



Case Study: Squamish

PIVOTING FROM FEAR TO COMMUNITY PRIDE

Tourism Squamish's Crisis Communication Response to vandalism on the Sea to Sky Gondola

This case study is based on interviews with Lesley Weeks, Executive Director at Tourism Squamish and Christy Allan, Director, Sales, Marketing and Guest Services at Sea to Sky Gondola.

The Sea to Sky Gondola is a popular Squamish tourism attraction, drawing visitors from British Columbia, Canada, and the world to enjoy it and the many other experiences the community offers. Employing some 250 people, the Sea to Sky Gondola company is the largest employer in the local tourism economy in this small, tight-knight town.

In August 2019, and again in September 2020, the gondola was subject to serious acts of vandalism. Lesley and Christy explain how the strength of their partnerships with each other, and the local community, are helping to manage this local crisis.



Squamish | Tourism Vancouver



THINKING ABOUT COMMUNITY SAFETY FIRST

It was close to 4 a.m. in early August 2019 when Lesley, Executive Director at Tourism Squamish, got the call that the gondola cable wires had broken—later confirmed to have been cut—causing extensive damage to the attraction, halting all operations in the middle of a busy summer season, and putting staff out of work.

Fortunately, Sea to Sky Gondola’s general manager, Kirby Brown, was also the board chair of Tourism Squamish, the local Community Destination Marketing Organization (CDMO). Lesley was one of the first people he called, which helped her understand how the renowned attraction was going to manage the crisis.

Lesley recalls her reaction:

“When I knew everyone was safe, I immediately set to define what this crisis meant for Tourism Squamish, local partners, and for visitors to the area.”

In a local tourism-related crisis, the board chair plays a crucial role in supporting the CDMO; but in this situation, this would be the only time Lesley would have direct contact with Kirby for the next few days, as he managed his business’ response.

LEANING ON RELATIONSHIPS

Without a crisis communication plan in place, Lesley relied on her instincts to guide her next steps. She was confident in the relationships she had fostered at the District of Squamish, and the connections Kirby and Christy, Director, Sales, Marketing and Guest Services at Sea to Sky Gondola, had fostered in the community as well. Lesley began working closely with Christy as well as the mayor’s communication director and, together, the three partners agreed on how information would flow, when updates would occur, and who would be responsible. With advice and a nod of support from Destination BC and the team representing the Vancouver, Coast and Mountains tourism region, Lesley got to work.

STAYING FOCUSED ON COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND VISITORS

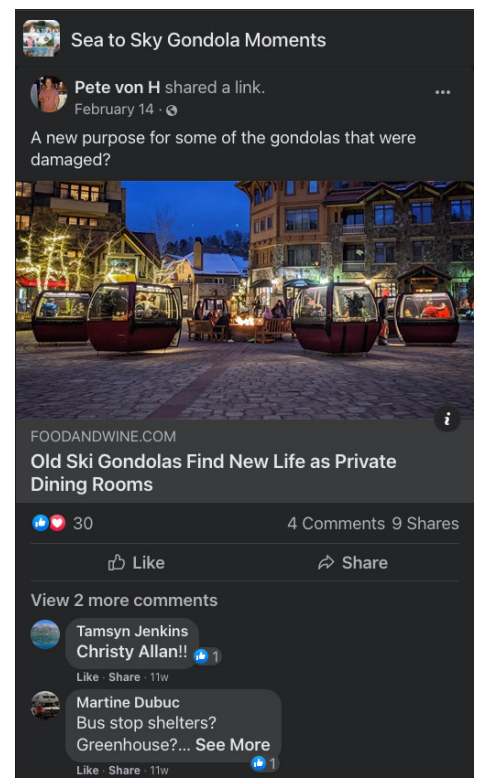
The attraction is on the main highway through town and, in the hours after the vandalism occurred, emergency vehicles were onsite. In a small town, and on social media, word travels fast; there was no time to waste in informing stakeholders and media to get ahead of the crisis.

Kirby acted as the key spokesperson, keeping media, guests, passholders, community residents and the company's other partners apprised of what was happening on the ground. He worked to instil calm and to communicate that the act of vandalism was against the gondola, not the people. He was thoughtful in keeping his stakeholders updated regularly. To ensure this messaging was reaching all community partners, Lesley at Tourism Squamish amplified the information through membership channels.

Still, local partners, tourism businesses, visitors, and the media had questions for Tourism Squamish on what this meant for them and the community. Many were uneasy and concerned about safety. To protect the local tourism reputation, Lesley focused on reassuring community members and visitors alike that it was still safe to visit Squamish, and shared details about all the many other local attractions and activities available.

CREATING COMMUNITY SENTIMENT AND PRIDE

Lesley recognized her stakeholders needed an outlet for emotional response. She launched a Facebook page called "My Sea to Sky Gondola Moments," within the first few days of the crisis to help channel that emotional reaction in a positive way. The page included historical photos from the gondola and invited others to post and share their memories. The page helped to reconnect people with the Tourism Squamish brand, and to manage the reputation of a safe, exciting place to visit. Lesley shared the Facebook page with media to help set a positive tone for media coverage and refocus their stories on the positive impact of the gondola on the community.

