criminal lawsuits pending, began to abandon analysis in order to “work towards personal survival.”

Narrow-minded Focus: SFGA fell into a narrow-minded focus unconsciously. Berge warns managers often think: “Just get through with this, let my lawyer handle this.” As SFGA would ultimately learn, leaving a crisis to lawyers creates not only a terribly long-winded after effect, but also “brands your product with a discredited name.”¹⁴⁰

Shifting of Blame: SFGA definitely lost the battle of shifting blame, a battle that the State of New Jersey and Jackson Township won. While it would have displayed poor management for the park to blame first, they were also unable to defend themselves.

¹³⁹ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 20.

¹⁴⁰ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 20.

“Continuing histories of people blaming one another, counter-attacks, and justifications mainly serve to give the media a continuing history of bad management.”

Hurt Feelings: “Sleepless nights and bitterness are the most common reactions among top managers involved in a large-scale crisis.” Coupled with the shocking fire scene and disturbing, lingering visuals, the SFGA public relations department faced a life altering experience. Berge points out SFGA’s mistake in allowing the “social pressures to magnify” the situation. Crisis managers must not become so preoccupied with the public and media reactions that it deters productivity. While it is easy to understand emotional turbulence in this situation, and as Berge reminds, “to live one’s own crisis is emotionally different from what anyone else perceives,” crisis management is about “fighting hurtful attitudes.”¹⁴¹

Squeaky Clean?

According to Pinsdorf, successful crisis communication, unfortunately for many companies, is often solely hinged on operational issues.¹⁴² Neither SFGA nor Disney was operationally “squeaky clean” in its crises. An untrained ride attendant was blamed for the Disneyland accident, while a myriad of factors plagued the SFGA fire. SFGA was muddied by unfulfilled operational requests, an allegedly paid off inspector and eye witness accounts of shoddy materials. During the 1985 criminal trial, however, all those allegations were disputed and sound evidence of foul play in the Haunted Castle, even

¹⁴¹ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 20.

¹⁴² Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. p. 33.

possibly arson, easily swayed a jury toward acquitting the park. The overriding sentiment toward the SFGA fire was as Ziprik put it, “no one will ever know for sure.”¹⁴³

Disneyland deserved blame and took it, also introducing highly publicized, new training initiatives between the winter accident and the onset of their summer peak season. They did not report a significant sales drop for the next four years.

How can this be? Pinsdorf explains:

Complete truth and truthful communication are not just the last gasps of a Puritan ethic, but sensible means of protection and profitability, even survival. Chester Burger, who has counseled many companies through crisis, warns that public opinion will always believe the worst about you unless you tell your side honestly, completely and very quickly.¹⁴⁴

Back to Business

Pinsdorf simply explains the devastating image SFGA assured by opening the next day. “Our *act* is our important message. What you do will always communicate more clearly than what you say.”¹⁴⁵ In SFGA’s case, since they chose to say nothing, opening for business was their only communication. It was one that expressed greed and insensitivity.

“They went on with business like the fire was an everyday thing,” one father told the Philadelphia Inquirer. “Like our son was a number that could be thrown away in the garbage.”¹⁴⁶ Though Disney remained open even immediately after the USS Columbia tragedy, management supplemented with other communication.

¹⁴³ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

¹⁴⁴ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. p. 20.

¹⁴⁶ Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day after the Tragedy, It’s Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. pp. 1.

According to Ziprik, the decision to open the day after the fire can be boiled down to what Pinsdorf describes as “executive refusal.” Despite the public relations department’s pleadings with top executives at SF headquarters in Chicago, they demanded the park stay open. Even worse, they demanded the park, its employees and managers “act as if nothing happened.” With no physical representations of remorse, SFGA gained one of its largest image blows from uncooperative executives.¹⁴⁷ Pinsdorf describes how important it is for executives to listen to public relations professionals during a crisis. “This stonewalling approach which has good reasons, risks the company’s story will be told adversely. It behooves executives to stay open to new strategies.”¹⁴⁸

The Crisis and the CEO

In the SFGA case, the CEO was SF President Dean Howells. Six days after the fire, Howells finally fled from the company’s Chicago headquarters to Jackson for a press conference in which he expressed grief. Ziprik remembered asking the president to fly to the park the night of the incident. He refused. Ziprik hypothesizes that national newscasts failed to accurately portray the incident’s impact (remember, this is 1984), so executives felt the Jackson management were over-reacting.¹⁴⁹ While reaction teaches us waiting that long to express remorse is a huge mistake, whether or not a CEO or president should immediately fly to the scene of a crisis remains under debate by crisis management experts.

Pinsdorf warns that a CEO’s presence and media statements should be used judiciously:

¹⁴⁷ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

¹⁴⁸ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. p. 20.

¹⁴⁹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

CEOs should speak only in proper forums and at times most appropriate and useful. Reporters naturally seek to talk as high up in the company as they can. Once a CEO makes the trip and a statement, he/she becomes the company symbol, and it becomes more difficult for others, like trained media people, to act as spokespeople.

The Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India in August of 1985, provides a good point of reference. When Union Carbide president left immediately for India when one of his company's pesticide plants blew up and killed thousands. He felt if he were over there he could make snap decisions and judgments on the spot while portraying Union Carbide's concerns for the damages. Anderson's humanitarian concerns, though contrasting to Howell's "business as usual" stance, met similar ends.

This humane, responsible, even generous gesture accomplished little. (The president) was jailed briefly, denied access to the plant, and threatened with criminal proceedings. On the first anniversary, he was burned in effigy. Despite all his good intentions, human feeling still lacked in the company's responses. And his presence encouraged a focus on one individual as responsible.

