1000 Islands Crisis Communications Playbook

Executive Overview & Strategic Intent

For border destinations like the 1000 Islands, geopolitical disputes and macro-trade conflicts are not abstract policy issues - they cause immediate economic harm to local operators and place emotional strain on integrated bi-national communities.

The primary long-term threat facing the region is structural volume erosion: the risk that repeated border disruptions create a permanent downward step-change in Canadian visitor volume (the "ratchet effect") that fails to bounce back automatically when political tensions ease.

This playbook provides a practical operational framework to **protect the baseline Canadian drive-market, preserve cross-border business relationships, mobilize local merchants, and manage media crises effectively without taking political sides**.

Industry Insights & Opportunities

- **Brand USA Canadian Market Research & Insights:** Strategic intelligence from Brand USA highlights sentiment shifts among Canadian travelers during border disputes. Brand USA research emphasizes engaging "movable" Canadian travelers with welcoming, value-focused messaging and clear travel advice rather than wading into political debate. Brand USA's dedicated Canadian campaign, expected to be launched this fall 2026, aims to protect cross-border travel volume and reassure border-region visitors.
- **ILNY's "New York Loves Canada" Campaign:** This campaign offers targeted deals across hotels, restaurants, museums and attractions statewide. While neighboring regions have actively listed discounts, the tri-county/1000 Islands region needs stronger representation. We suggest reaching out directly to local hotels, restaurants and attractions across the region, encouraging them to submit exclusive deals to the state portal. This will shift prospective visitor focus towards some tangible savings and clear border guidance.

Escalation Triggers & Threat Matrix

To avoid reactive decision-making, use this three-tiered matrix to guide operational decisions and determine when to bring in KHM:

Escalation Level	Waterway / Border Event	Strategic DMO & PR Action

Level 1: Rhetoric & Political Noise *(Current State)*	Tariff disputes, inflammatory political comments (i.e., naming debates), media stories on declining travel sentiment.	**Internal Handling & Value Messaging**: Do not validate rhetorical distractions or give political noise unnecessary oxygen. Maintain warm, welcoming messaging in drive markets. Actively enroll local businesses in the *New York Loves Canada* program.
Level 2: Operational Border Friction	Extended delays at bridge crossings, heightened USCG/CBP inspections, or new administrative check-in requirements.	**Fact-Based Operational Clarity**: Publish real-time, non-political travel FAQs (bridge status, marine check-in steps) on owned channels (i.e. website banner or appropriate getting to and around webpage). Issue direct briefings to local marinas, hotels and attractions. Maintain regular contact with bridge authorities and border agencies.
Level 3: Acute Crisis & High Tension *(Engage KHM)*	Severe political incidents, organized boycott calls, or major border access disruptions.	**IMMEDIATE KHM ACTIVATION & CRISIS PROTOCOL**: Engage KHM immediately to lead PR response, field local/national media inquiries and lean on KHM to draft crisis messaging. Hold paid promotional ads in Canadian markets. Align regional statements with state tourism messaging and lean on industry partners like Brand USA for messaging.

Immediate Action Protocol (When Issues Escalate)

Step 1: Assess & Pause Paid Media (First 30 Minutes)

- Convene core internal leadership.
- Immediately pause paid digital/social ads in Canadian markets during acute incidents to prevent tone-deaf ad placement.

Step 2: Factual Verification

- Confirm exact crossing, bridge, or operational facts directly with Bridge Authorities, USCG, or CBP before releasing public statements.

Step 3: Stakeholder Communication Cascade

1. **Frontline & Visitor Services Staff:** Supply factual FAQs so staff never debate politics or speculate with guests.
2. **Local Business Partners (Marinas, Hotels, Attractions):** Send clear operational guidance and scripts for customer inquiries.
3. **KHM PR Agency (Level 3):** Hand off lead media handling and national interview vetting to KHM.
4. **Canadian Travelers & Media:** Publish clean, non-political travel updates on owned channels.