

Repairs & Maintenance

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When disaster strikes, will you be prepared?

Plan | Respond | Recover

Lately it seems as if each day brings a new disaster in some part of the country. From hurricanes to earthquakes, it makes you almost yearn for the more mundane snowstorm or fire. No one is immune, and disasters do not discriminate. Will you be ready if one comes your way?

According to the National Archives and Records Administration:

- Only 43 percent of companies struck by disaster resume operations.
- 29 percent of companies that resume business fail within two years.

This is why the “plan, respond, recover” cycle must be taken as a whole. If you respond well but never recover, you’re still out of business.

PLAN

Planning ahead for the worst-case scenario is critical for your business’ survival and your employees’ safety. With many front-of-house staff living paycheck to paycheck, an extended interruption in business can mean the difference between making it and going under.

Consider each type of disaster and your initial response to it. An impending disaster with advanced warning, such as a weather event, gives you more preparation time than a fire and thus requires a different response.

All areas of operations need a plan, even those that don’t feel directly related to a disaster, such as payroll.

Human Resource Considerations

The company should take the time to ensure employees at all levels understand the plan and will be safe from harm. What is expected of front-of-house employees is different than that of on-site managers and corporate employees.

Get employees involved in the planning process, including developing and reviewing plans. Plans should be reviewed and tested at least once a year. David Hauser, Restaurant Maintenance Manager at Friendly’s, shared that in his organization, the district operating manager is the pulse of the location. The tone trickles down from there. This is why it is important to go over emergency procedures and egresses regularly. What happens if there is a fire? Local catastrophe? A corporate office directive? Inclement weather event?

In addition to the critical employee communications discussed below, the plan needs to include:

- How will employees be paid if systems become unavailable? (Many employees depend on timely paychecks. If they are also experiencing a personal disaster, such as a weather event, it is even more important to ensure continuity.)
- If a location has to close for a period of time, can employees be redeployed locally to avoid job/income loss?
- How can the company help ensure employees are taking similar safety steps in their own homes to ensure personal safety for themselves and their families?

Communications

What is the communication plan? Remember that the best-laid plan is worthless if communications falter. Consider the following questions:

- Who will receive warnings, and how will they receive them?
- Where is the call list, and how is it updated?
- How are you going to call?
- Who is going to call?
- At what point will calls be initiated?
- Will the business be open?
- Should employees come to work?
- When will they hear from you again?
- Who can they contact if they have questions?
- How will you communicate with the public, patrons and media?

Operational Considerations

Everything runs on technology. This is where best practices meets disaster planning:

- Are files and data backed up securely, offsite and on a daily basis?
- What is the plan for recovering important operating systems?
- How will important hardware be secured?
- How will mission-critical tasks be completed if systems are unavailable? What is the offline equivalent and/or Plan B?

- What are the “shelter-in-place” procedures?

Facility Management and Product Management

It is vital to have a clear plan to secure your facility and minimize product loss in the event of an impending disaster. Any disaster with warning means you can take steps to secure the restaurant before it strikes. These might include:

- Turning off machines
- Securing awnings/objects outside the restaurant
- Turning down temperatures on freezers
- Ensuring ice machines are empty
- Having potable water available in bulk
- Securing and testing backup generators
- Stocking supplies in case employees must shelter in the location
- Securing refrigerated trucks for power outages
- Depleting supply of extra food in advance of a storm to minimize potential loss
- Considering the proper shut down and recovery procedures for all key equipment, including its location and who has access
- Considering a backup for key equipment if digital systems are down for an extended period

RESPOND

A company's planned response always evolves as a disaster unfolds. You must be fluid and in constant communication for effective response.

For any immediate emergency, Hauser says everyone in the facility should first be empowered to dial 911. An immediate call to 911 is necessary to get emergency responders on site first. Then, other steps, such as administering first aid or evacuating the store, can be taken. Hauser's facilities are required to perform periodic unplanned drills to mimic various emergency scenarios.

For anticipated disasters such as storms, activate the call list according to the communication plan. Over-communicating is always better than under-communicating.

Coordination and cooperation with local first responders, officials, vendors, suppliers and the community is critical to effective response and quick recovery. Long-term goodwill and public relations can be made or broken in times of distress.

And while carrying out official duties, always remember to make your personal safety a first priority.

RECOVER

Before any facility can reopen, it must be cleared by local authorities. The building must, at a minimum, have potable water and safe conditions. You must also recover and re-power your equipment and evaluate any food.

When re-opening the location, explain any limitations to your staff and the public:

- Will there be limited hours?
- A limited menu?
- A limited quantity of meals?
- Is there clear and safe passage for customers and employees to reach your facility? Be sure to share any detours.

Recovery is not a straight and linear path. Even as some restaurants made a quick re-opening in Houston after Hurricane Harvey, provisions were limited, access routes were sparse, and it was certainly not business as usual, as many found themselves open and then closed again.

AN APPROACH YOU CAN BANK ON

The best advice from the front lines via Hauser is to keep asking yourself, "What is the next worse thing that can happen?" You have to work the challenge as it is happening. Be fluid, because you cannot predict the outcome of any disaster. Always plan for the worst.

Even if you never have to mobilize your worst-case disaster response, having a sharp and at-the-ready plan of action will help you sleep at night and offer insurance to your company's ongoing success.

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