In retrospect, Union Carbide, SF and President Howells all should've followed a better formula outlined by Pinsdorf. In a crisis, parent companies should send a secondary operating officer, like a vice-president or other official. This way, not only will a CEO be initially spared, but he/she will not have to turn over the company's day-to-day operations. Instead, a parent company should send their trained media people to the scene immediately, along with encouraging trade media to go. All of these people can address otherwise complicated issues with ease and confidence.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating when Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press. pp. 9 – 10.

PR & The Victims' Families

According to Michael Register, Director of the United Kingdom's Register Larkin crisis specialists, an often overlooked crisis classification is determined by no other factor than how the victims handle it. In deadly crises, no one expects the friends and families of the deceased to "handle it well;" however, "how" they grieve becomes key to managers.¹⁵¹

Hundreds of families across the tri-state area spent that Friday trying to make sure their children were all right. The Haunted Castle's horrors were real for only eight of those families. Despite SFGA's efforts to accommodate the crisis, including the creation of a special hot line mere hours after the fire's outbreak, parents described the process of finding out whether or not their children were in the fire as "a long and frustrating process." Two families reported particularly gut-wrenching stories of "pain and frustration" demonizing the park irreparably. Different versions of the families' accounts ran in both local papers, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Star-Ledger, The Bergen Record, The Jersey Journal, The Atlantic City Press and possibly countless other sources.¹⁵²

According to Fink, author of Crisis Management, a major determining factor in a company's management success involves the families of victims. Their interest should be number one. If families believe a company cares, others certainly will, and a company

¹⁵¹ Haymarket Publication Service. Bond, C. (1995, January) Crisis PR.

¹⁵² Clark, R. (1984, May 13). Grief and Anger over Deaths. Philadelphia Inquirer.

appears responsible. If families do not believe a company actually cares, the company is surely “heading downhill.”¹⁵³

The Trial

Kevin W. Kelly, the unsuccessful County Prosecutor, in an interview ten years after the trial, still disagreed with the jurors. He believed SFGA won because they were willing to spend as much money as possible to beat the conviction.

I’ve tried 35 to 40 murder cases over the years. You win some; you lose some. But as long as I live, I’ll never understand how that jury returned that verdict. It changed me as a lawyer and as a person. (The case) took years off my life. The horror those kids must have experienced being trapped in there. I can’t even begin to realize the horror they must have felt as those flames raced toward them. It was a case of the almighty dollar over what should have been done.¹⁵⁴

The father of Christopher Harrison, another fire victim, said, “I guess it’s hard for regular people to go against a big corporation like this. I’m very hurt for all the kids that died that day. It’s a sad day.”

The criminal trial paved the way for the myriad of civil suits facing the park. Besides the families of victims, Jackson fire fighters and even past employees tried to sue SFGA. The tables continued to turn in the park’s favor, as only one family did not settle out of court. Seven of the eight families settled out of court for 2.5 million dollars apiece. SFGA would have probably paid any price to get the tragedy out of headlines. The Beyrouthey family of Passaic County, New Jersey pursued the civil trial, claiming they were seeking “the principle of the case.” The court awarded the Beyroutheys \$750,000, a little over ¼ of what the other families received.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Fink, S. (1986) *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*. New York: AMACOM.

¹⁵⁴ Sadovi, C. (1994, May 8). Park Fire Still Haunts Some *Asbury Park Press*. p. 1.

¹⁵⁵ D’Ambrosio, P. (1987, February 7). Family Settles. *Asbury Park Press*. p. 1.

Chapter Five

The Fire Lives On

According to George Riddel, Pastor and Principal of Williamstown, New Jersey's Victory Christian School, which was on a field trip at Six Flags Great Adventure when it lost Tina Genovese in the Haunted Castle fire.

I am still very upset (about the Haunted Castle tragedy at SFGA. The Victory Christian School in Williamstown, NJ), to this day, have never gone back there (SFGA), as a school or as individuals, because of their incompetence in handling basic human issues. No one from SFGA—ever—to this day, ever contacted or showed remorse for the Genovese family (Tina Genovese was one of the eight teenagers killed in the fire). They have made absolutely no recognition of the death of a young girl. I realize they are not going to want to assume responsibility, even today, even six-teen years later. But what's wrong with saying, 'I'm sorry that your son or daughter lost their life?' Someone could've. Some official could've come to the Genovese family and said, 'I'm sorry.' If they couldn't face the family, they could've left flowers, or a fruit basket or something. But their actions were totally consistent with their goal, and that is making money. They didn't care about us. They don't care about anybody. I will not ever attend SFGA, and I discourage all of my students from doing so. I fully blame the park. I believe they chained doors closed in (the Haunted Castle). I will always blame them.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Riddel, G. (2001, February) Telephone interview.

According to Joseph Cole, a general manager at an anonymous Texas amusement park, the above wishes are natural even by today's standards.

Today, managers work harder to stabilize an emergency crisis situation. But normally, no one from our park would ever contact a family member or a hurt patron at home. Once the accident reports are filed with the insurance company, they do all the investigative follow-ups. I try to convince my park to apologize. I would always apologize. If someone even just got hurt, I would certainly not want them to think it was intentional.