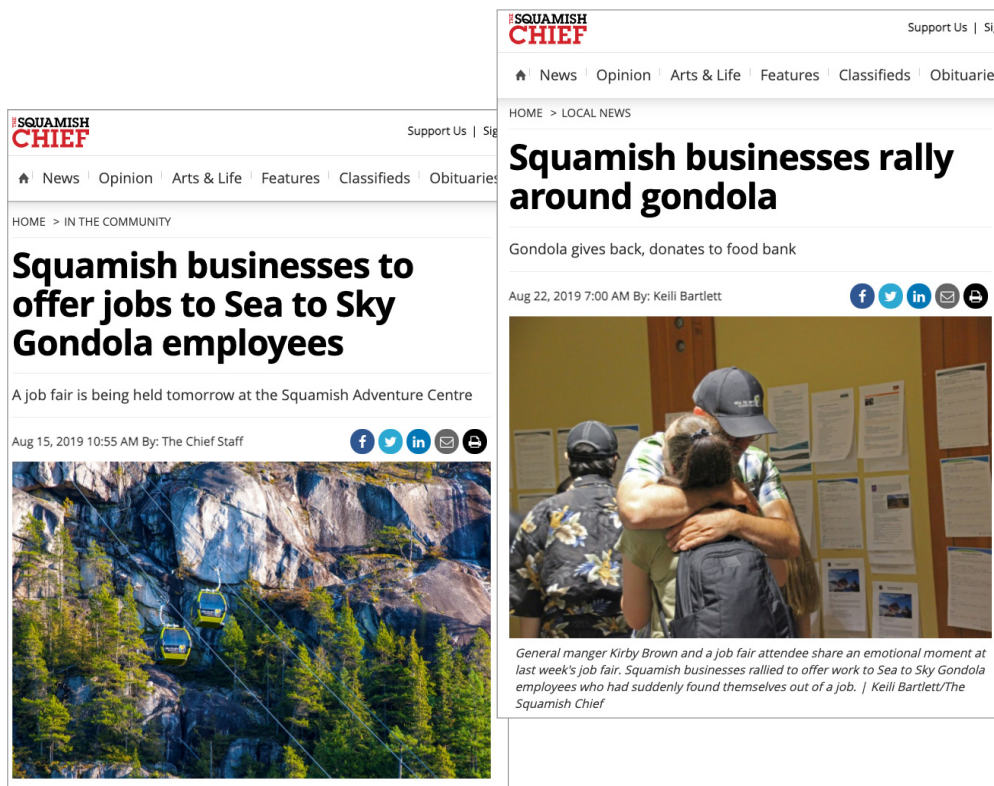


GOING BEYOND TO PROTECT THE TOURISM BRAND

As it became apparent that, to address the extensive damage, the gondola would be out of operation for longer than initially anticipated, Sea to Sky Gondola needed to support their 250 employees. Tourism Squamish worked with the local Chamber of Commerce to organize a job fair to highlight local employment opportunities. The job fair was another opportunity to pivot from the crisis to support the local community and maintain the reputation of being a safe, inviting place to live, work and visit.

In Christy's words:

“You have no idea of the impact of your brand until you go through a crisis. You realize the relationships you fostered and the way you participate as a good community partner will help you weather any storm.”



KEEPING A PULSE ON SENTIMENT

When a second act of vandalism occurred in September 2020, Lesley noticed a slight change in sentiment.

“We did a great job ensuring safety of the local community after the first incident, but we’ll have to work harder this time.”

She continues to use the brand voice to highlight other tourism opportunities in the area, while supporting the gondola team. Sea to Sky Gondola has also launched a blog series to document the “Journey to Rebuild” to showcase the efforts in rebuilding the gondola, and continue to foster a sense of safety, community spirit, and people.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER IN A CRISIS

- The same incident happened not once but twice, making it feel personal. Safety was a big concern, and the CDMO needed to provide reassurance.
- Relationships fostered a community response to these incidents, including how the CDMO addressed the crisis.
- A very skilled communicator led the response for Sea to Sky Gondola; he was also the local tourism board chair. He enabled a calm, factual response, allowing the CDMO to focus on protecting the tourism brand while local police investigated the incident.



SHARING KEY LEARNINGS WITH OTHER COMMUNITY DMOS

- 1. RELATIONSHIPS MATTER IN A CRISIS** The Sea to Sky Gondola is Tourism Squamish's biggest partner and coveted attraction. It is also the community's biggest employer. Building relationships with the local community was important. In this case, Tourism Squamish was fortunate to have the gondola's general manager as the board chair. It is important to foster these relationships so you can work together and lean on each other's expertise in a crisis.
- 2. MESSAGING IS IMPORTANT** Sea to Sky Gondola crisis messaging focused on the act of vandalism, rather than the safety of the gondola or risk to people. That made it easier for Tourism Squamish to create messaging of safety for locals and visitors.
- 3. FOCUS ON THE CDMO'S ROLE** an extended closure meant the CDMO needed to rethink marketing programs and redefine packages with other operators and adventures, to ensure visitors would keep coming to Squamish. The CDMO also had the opportunity to be a good community partner and arranged a jobs fair with the local chamber of commerce. Look for ways to elevate all tourism operators in your marketing.
- 4. IMPLEMENT TOOLS TO HELP YOU BE BETTER PREPARED IN CRISIS** Tourism Squamish created an additional contact on their board of directors, signed up for a media monitoring service to keep a pulse on related news stories locally and around the world.

In closing, Lesley offers her colleagues around the province sage advice in managing a crisis:

“Get training so you feel more confident and less fearful of managing a crisis!”

She also added:

“Don't be afraid to answer your phone when the media calls. It's less stressful to deal with it immediately, rather than waiting until the end of the day.”

And,

“Be ready to go on camera! The media can just show up outside your office.”