

Crisis management: The response of a small Dutch hospitality company during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore how a small Dutch hospitality company responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and hence create an understanding of how hospitality businesses can potentially use this knowledge when facing similar crises in the future. This study is based on exploratory research and used interviews to collect primary data. Five themes were found: initial crisis response, operational expenses, health scare, marketing, and crisis impact. It is seen that crisis management was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, where reactive strategies were key for survival. Immediate actions were taken and implementing change was seen as easier due to the small size of the company. Further, operational expenses were adjusted to the changed demand and a favourable reputation helped to rebuild customers' trust, where marketing initiatives were seen as important to reach customers. Finally, the impact of COVID-19 can strengthen organisational efficiency when handled well. Research about the impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry is limited, therefore further research is recommended on the long-term crisis response and the crisis consequences as well as the attitude of owners and employees of the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, crisis management, crisis response, hospitality management

Introduction

This study will focus on a small hospitality company, Everyday Bread & Coffee (EB&C), during the COVID-19 pandemic. EB&C has two eating establishments in Zwolle and Hattem, the Netherlands. This company provides table service and is known for serving coffee from professional baristas and the sale of their own formulated bread and pastries. Due to the closedown of the on-premises dining areas, EB&C was forced to change their way of operating and chose to stay open during the COVID-19 pandemic by temporarily adjusting their company to an off-premises-only business, where food sales and food delivery became the main business. Most of the time, small hospitality companies do not have the financial strength to survive when closing down their entire business for an unknown period (Bartik et al., 2020). Therefore, it is crucial that small eating establishments change their way of operating in order to generate profit and to stay in business. EB&C responded immediately to the crisis and adjusted their way of operating. This company serves as an example for other owners and hospitality employees of small hospitality companies when facing a similar crisis in the future.

Academic literature

Crisis management in the hospitality industry

The hospitality industry is one of the most vulnerable industries to crisis (Albattat & Mat Som, 2019). Crisis preparedness is

lacking in many organisations that do not see the importance of planning for unforeseen situations (Pecujlija & Cosic, 2019). Tse et al. (2006) found that nearly all restaurants in Hong Kong did not have a crisis plan before the SARS 2003 outbreak.

Albattat and Mat Som (2019) state that it is important for a hospitality company to be well prepared for a crisis because the hospitality industry is a year-round one and highly sensitive to the negative impact of a crisis since guests and employees are a part of the product itself. Coombs (2014) outlines a three-stage model for crisis management: the pre-crisis, the crisis event itself, and the post-crisis. At the stage of the crisis event itself, the "during-crisis" response of a company is to seek for outcomes related to reducing the negative impact of the crisis on the organisation. At this stage, different elements are important, like the initial crisis response and reputation management (Coombs, 2014). Pecujlija and Cosic (2019) state that the consequences of a crisis may look like a failure, but an organisation can succeed in coping with the crisis. Also, it is stated that organisational responses to a crisis may lead to positive organisational changes and improve organisational efficiency. Coombs (2014) reports that the response can lead to a more substantial reputation, a more powerful brand, and changes to an organisation that make it a safer place to work.

Bartik et al. (2020) researched small business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that businesses are responding in various ways, but also highlights that the duration of the crisis is not yet known. In addition, Alves et al. (2020),

found that small companies show advantages in terms of high flexibility and their prompt reaction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initial crisis response

An essential topic concerning crisis management is the initial crisis response of a restaurant and thereby the way the restaurant changes operational expenses during a long-term crisis (Coombs, 2014). Alonso-Almeida and Bremser (2013) studied a small sample of restaurants in Madrid, Spain, one year after the global economic crisis in 2008, and found that proactive and reactive strategies were used. In a proactive strategy, a company foresees a crisis by taking steps before the crisis occurs. With a reactive strategy, a restaurant responds after the incident has occurred (Brzozowski & Cucculelli, 2016). According to Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015), reactive strategies are the first strategy a company takes as an initial crisis response because they are expected to ensure a company's survival. During the COVID-19 outbreak, restaurant managers have been various ideas to minimise their running expenses as a reactive strategy. According to Tse et al. (2006), restaurants did this by minimising their running expenses, cutting costs and reducing investments during the SARS outbreak. However, Kukanja and Planinc (2013) found that food and beverage establishments that relied heavily on cost-cutting experienced a decline in their competitive advantage during a financial crisis. Heavy cost-cutting led to lower organisational performance which negatively impacted a company's turnover (Kukanja & Planinc, 2013). In addition, restaurants could make use of government assistance to lower organisational costs. In the Netherlands, the Dutch government is offering financial help during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Temporary Emergency Bridging Measure for Sustained Employment provides employers with financial support to pay their employees' wages. Further, hospitality companies who have been affected by the coronavirus measures can get a reimbursement of €4 000 (Netherlands Chamber of Commerce, 2020).

