

I Survived: Managing Family Vacation Risk



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Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: General

Last week I led my family of five on a classic rite of passage—a Spring Break trip to Florida to visit Walt Disney World and Universal Studios. I'm pleased to report that the trip went well, we made it home safe and sound, and I only allowed myself a few brief moments to connect the dots between family vacations and risk management.

In many respects, a family vacation is a textbook example of risk-taking. Expectations run high during the planning phase, but numerous circumstances—some within, and many outside our control—influence the 'net' experience for individuals and the family as a whole. Paraphrasing Norman Marks in his book, *World-Class Risk Management*, [the family] that thrives [and survives a family vacation] is the one that is "is able to take advantage of fair weather opportunities in our uncertain world while taking care not to founder on its reefs during a storm."

Here are my tips for managing family vacation risk, and surviving, thriving, and making happy memories during your next family vacation—or organizational adventure.

- **Plan early and adjust often** - Effective planning in several stages was critical to our success. After deciding on Orlando as our destination, our family began making lists of 'must-see,' 'maybe' and 'possibly not' vacation activities. Once we arrived we did some fine-tuning based on uncontrollable but quickly changing contextual issues, such as weather and park attendance. Instead of having to create a plan on the spot (something that never goes well when distracted children are involved), we just made some basic adjustments to our plan to accommodate changing circumstances.
- **Be flexible** - As the saying goes, "No plan survives first contact with reality." Although non-Floridians imagine the state bathed in sunshine year-round, we discovered that weather is an enemy to the family without a few contingency plans. We found it unseasonably hot with occasional thunderstorms severe enough to temporarily close rides. Fortunately we had anticipated the heat, were equipped to stay hydrated (see [this NRMCC article](#) about hot weather), and opted for extra water-related rides during the hottest days. As for the thunderstorm, we switched our plans to a ride on an indoor attraction and then found a sit-down restaurant to wait out the rain. In the end, flexibility probably worked to our advantage as we were able to quickly adjust to weather conditions that likely drove other families out of the parks.
- **Befriend technology** - Whether it was texting other family members to meet up after riding separate attractions or using our favorite weather app to track incoming storms, smartphones proved to be an invaluable tool during our trip. However, probably the most effective technology tool was the park app for each of the parks. The apps were useful in several ways as a miniature risk dashboard to help with decision making during the day. For example, the apps posted wait times for most of the attractions and rides. Although this information was available at the entrance to the attraction, and allowed us to avoid

wandering about looking for tolerable lines. In addition, although physical maps are great, having our location pinpointed exactly on a digital map by GPS meant less time backtracking to try and find the restrooms.

- **Communicate with stakeholders** – We have a range of interests and priorities in our family when it comes to amusement parks. Some of us like more dynamic rides like roller coasters and some don't. At least one member of the family was keenly interested in seeing as much of the Harry Potter-related parts of Universal as possible. As such, we made it a point to regroup after each activity to check everyone's status. Constant communication allowed us to address immediate needs such as hydration and nutrition but it also allowed us to make sure that everyone was getting the positive upside of the experience. From discussing our vacation goals during the planning stages to checking in with one another during the actual days in the parks, communication played a vital role in keeping everyone engaged and happy (as noted in [this previous Risk eNews](#) about communication and employee morale).
- **One size fits one** – One mantra that is constantly repeated here at NRMCM when we work with our [consulting](#) clients is that although there are universal considerations when it comes to risk management, there is no 'one size fits all' solution for every organization. This is true with family vacations as well. Every book, online resource, or personal conversation about our destination had recommendations for things that every family must do. However, every family is different in what they like and what they want to experience, and even long-anticipated 'wants' may change quickly in the face of intense weather, long lines, or other circumstances beyond your control. Ultimately, you need to find what works best for your family (or organization) in the moment given its unique makeup.
- **Teamwork makes the dream work** – At every step of our journey, it was the staff at any given destination that had the most input on whether it was a good experience or not. The Disney Institute is known for its focus on employee selection as one of the four key aspects of [employee engagement](#). Resolving to improve your hiring process to positively transform how your stakeholders experience your mission is well worth the time it requires. Wondering where to begin to improve the outcomes of your screening process? Check out our [Staff Screening Notebook](#), with its simple but thoughtful ten step process to guide you from defining the positions available in your organization right up through onboarding a new employee.

Although it's usually a bad idea to bring work with you on vacation, the lessons about risk management that we regularly share here at NRMCM definitely came in handy during my family vacation. Lessons like these are universal when it comes to risk management!

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