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Lessons Learned

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How to prepare for natural disasters from a first responder's perspective

During 2005, Florida experienced five hurricanes, and our clients with facilities based in Florida asked us to respond to their disaster recovery requirements. From this quick introduction to disaster response, we have been involved with dozens of natural disasters over the past 10 years, acquiring invaluable real-world experience. The RFMA Communications and Publications Committee suggested that we compile our lessons learned so that they may be shared with our community, and we jumped at the chance.

There are three important segments of this article: planning, the disaster and the recovery. Planning is absolutely vital. We have seen, time and time again, that our clients with a robust disaster preparedness plan are able to achieve normal business operations in the most expedient manner.

Your Disaster Plan

If your organization is serious about preparing for the next natural disaster, you need a crisis management plan. The second step is to assign a team representative from every important and relevant departments within your organization. Having input from operations, finance, human resources and facilities will allow a plan to be created that the organization can support.

Once the team is created, draft an outline of the important elements. Below are our best practices in developing this outline:

Plan for the safe evacuation of employees. The No. 1 thing impacted during an emergency is your employees. Their homes and lives may be devastated, and they may not be able to work soon after the event. They may require shelter, food, water, medical support, fuel and transportation. How will your organization respond to the needs of your affected employees? Will you plan to bring in temporary employees to support operations? If so, will they require shelter, food, water, transportation, etc.?

Shelter, food and water. After a disaster, basic items are no longer available and must be brought in. Plans must be made in advance to have these important needs; otherwise, your facility's return to normalcy will be delayed.

Designated teams and roles. It's vital to have one point of contact for the client and your first responder team. Communication is critical during the craziness before and after a natural disaster. Having a single point of contact who is empowered to make decisions allows for quick decision making. It also eliminates miscommunication and confusion. In our experience, decision from committee slows things down. To support your disaster response manager, we recommend an admin/office team, field technicians and a field coordinator. In addition, establish an 800 hotline for checking in and other communication after the event.

Gather materials. Plan ahead for access to plywood, sandbags, chain saws, tools, food, water, etc. A few days prior to a disaster, obtaining these items will prove to be challenging.

Establish your first responder team of vendors. This includes HVAC, roof, glass, cleanup and emergency power, etc. Agree on daily communication via conference call to check on progress.

Get fuel. Nothing happens without access to fuel. Put a plan in place to acquire, transport and house fuel that can be used by employees. Past experience has shown this to be a critical element.

Identify at-risk locations. Three days prior to the event, weather forecasts will post warnings on the areas that are at most risk of natural disaster. All locations within this forecast will be part of the plan (such as board-ups, sand bags and other necessary prep).

Communication. Cellular service may not be available. We always use satellite phones for reliable communication.

Daily check-ins. Establish a home base for check-in at the end of every day. This helps if communication is not possible.

Deliveries. Halt food deliveries or increase stocked foods to serve clients if you intend to keep power. Will you continue food deliveries right after the event? How will you handle food spoilage?

Re-opening. How fast do you want to open after the event? Will you use a generator or wait for utility power? If you know generators will be deployed, high-risk locations should install generator hookups.

Generators. Will you lease or buy? Don't forget fuel, as a generator will not supply electricity without fuel. If generators are part of the plan, you must have a reliable and trusted partner that will supply the assets when required. Days after the disaster, demand for these assets overcomes the available supply. We've seen clients who thought they had access to generators, but when the time came for delivery they were no longer available.

Access. Be aware that impacted areas may have curfews due to fear of looting. Access to the impacted areas will not be allowed without permission. Part of your plan should be to send out letters of permission to your first responder team. They can show the letter to the authorities and, in most cases, allow them to access the area and your restaurant. The letter should be written on company letterhead and properly identify your first responder team.

Inspection sheet. Create an inspection sheet for your first responder team to be filled out upon arrival. Key areas to cover are roof condition, HVAC, power, parking, glass, trees, etc. Require lots of pictures. When filled out properly, this inspection sheet will allow your team to plan out the next steps. Here is a trick that we have used in the past to determine if power exists at the location: Call the location. If the answering machine picks up, there is power.

Back in business. Do you want to be first open after the event? The impacted community greatly appreciates those businesses that help things get back to normal. We have witnessed firsthand that businesses that open first see incredible traffic immediately after the event. And, terrific customer loyalty is created.

The Disaster

Don't abandon the plan. Implement the plan. As the emergency approaches, get going. If the plan calls for boarding up the windows and setting sandbags for high-risk locations, get your response team moving.

Have the first phone call with your first responders and put the plan into motion. Ensure the appropriate assets and supplies are being acquired. Arrange for temporary employees and ensure for the care of your employees in the impact area. If your plan is solid and comprehensive, all that is required is to implement the plan.

The Recovery

Again, the plan should be dictating how engagement is initiated and how first responders react. Be aware of possible curfews. Also, it is impossible to plan for all situations. Be flexible.

Create a list of locations, prioritized from first to last, and have your first responders engage. Set up home base and start the inspections. Account for employees and keep following the plan for how you intended to engage and get your restaurants back online. Get it done. As with most disasters, electricity will likely be lost. How you deal with food spoilage should be determined in advance. Touch base with local authorities for road closure and curfews; don't depend on local news. Clean up, identify needed repairs and get 'er done.

Success is in the planning, which leads all other actions. Don't abandon the plan. Be flexible and prepared.

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