Through membership to an amusement facility list service on Yahoo, a current industry buzz surrounds a pending California law which would protect a manager who apologizes from liability from an incident. Amusement and haunted attraction managers like Joe Cole are watching it very closely. "I would always like to do the 'right thing' first," he said, "rather than just letting lawyers figure it all out."¹⁵⁷

Planning and the Case Studies

According to notes prepared for the Rowan University course entitled "Crisis Management," there is a 20-question outline for building a successful crisis management plan. This outline, when compared to aspects of both SFGA's 1984 Haunted Castle tragedy and Disneyland's 1998 USS Columbia crash, point to specific contrasts in both companies' public relations practices.

1. What are the eight to 12 vulnerabilities your company now faces? Have you realistically explored the vulnerabilities—to the extreme?
2. What are the extreme risks those critical vulnerabilities represent to the community, consumers, the environment and your employees?

¹⁵⁷ Cole, J. (2000, November). E-mail interview.

3. What are your strategies and tactics for eliminating the risk in each, and will you be able to announce the plans before you are forced to?
4. What are the responses and action plans for each should they occur? Are they time-lined?
5. What remedies are ready in the event that the worst extremes occur?
6. What staff and outside resources are in place and ready to manage an emergency problem caused by your company?
7. Who speaks for your company on each issue? Have they spoken recently? Are they ready to speak today?
8. Who are their back-up teams? Have they been coached?
9. Are your contact lists complete for each scenario?
10. What are your primary messages to the media and to your affected publics in the event of each situation, accident, emergency or crisis?
11. What specific commitments has your senior management made to being prepared? What is their role in each scenario?
12. How will you take advantage of the window of opportunity which occurs during a crisis when the media and the government stand back to see if you can manage the problem?
13. Who are the key individuals designated to take charge with absolute authority to take necessary action to resolve problems?
14. How is your industry prepared to help you in the event you cause a major problem?
15. Have you identified, organized and briefed your key audiences to help save your reputation, credibility and markets in time of trouble?

16. How has the general who will lead your troops when the time comes been prepared?

When should he go to the scene in each case?

17. How will you actually test the operational and communications portions of your crisis management process?

18. Have you factored in the potential unplanned visibility in your risk analysis process?

19. Are the plans easy to understand, visual and user-friendly?

20. What is the process for monitoring all of the vulnerable areas and providing feedback to revise the plans as required?¹⁵⁸

In a telephone interview with SFGA's 1984 Assistant Director of Public Relations Kathy Ziprik, the practitioner admitted management's complete negligence of the Haunted Castle attraction. "If it didn't have a coaster attached," the SFGA management didn't worry about it. It was considered a "secondary attraction" at the back of the park, despite citations of continual worker protests and the attraction's management constant attempts to point out the structure's shortcomings.¹⁵⁹ These protests included a 1983 Haunted Castle worker walkout. In 1983, SFGA replaced and repaired eight items on a list of ten park hazards compiled by an external consultant. Sprinklers in the attraction were item number nine. NJ Superior Court decided such sprinklers could have saved the lives of the eight deceased teenagers. SFGA obviously did not acknowledge these warnings enough to motivate sprinkler installation. More importantly, management, especially the public relations department, did not acknowledge them enough to explore the attraction's vulnerabilities.

¹⁵⁸ Moscatelli, J. (2001) Crisis Management class notes.

¹⁵⁹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

Needless to say, the Haunted Castle did become a “featured” attraction on May 11, 1984.

Disneyland, on the other hand, blamed for running itself like a self-contained municipality, never pretended to be anything else.

Disney asked for the same rights and powers as an independent municipal government. The Anaheim authorities gave the Disney company these powers because they were so happy about the tourists that Disney would bring to the area. It is a state within a state, both a company and a local government. It can build its own roads and run its own police and fire stations.¹⁶⁰

If Disney has all the rights of a self-sufficient municipality, should it have been any wonder that the park took it upon itself to delegate clean-up of its own accident scene?

SFGA & Management Roles

Crisis managers insist theirs is a vital area of corporate responsibility which should be given the highest priority. Too often, professionals say, that message falls on deaf ears—especially to higher-level management. Instead, they delegate to operational staff to produce obligatory crisis manuals. So, when crisis hits, upper-level management winds up adopting a ‘panic’ or ‘hope’ stance rather than relying on controlled, skillful management.¹⁶¹

“We weren’t in touch,” Ziprik admitted, “with our hourly workers.” SF upper-management was easily the most guilty of the park’s parties. They were directly and ultimately responsible for the park’s lack of preparation. They decided to open the park the day after the fire. They told their public relations staff to “say nothing.” Ziprik agrees with this sentiment. “Public relations will always depend on what top management wants

¹⁶⁰ Ellwood, W. (1998, December). Inside the Disney Dream Machine. *The New International*.

¹⁶¹ Haymarket Publication Service. Woodcock, C. (1994, November). How to Face Crisis with Confidence.

and the department's influence on it. Since (the fire) public relations people (at SF) have dealt with crises, and things have generally been OK."¹⁶²

SFGA & The Cracked Egg Model

SFGA's dissent into crisis can be closely charted by using the "Cracked Egg Model" of public relations. This model charts the formation of public opinion through an eight-step process of latent mass sentiment, incident, pros/cons, debate, time, public opinion, social action and mass sentiment.

Mass sentiment: The mass sentiment toward SFGA prior to the fire of 1984 was very good. Park attendance numbers were spectacular. The park was the third most attended amusement facility in the country. It enjoyed a loyal local patronage considering the park fun, exciting and close to home. The park also enjoyed good ties with local officials, especially a Jackson government that considered the park its "prize citizen."