Health scare

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the immediate focus of restaurants is on cost-reducing practices and securing income during the unexpected closure of the on-site dining areas. However, restaurants need to guarantee their guests that their product is safe and clean to increase revenue and long-term guest loyalty (Hebeler, 2020). According to Seo et al. (2014), a crisis can shape the consumers' perceptions and influence reputational threats even long after the crisis occurred. Reputation management can be of high value, where a company can have a favourable or unfavourable reputation (Coombs, 2014). Good hygiene practices reassure guests that restaurants are clean and safe to visit, which increases a restaurant's reputation and guest loyalty (Lo et al., 2006). Choi et al. (2018) investigated the consumers' restaurant selection behaviour and found that consumers intentionally choose to dine at a restaurant that has better food safety practices.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020), it is unlikely that people contract COVID-19 from food or food packaging, but it is also said that there is no clear evidence to date. According to Jain (2020), customers will be avoiding ordering food and dining out after the COVID-19 pandemic has disappeared due to social distancing and the health scare.

According to the vice president of the National Restaurant Association (2020), the most significant obstacle restaurants have to face will be convincing guests to feel safe about dining out again. Seo et al. (2014) found that a food crisis may have long-term negative consequences for a restaurant. The WHO (2020) states that restaurant owners and managers should produce written guidance for staff on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and implement good staff hygiene practices like food safety management systems based on hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP). HACCP is a tool that can be used to reduce the risk of food safety failures (Jawed et al., 2020). Jawed et al. (2020) also state that the HACCP tool is limited, and more food safety tools are needed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, the WHO (2020) states that restaurants should follow social distancing measures in the work environment. Jain (2020) states that in the post-COVID-19 world, social distancing will be the norm and the restaurant industry has to reinvent itself altogether, and sit-down restaurants will suffer the most.

Marketing

An aspect of crisis management is protecting the reputational assets of a company. Overcoming the health scare of COVID-19 in order to maintain a favourable reputation can be enhanced with the help of marketing. According to Kirtiş and Karahan (2011), marketing plays a vital role in surviving and staying profitable during a crisis. During a long-term crisis, it is very important that restaurants use marketing strategies to reach customers (Tse et al., 2006). According to Lo et al. (2006), the marketing of restaurants primarily focuses on local customers during a crisis. Also, Mair et al. (2014) state the importance of relationship marketing with local and loyal customers. Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2020) suggest that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the local community becomes even more important. Customer loyalty is considered as the most crucial part of relationship marketing as loyal customers are more profitable than winning a new customer (Sarwari, 2018). According to Lee et al. (2010), the use of social media or mobile applications can create a more efficient and effective tool to reach current and new customers, which can lead to increased revenue and an improvement in customer relationships.

Conclusion of academic literature review

In times of a crisis like COVID-19, it is necessary for hospitality companies to apply crisis management to minimise losses. In addition, it can even lead to positive organisational changes if handled well. Furthermore, there are three stages analysed within crisis management: pre-crisis, during the crisis, and post-crisis stage. A more in-depth insight is given in the during-crisis response stage, where the initial crisis response and the reputation of a company are further analysed. The initial crisis response is mainly focused on changing the operation and the operational expenses and is connected to proactive and reactive strategies. In a company, cost reduction is seen as an essential aspect during a crisis, where companies cut costs most of the time, hold back on investments, and apply for government assistance. As for the reputation of a company, an insight is given into the customers' fear of getting infected and the importance of marketing. Restaurants have to face a long-term health scare due to COVID-19, with customers avoiding dining out, which will change future operations. Restaurants can decrease the negative spill-over effect of COVID-19 in their operations as customers are

more likely to choose a restaurant with a favourable reputation for high health standards and food safety practices. In addition, a company can change its marketing strategy to the changing demands caused by COVID-19. The importance of customer relationship management is noted and in which the local and loyal customer becomes even more important.

Research approach

This research aimed to explore how a small hospitality company responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands. Therefore, this study has the purpose of understanding behaviour and gaining knowledge of the opinions of owners, managers and employees of EB&C of how they perceive operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. To guide this research to a more specific aim, the following problem statement was composed: "Crisis management: How does a small Dutch hospitality company respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?" Since not much research has been written about COVID-19 in the restaurant industry, this exploratory research through interviews was conducted to build a picture based on the ideas and stories of owners and employees that enlightened this research with new insights.

