

When the Worst Happens

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What would happen if a true disaster hit one of your restaurants?

Would you be ready?

In the facility maintenance world, emergencies happen, and we're programmed to react quickly—whether it's 3:00 in the afternoon or 3:00 in the morning. We constantly work to "put out fires," to keep "treading water" and to "stay afloat" between site visits and phone calls. Sound familiar?

These common phrases illustrate how hectic this industry can be. Well, what if there actually is a fire or water event or even an earthquake, blizzard, tornado or drought? Would having a disaster preparedness plan in place make these situations easier to handle? Absolutely. If you don't have a plan in place, you may be forced to react, rather than respond, and you may pay for it later, literally. According to FEMA, 5,900 restaurant fires are reported annually, with an average cost of more than \$29,000 per event. That's for fires alone. Ouch.

Beginning a Disaster Preparedness Plan

When we're caught off guard by an emergency for which we haven't prepared, our initial reactions can be impulsive, inefficient and just plain wrong. However, by creating a disaster preparedness plan for your business, you can position yourself and your team to be able to respond quickly and appropriately. By moving straight into response mode, you set yourself up for the best chance to safely minimize business interruption and get your restaurant back open for business.

Ok, now I've got your attention, and you want to know how to create such a disaster preparedness plan, right? Great! The rest of this article will outline some quick tips that don't take long to implement and can make a huge difference in the time and money it takes to get your restaurant back up and running.

There are several key considerations that are important when creating a disaster preparedness plan: your company's level of commitment, your vulnerabilities, effective planning and ongoing practice.

Making the Commitment

First, you must commit to the effort and make sure that someone on your team is willing to take ownership. This step may seem obvious, but it can easily be undervalued. It is important to designate someone on your team who ensures your plan is thorough and practiced by all participating parties. If this step is skipped, it can become painfully obvious during a loss event. Your plan won't do you much good if it's incomplete or no one knows what it is.

Consider Your Vulnerabilities

Assess the disasters that are most likely to occur in your area. If you live in Arizona, you might not have to worry much about a blizzard, but drought or fires could be a real issue. In Florida, you may have to worry about both hurricanes and flooding at the same time, which adds a whole other level of complexity to the situation. Evaluate your geographical location and company history to see where your restaurant(s) may have increased risk, and start there.

Better Safe than Sorry

Now that you've identified your biggest threats, it's time to develop your disaster preparedness plan. Keep in mind you may need to go through this exercise more than once if you have restaurants that face different threats. Categories to consider are:

- **Safety:** Do you have a first-aid kit and fire extinguisher onsite? Has an exit plan been established?
- **Communications:** Does your team know who to contact within your company for different emergency situations? Have you identified a secondary contact in case the primary is unable to fulfill his/her duties or needs to tend to personal matters? Who are the primary suppliers you need to contact (insurance provider, utility company, electrician, plumber, glass services, restoration company, etc.)?
- **Tools:** Is there a scenario where a special tool or key will be needed? Would it be helpful to have a battery-powered flashlight and weather radio onsite?
- **Food:** Do you have water and non-perishable food available in the event your staff or customers can't leave the restaurant?
- **Family:** What is the procedure for getting in touch with loved ones who may have also been affected or who need updates on the emergency at hand?

Practice Makes Perfect

After all of your details are in place, you must practice the plan with each new employee who joins the team. Practice often enough so that every employee feels comfortable with the process and will take potential emergencies seriously. Make sure all prepared information is readily available and equipment and tools are conveniently located for quick use. Additionally, as you train and practice, be aware of whether any of the information needs to be updated. If you've remodeled the store, changed insurance company or even had internal contact changes, be sure all of those updates are reflected in the disaster preparedness plan.

Emotions

Up to this point, we've talked about the technical aspects of preparing for an emergency, but we haven't yet addressed the emotional aspects. Everyone handles emergency situations differently, so it's important to discuss the different ways people might react so they can mentally prepare prior to an event. Being able to identify with their fight or flight instinct may allow them to shift from an impulsive reaction to a safer response. Additionally, it may be important to have options in place post-emergency for those who need some extra emotional support through the HR department or a therapist. Signs that there may be lasting emotional effects

may include significant changes in appetite or behavior, headaches, difficulty sleeping or even depression. Be on the lookout for these signs, as early detection will be key to a quick recovery.

Prevention

Having a disaster preparedness plan in place is vital, but remember that the best planning you can do is centered on prevention. When inspecting your buildings or installing equipment, talk to your vendors and ask if there are any upgrades or tweaks that need to be made to prevent smoke, fire, mold or water damage in the future. What looks like a small issue today could turn into a dangerous and costly issue tomorrow.

If you'd like some additional support in creating your disaster preparedness plan, reach out to the equipment and restoration company you trust for help. Together, you can create a safer working environment for your team and minimize downtime if an emergency situation strikes.

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