Incident: On May 11, 1984, eight teenagers died in an accidental fire at SFGA's Haunted Castle attraction. It was the largest tragedy in the company's history and to date. The attraction was made up of 17 trailers connected by a central control room and medieval facade. The fire, reportedly started by an unidentified adolescent boy's cigarette lighter touching an exposed, foam "bumper," was eventually ruled accidental.

Pros/Cons: This stage describes the initial dissemination of information about the fire. A period of time during which the public is generally open-minded to all sides of the story. SF squandered the opportunities of this stage. Instead they made general, contradicting, unapologetic and inaccurate comments.

¹⁶² Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

Debate: The contradictions cause an obvious shift in the media coverage, as the media itself and local officials publicly expose the park's stonewalling and incooperation. Meanwhile, angry parents mishandled by the park, began bringing their stories to reporters. Even when the incident itself was no longer newsworthy, SFGA allowed its action to make headlines.

Time: As time passed, the park fell deeper beneath public outrage. SFGA simultaneously faced criminal charges of aggravated manslaughter and plans to reopen for the 1985 season. Their ability to publicly defend themselves was critically curbed by an angry public and previous mistakes. Later attempts at open, two-way communication were now perceived as cover-ups. Months after the tragedy, but prior to the criminal trial, a SFGA survey showed most NJ residents had already condemned the park.

Public Opinion: Public opinion, now deeply laden in the prosecutor's trial details and media-generated fire "anniversary coverage," reached an all-time low. The low was based on previous miscommunication, misinformation and misunderstanding.

Social Action: Action against the park is most noted by steadily dropping attendance and returned promotional tickets during the 1985, 1986, and 1987 seasons. Once the third most visited park in the country, SFGA faced closing its doors in the winter of 1987. Instead, a complete management overhaul unfolded, as all of 1984's park managers were eventually fired and replaced.

Mass sentiment: Post-tragedy sentiment considered SFGA a "death trap." Management was perceived as "insensitive, even inhumane." Once good ties with the surrounding community become completely severed. Only a complete managerial

overhaul, time and the help of a NY public relations agency pulled the park back together.

The Three Ms

Miscommunication + Misinformation = Misunderstanding

The above equation illustrates the significance of this study. SFGA's lack of public relations crisis planning was manifested by media stonewalling (miscommunication) and inaccurate comments (misinformation). The subsequent external opinion (misunderstanding) not only pushed the corporation into years of trial and falling bottom lines, but also forced them to lose patrons' trust.

SFGA's Haunted Castle Fire & Fink's Cycle

Stephen Fink, author of Crisis Management created a crisis life cycle including four stages. The first is a warning stage known as the "prodromal," this stage describes a corporate state leading into a crisis. The crisis occurrence is the "acute" stage, which may or may not lead to a drawn-out "chronic" stage before reaching "resolution."

Prodromal Stage: Fall 1978 to May 11, 1984: SFGA's inability to mount a successful prodromal stage, in hindsight, became the foundation of their downfall. After signing a permanent lease with George Mahana & The Toms River Haunted House Company, problems with the Haunted Castle attraction arose almost immediately. Although these "warnings" addressed patron safety, many citing the possibility of a fire directly, SFGA did little to plan for what could, and ultimately would, happen. Ziprik was the first to notice the park's stunning lack of a crisis public relations plan. She took swift action to create one, never knowing she would be too late. While some safety planning

would eventually absolve the park of criminal intent, lack of public relations planning sent the organization spinning into a seemingly unending chronic stage.

The Acute Stage: May 11, 1984, 6:20 a.m. to 8 p.m.: The crisis' acute stage was the fire that erupted within the Haunted Castle, ultimately killing eight teenagers.

The Chronic Stage: May 11, 1984 to May 1988: Lack of initial planning brought SFGA four years of declining sales, two major managerial overhauls and a total park policy reconstruction. Even after the lashings the park took from media, past employees, government officials and the family and friends of the deceased, the park's chronic crisis stage did not stop there. Negative press haunted the park as the Haunted Castle fire criminal trial directly paralleled their 1985 season opening.¹⁶³

We tried to pull ideas for promotions out of our hats in 1985 and nothing moved the mark. The way the park handled public relations for the (Haunted Castle fire) tarnished GA's image. We couldn't give tickets away.¹⁶⁴

Park attendance, already down to 2.7 million in 1983 from 3.4 million in 1984, suffered another loss in 1985, though no other acute crisis had occurred. In subsequent years, the park would face what former park employees (asking for anonymity) and Ocean County locals would call "the Haunted Castle jinx." From after the Haunted Castle verdict, SFGA faced a string of other acute crises:

1. A man fell to his death from the Rolling Thunder roller coaster (1986).
2. A riot ensued after a New Edition concert, hundreds were hurt (1986).
3. A woman fell to her death from the Lightning Loops roller coaster. An untrained ride attendant was blamed (1987).

¹⁶³ Fink, S. (1986) *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable*. New York: AMACOM.