Study findings

In total, four interviews were held with two employees and two owners of both restaurant locations of EB&C. All interviews were held within the same time frame during the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. three to four months after the announcement of the on-premises dining area closure. During the selective coding process, five themes were found: the initial crisis response, operational expenses, health scare, marketing, and the crisis impact. The most relevant results for answering the research questions were analysed with an SQC structure, where four themes (initial crisis response, operational expenses, health scare, and marketing) were divided into subthemes and supported with quotes from the interviews. The fifth theme, crisis impact, with the subthemes: positive and negative consequences and the attitude of the owner/employee, were new findings concerning COVID-19.

Initial crisis response

The initial crisis response is the first response EB&C took after the onset of the crisis. The initial crisis response is shown through different aspects which can be divided into two subthemes: unforeseen crisis, and situation handling. All the interviewees reported that they did not foresee a crisis like COVID-19 and there were no steps taken in advance. The interviewees state that they felt *powerless and overwhelmed; it was a total shock; and it was like a storm that came over us from the first day till now, and it goes so quickly*. One interviewee stated that *big companies have a crisis plan, but we as [a] small company did not and then you also do not expect something like this could happen*. This indicates that EB&C did not have a crisis plan due to the small size of the company and that the impact of COVID-19 was not expected to reach this business. In contrast, there were steps taken before the announcement of the closure of the on-premises dining areas by the Dutch government. The interviewees stated that *a week before we discussed some delivery options and possibilities because we saw, you know, something coming. But we were not sure what was coming*. This

indicates that EB&C did not take steps before the crisis occurred but did during the crisis event itself. Another subtheme of the initial crisis response is how EB&C handled the crisis situation in their operations. All interviewees stated that they reacted directly and stayed open during this crisis outbreak.

In addition, certain measures were taken within the organisation. One employee state that *we changed the store, so it is better to work for us. We also had to work here, and it also had to be safe for us too*.

Operational expenses

The expenses of EB&C changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reducing operational costs can be the first step taken in lowering organisational expenses. When questions arose on how costs were reduced during the crisis, all interviewees agreed that costs were cut on staff. One owner said that *we had to considerably save on payroll because that is the highest cost*. With cost reduction in other areas of the operation, some disagreements were seen. One interviewee stated that they decreased stock levels *and did not spend much money on that*.

External financial support

In times of crisis, companies can apply for external financial support to help with survival. One owner perceived the help as disappointing: *it sucks that we are not getting any financial support whatsoever*. It is seen that EB&C can make use of government support, but that the owners perceive the external financial support differently. One owner was disappointed by the help and another owner was thankful for the help, even though it was not sure that financial support would be given. Employees did not actively notice the government support in the business.

Health scare

Due to the health risk caused by COVID-19, customers' behaviour can be influenced and different elements in an operation can be changed to win back customers' trust. The health scare theme can be divided into four subthemes: the customer perspective, sense of safety, food safety, and social distancing.

Customer perspective

The perspective of a customer is seen as important for winning back customers' trust. An interviewee stated that making a crisis plan before COVID-19 happened would not have made a difference since that would not have changed the customers' perspective: *we can't influence the customers. So, even if we changed everything or made a plan beforehand, it would not have changed the customer*.

Sense of safety

Different measures were taken to create a sense of safety for employees and customers in the organisation, as one interviewee reported: *as long as everyone is healthy; we check that on a regular basis*. It is seen that safety measures were used to maintain a sense of safety for the customers as well as for the employees, where employees feel safe to come to work and customers are not afraid to visit the company. Furthermore, it was noticed that the sense of safety could be connected to the trust customers have in the company.

Food safety

EB&C took several measures to guarantee food safety, especially during the crisis. This changed the operation: *In the beginning, we put all our bread in plastic, wore gloves, and sanitised our hands constantly and we got it everywhere. And we wash our hands like a thousand times a day. So, people need to have a little bit of faith.* Additionally, this interviewee stated that *we had to do it to show to our customers, hey, we are being careful, and we are taking all the measures that are necessary.* This indicates that extra food safety measures had to be taken to visually show customers that the operation was safe.