¹⁶⁴ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

4. Jewelry thieves stabbed two and shot one patron on Easter Sunday (1987).
5. A man broke both legs when a park attendant mistakenly started the Sarevejo Bobsled ride (1987).
6. A man was severely injured by a camel in the park's safari (1987).¹⁶⁵

Though each of these events represented smaller acute crises, in each of the newspaper stories surrounding them, the Haunted Castle fire was mentioned. They all become an escalating chapter linked back to the Haunted Castle. Park attendance did not recover, remaining at 2.9 million in 1986, and then taking a staggering thirty-seven percent overall drop in 1987. Less than one million patrons attended Six Flags in 1987. SFGA upper-management seemed fairly certain their parent organization would close the park down, but by a narrow margin, SF voted to keep it open, but fired all management.¹⁶⁶ Among those fired were the park's president. SF also hired New York public relations consulting firm J. Walter Thompson, in the 1987 off-season to help the park recover. The Thompson agency had just handled the Tylenol tampering scare that rocked the nation mere months before the Haunted Castle fire. The campaign cost \$2 million. In essence, they were hired to end the chronic crisis stage that had begun over four years prior.¹⁶⁷

Resolution Stage: Spring 1988: New SFGA President Ray Williams took a tough stance on the park's policies:

This park has been deeply shaken by a previous string of crimes. It's been devastating. We need to convince people we have a safe park here. Unruly and disruptive behavior has been stopped. Wine, beer and wine coolers are no longer served. There is no need for it here, for years there wasn't any. There was a rougher crowd here, a rowdier crowd. That has ended. Bare-chested, bare-footed patrons have been barred. Fighting brings an

¹⁶⁵ Cavaluzzi, J. (1984, May 12). Previous Fatalities at Park. Asbury Park Press.

¹⁶⁶ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

¹⁶⁷ Mallow, P. (1988, January 27). GA Turns to NY Ad Agency to Improve Image. Asbury Park Press.

immediate police response. We tripled security, banned hard rock shows and added metal detectors.¹⁶⁸

The park also changed logos, dropping its trademark rainbow over the small words “Six Flags” and larger “Great Adventure.” For the 1988 season, the park removed the rainbow from all rides, signs and publicity. Six blue flags clustered over the large words “Six Flags” and smaller “Great Adventure” replaced it.

The rules brought about a 13 percent attendance increase in 1988, a number that has steadily increased ever since. Despite all of these and other positive changes, research conducted by the park in 1993, showed forty percent of Philadelphians “not attending” the park did so because of the park’s past safety record.¹⁶⁹

Cleaning up after a particularly messy crisis often requires as much discipline as dealing with it. Many managers are tempted to relax, or even collapse after the exhaustion of handling a large-scale crisis. Crisis recovery comes with as many specific rules as crisis management, as outlined by Fink:

1. De-brief all staff on different levels of the crisis.
2. Pay special attention to small details, as even the smallest details reveal a lot about pending crisis trends.
3. Re-start advertising and public relations promotions.
4. Sustain all internal communication including staff meetings and all print media.
5. Keep open communication lines with trade or professional organizations.
6. Seek out and manage any lingering rumors.

¹⁶⁸ Hanley, R. (1988, July 29). GA Trying to Regain Lost Customers. Asbury Park Press.

¹⁶⁹ Bozell Public Relations. (1990). The Great American Scream Machine. www.silveranvil.org.

Fink's cycle was written in 1986, not long after the Haunted Castle fire. A more modern cycle designed by George Sikich of the Logistical Management Systems Corporation reveals similar deficiencies in SFGA's public relations. The cycle outlines common weaknesses leading to crisis management failure.¹⁷⁰

1. *No systematic collection of planning information:* Ziprik began to write a plan, but it was too late. Without one, SFGA had no access to "organizational information, regulatory guidance, company policy procedures, location specific data and hazard analysis."

2. *No systematic dissemination of planning information:* Ziprik's plan sat in a nearby typewriter, but without proper dissemination to affected populations, it may as well not have existed.

3. *Failure to identify and establish an incident command:* There were two too many spokespeople at SFGA. Glenn Vallanch, Kathy Ziprik and Cherry Kutac are all referred to as spokespeople. Without a clear leader, the media considered information on the fire a free-for-all.

4. *Poor communications with external publics:* The chaos that ensued in the hours following the Haunted Castle fire resulted in the confusion following the days after the fire. Ultimately, ambiguity would ensue for years on the heels of the public, politicians and media surrounding the park.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Fink, S. (1986) Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable. New York: AMACOM.

¹⁷¹ Logical Management Systems Corporation. (2000). All Hazards Crisis Management Planning. Sikich, G: Author.

Effects on the Whole Industry

According to several Orlando journalists interviewed by New Internationalist, Disney is a hard company to sue for more reasons than meet the eye.

In Florida, a lawyer is not allowed to sue someone that they have previously represented in court. In other words, if a lawyer has taken part in a trial for Disney, that lawyer can never take legal action against Disney. Knowing this, it is not surprising that Disney hires as many lawyers as possible, so that there are very few lawyers in the area who can stand against them.¹⁷²

According to Dieudonnee ten Berge, author of The First 24 Hours, “a crisis situation can accelerate a much-needed change in established procedures, allowing new strategies to emerge.”¹⁷³

I think the incident affected the industry tremendously. Before the fire, public relations focused on coming up with strategies and special events that would bring the media out to report on how great the parks were. After this incident, crisis management was brought to the forefront of a public relations plan. It was no longer just a bullet point. It became everyone’s responsibility to understand just how important safety was to a park. It is now the #1 concern, not only from the standpoint of taking care of guest so they don’t get hurt, but from a profit standpoint. What Great Adventure taught the amusement industry was that if the public does not trust your company with their safety, if they believe you are uncaring, cold-hearted or just negligent, they will stop coming, and the park will stop doing business.¹⁷⁴

Trade publications still use the SFGA fire as a benchmark for the haunted amusements industry. In 1996, twelve years after the fire, Haunted Attractions magazine ran a year-long spread on the fire. Write-ups and vivid color photos about the fire graced

¹⁷² Ellwood, W. (1998, December). Inside the Disney Dream Machine. The New Internationalist.