Social distancing

Social distancing is seen as an important safety measure during this crisis. The owners and employees report that keeping the 1.5-metre distance is a challenge in the workplace. *We have a small place over here. Keeping your distances is harder. We do try. Well, a lot of times keeping the distances does not work.* It is seen that keeping a distance between employees could not always be maintained since this interferes with performing the job. However, the one-and-a-half metre distance between employees and the customers is seen as important, where several measures were taken to ensure this.

Marketing

Different marketing aspects were adjusted or maintained as the importance of marketing was seen in EB&C during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sales promotions and relationship management were the two main subthemes detected from the marketing theme.

Sales promotions

All the interviewees agreed that sales promotions are effective in times of crisis and help to reach customers. All the interviewees stated that social media are actively used to let customers know that their company is not closed during the crisis outbreak: *We do a lot more on social media. Through social media, we inform people what we were open or promoted our new pastry line. And it works.* It was seen that the way of promotion changed during this crisis, with social media used to reach customers right away. Another interviewee added that besides social media, local influencers were used for promoting products. It was seen that different marketing tools like social media, social influencers, and word of mouth were used and helped with reaching and attracting customers during the crisis.

Relationship management

In the subtheme of relationship management, two types of customers can be seen: loyal and local customers. Furthermore, it was seen that local buying is promoted during the COVID-19 pandemic: *People here in the surroundings are promoting local buying, so I think we also got new business from people here in the neighbourhood.* This all shows that the support of local and loyal customers was needed during the crisis and became even more important than before the crisis.

Conclusion

It was seen that the owners and employees of EB&C did not foresee that COVID-19 could affect the normal way of operating, besides which the small size of the company was given as a reason why there was no crisis plan before a crisis occurred. This

is in accordance with the finding of Tse et al. (2006) who state that most small restaurants do not have a crisis plan. Therefore, it can be concluded that proactive strategies were not taken (Brzozowski & Cucculelli, 2016). However, reactive strategies were seen since all participants stated that immediate actions were taken after the crisis started. EB&C chose to keep the company open and improved the business to attract customers. Alternatives to normal operations were implemented, like food delivery. In addition, new investments in the company were done to keep customers interested, and strict safety measures were taken to actively show customers that EB&C was taking COVID-19 seriously. This is in line with the theory of Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015) which states that reactive strategies are the first strategy taken to ensure a company's survival. Besides, it is noticed that due to the small size of EB&C, implementing change is seen as easier. This is in line with the findings of Alves et al. (2020), where more flexibility and prompt reactions were reported in small companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, it was seen that the operational expenses of EB&C changed due to the crisis. All the participants reported a payroll reduction since this was the highest cost in their operation and fewer employees were needed during the crisis. Kujanja and Planinc (2013) state that cost-cutting leads to lowering the organisational performance. This is in contrast with the findings of this research, since EB&C cut costs to improve organisational performance by adjusting the number of staff to a more efficient way of working that suited the new safety measures. Since the on-site dining area closure, fewer staff were needed for table service. Besides, the restaurant was changed to a store where products were sold to-go, and food was delivered. This also had an impact on the stock cost, since this was adjusted to the new demand. For these changes, investments were made, and costs were mainly saved on staffing. This contradicts the finding of Kujanja and Planinc (2013), since cost-cutting on staff and adjusting the stock cost to the new demand, had a positive impact on the company's turnover, which even led to the opening of a new restaurant location.

Further, EB&C made use of government assistance during the first weeks of the on-premises dining area closure. According to Tse et al. (2006), government assistance can help with cost reduction, but results show that this help is perceived differently by the owners and employees, where the employees did not actively notice the help and the owners were not sure if they would get the financial support, in addition to the fact that it had to be paid back. It can be concluded that government support does not reduce costs in an operation during a crisis. According to the participants, the sense of safety is mainly with the perception of the customers. This is in line with the findings of Seo et al. (2014), who state that a crisis shapes the customers' perception and can lead to a reputational threat. According to Coombs (2014), a favourable reputation is linked to attracting more customers. In line with this statement, the owners and employees believe that their favourable reputation helps with convincing the customers that EB&C is clean and safe from COVID-19. It is seen that the sense of safety can be connected to the trust customers have in EB&C.

In addition, the participants were critical of the negative impact of the media. A negative spill-over effect can be seen (Seo et al., 2014). Owners, employees and customers were not immediately infected by COVID-19 when they visited EB&C, but the chances of infection are increased in public spaces.