¹⁷³ Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell. p. 15.

¹⁷⁴ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

the last page of every issue with the following disclaimer: “The intent of printing this article is to illustrate with all too real example, the importance of wise planning and safety to perhaps prevent such unfortunate occurrences from happening in the future.”¹⁷⁵

Joseph Cole, manager of an anonymous Texas amusement park said, “Today, haunted attraction managers make it an imperative to empty buildings quickly. It takes us no longer than one minute and 47 seconds. Even after all patrons have run for the exits, today supervising managers are trained to make another trip through the building.”¹⁷⁶

A recent article in the Washington Post chartered the success of seasonal haunted attractions in parks without permanent ones. “Williamsburg’s Busch Gardens, which launched its ‘Howl-O-Scream’ exhibit this year, including three haunted attractions, (one of which is a medieval castle made up of trailers, exactly like the SFGA’s Haunted Castle) saw a 20 percent rise in overall park attendance.”¹⁷⁷ It was a similar rise in overall park attendance that prompted a young Great Adventure park to make the “temporary” Haunted Castle a “permanent” attraction.

SFGA Content Analysis

Effective communication with external sources is often the backbone of crisis communication. The results of this content analysis illustrate that SFGA suffered its largest black eyes by ignoring certain external publics. According to Woodcock, external communications “can change crisis perceptions from blame to ineptitude to honesty, responsibility and integrity.”

¹⁷⁵ Holler, O. (1996). Editor’s Note: Fire at the Haunted Castle. Haunted Attractions, 2.2.

¹⁷⁶ Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

¹⁷⁷ Jones, A. (1999, October 31). Frenzy of Fear: Haunted Houses and Amusement Parks are Banking on a Surge of Screams. Washington Post. p. C1.

A content analysis of every mention of “Six Flags Great Adventure” in The New York Times and Philadelphia Inquirer from May 11, 1984 to May 11, 1985 was conducted. Negative coverage was synthesized to reflect specific deficiencies in the park’s crisis management. Fourteen percent of the negative press coverage resulted directly from the park’s insufficient planning, based on misrepresentation of facts. Eighteen percent of the negative coverage came from direct citations of park manager’s use of “no comment.” Nineteen percent dealt with the park’s inability to recover its original credibility or restore a positive image. Despite all of these statistics, forty-nine percent of the negative coverage in these publications came in the form of direct quotations from non-media sources, such as the family, friends of victims, government officials, former employees and the like.

SFGA vs. Disney: Recommendations & Conclusion

Where SFGA faltered, Disneyland strove. But, is such quick and seemingly easy handling of a gruesome tragedy part and parcel of good public relations? Though SFGA’s actions were far less effective and efficient, they are decidedly more human. SFGA was criticized for its inability to quickly evacuate the park and for opening the next day. On the other hand, Disneyland didn’t even try to close its park and confidently carried on with business. SFGA didn’t protect its image, Disneyland polished its.

But can kudos really be given to a company so superior to its neighbors and competitors in every functional facet that it becomes nearly impervious to crisis? Disney employs a phenomenal level of planning in all business functions. Ethical or not, such tactical approaches to business usually result in successful crisis management, and it is unlikely Disney would’ve been caught as ill-prepared as SFGA.

Ziprik, who lived through the Haunted Castle fire, agrees. She feels there is “no comparison between Six Flags and Disney. There are amusement parks, and then there’s Disney. Their parks are beautifully orchestrated. They offer a top of the line experience. They have and will always think of everything.”¹⁷⁸

A contributing writer for a Paperclip Communication newsletter wrote an article on “life lessons” he learned while working for Disney.

Employees are called “cast” and Walt Disney patrons are called “guests.” Being on the job is known as being “on stage.” This reminded us we were always there to serve our guests and be as friendly as possible. We always found a way to make the guests happy. No matter what it took. We took time to listen to complaints, and would work towards what guests wanted changed. Keeping Disney a great place is everyone’s job!¹⁷⁹

This seems a far cry from the “out of touch” work experience described by SFGA management. Yet, even the mighty Disney has its moments. According to one worker, “we push as many visitors through each ride as we can. At Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, I am supposed to handle 2,000 visitors an hour.”¹⁸⁰ With those numbers, no park is impervious to accidents.

Yet, as Disney has shown, while accidents are unavoidable, “chronic” crisis is. The contrast between these case studies can be boiled down to one system of crisis management discussed by Stephen Fink in Crisis Management, the difference between react and respond. SFGA reacted to the Haunted Castle tragedy. This reaction, ridden with human emotion, pain, disorganization and fear, was decisively more humane, and yet perceived as cold-hearted and cruel. A lack of crisis planning caused SFGA to be beaten up publicly. Disney responded. They took measured, confident and calculated

¹⁷⁸ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

¹⁷⁹ Ellwood, W. (1998, December). Inside the Disney Dream Machine. The New Internationalist.

steps void of all human emotion, but were perceived as caring and protective. The moral is only planning equals successful, accepted response to a crisis.

We should have had clearer information out. There was definitely a communication breakdown. Don't get me wrong, today I would have held "pre" and "post" shift meetings with all staff, or at least ran a phone chain and briefings. There would have been clearly written corporate instructions for all employees. There would have been press conferences and releases immediately. There were no policies about media entering the park. We were a company without a plan. We weren't prepared for anything that happened. We could have avoided this with better planning, more corporate support and better technology.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Ellwood, W. (1998, December). Inside the Disney Dream Machine. The New Internationalist.

¹⁸¹ Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.

References

- Arthur, Thomas. (1981, November). Defamation Suits as a Weapon in Corporate Control Battles. The Business Lawyer. 37.1.
- Associated Press. (1984, May 14). It Takes A Tragedy. Ocean County Observer.
- Associated Press. (1984, May 15). Survivors: We Thought it Was Something to Scare Us. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Associated Press. (1984, May 16). Park Fire Inquiry Finds System Fell Short. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Associated Press. (1984, May 17). Park Workers Mum After Fatal Fire. Ocean County Observer. p. 3.
- Associated Press. (1984, May 20). Victim's Father's Vow. Asbury Park Press.
- Associated Press. (1985, July 28). Jury in GA Case Beyond Criticism. Ocean County Observer. p. 6.
- Associated Press. (1998, December 28). Disney Covers Up Death at Park. Los Angeles Times.
- Bozell Public Relations. (1990). The Great American Scream Machine. www.silveranvil.org.
- Bennet, D. (1984, May 13). A Monstrous Tragedy. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.
- Berge, D. (1991). The First 24 Hours: A Comprehensive Guide to Successful Crisis Communication. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Bissinger, H. (1984, May 19). Citing Boy's Report, Officials Call Castle Fire 'Accident.' Philadelphia Inquirer.
- Boxer, Shari. (2000, April 14). Preparation the Key to Bouncing Back from Crisis. Business Journal.
- Brenoff, A. (1984, May 15). The Day of the Tragedy Started Out Normal. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Brenoff, A. (1984, May 18). Victim's Parents Express Anger. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Campbell, D. (1984, May 12). A Fast Hot Fire That Killed Swiftly Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 1.
- Campbell, D. (1984, May 12). Fire Kills Eight at GA Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 1.
- Carroll, C. (1985, December 23). The SF Trial. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.
- Cavaluzzi, J. (1984, May 12). Previous Fatalities at Park. Asbury Park Press.
- Chamber, M. (1984, June 17). Parents Seek \$2.6 Billion in Suits Over Death of 4 in Blaze at Park. The New York Times. p. 3.
- Churchill, D. (1992, January 16). Making the Magic Work for Disney. PR Week.
- Clark, R. (1984, May 13). Grief and Anger Over Deaths. Philadelphia Inquirer.
- Clay, D. (1985, June 4). Ex-Park Workers Claim Safety Poor. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Clay, D. (1985, June 5). SF Worker Says Only 1 Worker in Castle. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Clay, D. (1985, June 9). Castle Installer Says Park Never Asked for Sprinklers. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.

- Clay, D. (1985, June 12). Witness: Sprinklers Prevent Death. Ocean County Observer. p.1.
- Clay, D. (1985, June 15). Officials Testify on Fire Site. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.
- Clay, D. (1985, June 22). Experts Say Castle Decisions Were Responsible. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Cole, J. (2000, November). E-mail interview.
- Communication Briefings. (1988). Power-Packed PR: Ideas That Work. Blackwood, N.J.: Communication Publications and Resources.
- Connolley, W. (2000, September). Telephone interview.
- Consumer Product Safety Commission. (2000). Amusement Accidents and Death.
- D'Ambrosio, P. (1987, February 7). Family Settles. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- DeSantis, S. (1984, May 15). Officials Say Site of Deaths a Fiasco. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- DeSantis, S. (1984, May 17). Authorities Want Boy Who Set Fire to Come Forward. Asbury Park Press p. 3.
- DeSantis, S. (1984, May 17). Haunted Castle Built Illegally. Asbury Park Press. p. 3.
- Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). A Day After the Tragedy, It's Business As Usual. Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 1.
- Duvoisin, M. (1984, May 13). Call Went Out: Castle Ablaze. Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 1.
- Dwyer, T. (1984, May 14). Park Castle Protection Was Limited. Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 1.
- Dwyer, T. (1984, May 15). Witness Questioned in Probe. Philadelphia Inquirer. p. A4.
- Ellwood, W. (1998, December). Inside the Disney Dream Machine. The New Internationalist.
- Fear of Flying. (2001). The AirSafe Journal, 35.
- Finnegan, L. (1999, May). Disney Cited for Fatal Incident. Occupational Hazards. P. 12.
- Fink, S. (1986) Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable. New York: AMACOM.
- Flower, J. (1991). Prince of the Magic Kingdom. New York: J. Wiley Co.
- Four Injured in Two Accidents at Disneyland. (1998, December 27). The New York Times. p. 20.
- Gallotto, A. (1984, May 15). Senators Have Sharp Words for Jackson Park. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.
- Gallotto, A. (1984, May 17). Will Tragedy Haunt Theme Park's Future? Ocean County Observer. p. 5.
- Gallotto, A. (1985, April 5). Fire a Fading Memory. Ocean County Observer. p. 3.
- Gallotto, A. (1985, July 21). Jurors Leave Courtroom Different People. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.
- Giroux, H. (1999). The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of the Innocence. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goodnough, A. (1996, July 28). In Person: Mrs. Great Adventure. The New York Times. p. 13NJ.

Gruson, L. (1984, May 17). Park Developed Into Mainstay in Quiet Town. The New York Times. p. C1.

Gubernick, L. (1999, July 23). Entertainment: How Safe is That Theme Park. The Wall Street Journal. p. W1.

Harmon, L. (1985, April 5). Final GA Motions Denied Ocean County Observer. p. 1.