Therefore, all restaurants were associated with the chance of getting infected with the COVID-19 virus and were affected by negative publicity. Nevertheless, it is reported that owners and employees did not notice that people were scared to come to EB&C. It was seen that safety measures, like wearing gloves and keeping distance, were used to maintain a sense of safety for employees and customers. This contradicts the statement of Jain (2020), who reported that customers will be avoiding ordering food and dining out after the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that the owners and employees expect that EB&C will be fully booked after they are allowed to open the on-site dining areas and that the focus will be on maintaining safety instead of convincing customers to come dine again.

In addition, food safety measures were taken to visually show customers that EB&C follows strict hygiene rules. This finding is in accordance with those of Choi et al. (2018) who found that customers are more likely to visit a hospitality company that has good food safety practices. By actively showing that EB&C is following food safety measures, the sense of safety is created. Further, Jain (2020) states that in the post-COVID-19 world, social distancing will be the norm. It is seen that social distancing between employees cannot always be maintained, but measures are taken to ensure the one-and-a-half-metre distance between employees and customers, with the table setup and strict rules. The owners and employees of EB&C report that marketing was effective for reaching customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ways of promotion changed, where messages became more storytelling. Social media, local influencers, and word of mouth from the local community were used to promote new products and to inform customers that EB&C was open during the pandemic. This can be connected to the research of Kirtiş and Karahan (2011) and Tse et al. (2006), who both report the importance of marketing to reach customers and stay profitable during a crisis. Further, Kirtiş and Karahan (2011) claim that social media is the most convenient marketing tool to target specific segments of society. This can be questioned since in this research word of mouth was seen as more effective in reaching the local community.

Sarwari (2018) indicates that loyal customers are crucial and more profitable than winning a new one. The participants report that loyal customers are important since they gave their support from the beginning of the crisis. Besides, Lo et al. (2006) found that marketing initiatives of restaurants primarily focus on local customers during a crisis. This is seen in EB&C where the use of local influencers was made to reach customers from the neighbourhood. Further, Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2020) state that the local community becomes more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. In EB&C, it is seen that the local community supported local businesses. This support already existed and increased during the pandemic.

One of the negative consequences is that EB&C lost turnover at the beginning of the crisis. In addition, changing the operations to new safety standards changed the quality of the service. The original concept of the company could not be carried out and had to be adjusted, which gave an unsatisfied feeling to the owners and employees. In addition, it is stated that at the beginning of the crisis, customers were friendly, but that their behaviour changed after two months. They were seen as becoming impatient and did not obey the rules anymore, whereas the owners and employees had to be stricter about the safety rules. According to Coombs (2014), this response can

lead to a safer place to work. As owners and employees report, being strict ensures the safety of customers and themselves. As for the positive consequences of COVID-19 on EB&C, the owners report that they have learned a lot about their own company and identified new ideas on how to run the company and how to constantly improve even without the dining areas. Furthermore, the changed operations made work easier for the employees since tables do not have to be served, and work is done more efficiently than before the crisis occurred, with the same turnover. The turnover was expected to decrease, but instead, people bought desserts and savouries more than before, and products were sold out every day at the beginning of the crisis. Also, new customers were seen during the crisis. All in all, the changes were perceived as positive by the customers and this all led to the opening of a third location of EB&C. These findings are in line with the statement of Pecujlija and Cosic (2019) that suggest that an organisation can succeed in coping with the negative consequences of a crisis and this may strengthen organisational efficiency.

With the findings of this research, the problem statement "Crisis management: How does a small Dutch hospitality company respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?" can be answered. It is seen that crisis management is implemented in a small Dutch hospitality company during the COVID-19 pandemic, where reactive strategies are key to surviving the crisis. Immediate actions were taken since operations had to be adjusted to the changed demand caused by the pandemic. Implementing change is seen as easier due to the flexibility of a small company. Further, the stock was adjusted, costs were mainly cut on payroll, and investments within the company were done to attract customers. In addition, government support was available but did not contribute to cost reduction. In addition, a favourable reputation can help to overcome the fact that consumers are scared to visit an operation due to the risk of getting infected. Even so, the sense of safety is mainly with the perception of the customers themselves, and to show visually that food safety and social distancing measures are followed. This can help to gain the customers' trust and enhance a sense of safety for customers and employees. Further, strict measures were needed to ensure safety for the customers as well as for the staff. In addition, customers were reached by the use of social media, local influencers, and word of mouth. The importance of local and loyal customers is seen since their support was needed during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is seen that positive and negative consequences of COVID-19 led to more safety and a positive contribution to organisational efficiency. Though positive and negative consequences of COVID-19 may vary, the attitude of owners and employees is seen as important for survival. Being positive and thinking in possibilities not problems can contribute to the immediate response of an organisation.

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