Harmon, L. (1985, June 20). SF Head Says Fire Cost Millions. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.

Hanley, R. (1987, July 29). GA Trying to Regain Lost Customers. The New York Times.

Haymarket Publication Service. Bond, C. (1995, January) Crisis PR.

Haymarket Services. Rudolph, B. (1999, February). Crisis Management Becomes the New Corporate Discipline.

Haymarket Publication Service. Woodcock, C. (1994, November). How to Face Crisis with Confidence.

Higley, D. (2000, November) Telephone interview.

Hill, N. (1999, April 18). Mom Asks Legislators to Climb on Board. Los Angeles Times. p. 1.

Holler, O. (1996). Editor's Note: Fire at the Haunted Castle. Haunted Attractions, 2.2.

Humphrey, P. Why Did Valeria Cartwright Have to Die at Six Flags (1999, July 17). Fort Worth Weekly.

Infield, T. (1984, May 13). The Haunted Castle Fire. Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 1.

It Takes A Tragedy. (1984, May 14). Ocean County Observer.

Jones, A. (1999, October 31). Frenzy of Fear: Haunted Houses and Amusement Parks are Banking on a Surge of Screams. Washington Post. p. C1.

Kiely, E. (1984, May 20). Mother Mourns. Ocean County Observer. p. 1.

Kopacz, Bernadette. (2001, January). E-mail interview.

Logical Management Systems Corporation. (2000). All Hazards Crisis Management Planning. Sikich, G: Author.

Mallow, P. (1988, January 27). GA Turns to NY Ad Agency to Improve Image. Asbury Park Press.

Monfiletto, M. (1984, May 12). Eight Killed in GA Fire. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.

Moscattelli, J. (2001) Crisis Management class notes.

Napolitano, C. (1986, July 21). Verdict Angers Survivors. Asbury Park Press.

National Fire Protection Association. (1985, August 15). Investigation Report: Haunted Castle Amusement Facility Fire. Quincy, Massachusetts: Engineering Services Division.

National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians. (1999). Disney Covers Up Death at Park

Nelmeister, L. (1984, May 14). Park Workers Mum After Fatal Fire. Gloucester County Times. p. C1.

New Jersey Fire Safety Commission. (1984, September, 26). New Jersey Fire Safety Commission Report on the Fire at Great Adventure, Jackson Township, New Jersey. Trenton, N.J.: State of New Jersey Department of Community.

- Nieves, E. (1998, August 28). Deadly Summer Raises Concerns. The New York Times.
- O'Brein, T. (1999, January 4). One Dead Three Injured in Disneyland Accidents. Amusement Business.
- PR News Association. (1999). Hilton & Knowlton Present Virtual Crisis. PR Newswire.
- Panic Stations (1998, November 19). Marketing Week. p. 39.
- Parisi, Al. (1984, January 27). Father Files Appeal in Death of Youth. The New York Times.
- Parisi, Al. (1984, May 20). Haunted Houses Inspected. The New York Times.
- Parisi, Al. (1987, August 23). Resort Recovers After Fire. The New York Times. p. 11NJ.
- Parisi, An. (1985, January 27). Father Files Appeal in Death of Youth. Asbury Park Press. p. B6.
- Pinsdorf, M. (1999). Communicating When Your Company is Under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Riddel, G. (2001, February) Telephone interview.
- Rosenblum, E. (1984, May 13). Yesterday, It was Business as Usual—Almost. Asbury Park Press.
- Rozycki, Richard. (2001, March). Telephone interview.
- Sandovi, C. (1994, May 8). The GA Fire—10 Years Later. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Sadovi, C. (1994, May 8). Park Fire Still Haunts Some Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Sally, R. (2000, October, 2). Rider Safety Scrutinized. Business Insurance. P. 3.
- Sardella, C. (1985, April 1). After Fire, Park Shifts Image. New York Times.
- Schroth, T. (1984, May 16). Long Branch Haunted House Double-checked. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.
- Schroth, T. (1984, May 20). Haunted Mansion Has Crowd. Asbury Park Press.
- Silver, M. (1999, September 13). Fatal Attractions. U.S. News & World Report. p. 56.
- Storey, S. (2000). Safety in the Amusement Industry. IAAPA.
- Terrell, K. (1999, January 11). It's A Scary World After All. U.S. News & World Report. p. 71.
- Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, May 13). GA Aggravated Manslaughter Trial Starts Today. Ocean County Observer. pp. 1.
- Toms River Press Bureau (1984, May 17). Workers Speak Out About Castle. Asbury Park Press.
- Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, June 14). Officials Say SF Did Not Install Sprinklers. Asbury Park Press. pp. 1.
- Toms River Press Bureau. (1985, June 21). Ex-Official Says Park Safe. Asbury Park Press. p. 3.
- Tylenol Not 'True Crisis' says Schmetz. (1989, December). O'Dwyer's PR Services Report. p. 8.
- Uttal, B. (1977, December). The Ride is Getting Scarier for Park Owners. Fortune.

www.aol.com/rides911/accidents.

Weiner, T. (1984, May 18). In the Fire's Aftermath, A Dearth of Information. Philadelphia Inquirer. p. 3.

Williams, B. (1990, April 2). Exxon Valdez Wounds Starting to Heal. Oil & Gas Journal. p. 13.

Young, S. (1984, May 13). No New Bodies Found, Clues Still Being Sought. Asbury Park Press. p. 1.

Ziprik, Kathy. (2000, October). Telephone interview.