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Nature’s Most Unpredictable Beasts

Vincent Yaeger

Tornadoes pose more danger than you may think

The tornadoes that stormed through Alabama in early 2012 tested the disaster management plans of businesses in the area. Taking the time to evaluate your disaster management plans now will ensure your restaurants will suffer the least amount of loss and closure when severe weather strikes.

Real Danger

Think you’re immune from the threat of tornadoes? Consider these tornado myths:

- Areas around water and in the mountains are safe. Actually, no terrain is completely safe from a tornado. They travel right over water and have been tracked at altitudes in excess of 10,000 feet.
- The low pressure of a tornado (and a hurricane) will cause a building to explode. It is the debris and winds that destroy buildings; once the building envelope is compromised (i.e., doors or windows give way), the wind and debris will do the rest.
- You should crack the windows to equalize the pressure. See the previous myth; once you allow the winds in, there is no turning back.

More than 800 tornadoes occur across the United States every year. Though tornadoes occur all over the planet (except Antarctica), no area is as prone as the United States. Tornadoes form more often in the spring and summer months, usually between the hours of 3 and 9 p.m., but they can occur any time, day or night.

A tornado’s wind speeds can reach up to 300 miles per hour, and its funnel can travel at speeds of 0 to 70 miles per hour. These beasts can come down to a pinpoint or cover an area in excess of a mile wide and can leave a path of destruction for more than 50 miles. To aggravate matters, they often don’t travel alone.

Tornadoes form within powerful thunderstorms. Often just before one forms, the winds may diminish and the atmosphere can become very still. Tornadoes will normally occur on the trailing side of the thunderstorm and can travel in any direction, although they usually move southwest to northwest.

Planning for the Worst

As with any disaster plan, you always need to plan ahead and have support and recovery elements in place. Ensure that everyone involved understands their responsibilities, and communicate constantly up and down the chain to keep everyone engaged.

If you attended the Disaster Management Workshop at RFMA 2012, you know the basic tenets of response: SSCCR, pronounced “score.”

- Safety – ensure the area and structure are safe and able to be entered
- Security – establish security at your restaurant; in a major disaster you may have to use GCs
- Communications – establish communications up and down the chain to get things done
- Coordination – take charge and drive the solution, coordinate your resources and actions

- Recovery – utilize your plan and teams to get conditions under control and returned to normal

If you didn't attend the workshop, the e-learning module will soon be available on the RFMA website.

Your plan should evolve from experiences of what has worked and what has not in the past. Include communication from your corporate office down to the restaurant crew.

Responsibilities should be clearly delineated and understood before disaster strikes. As the facilities manager, you should drive the problem to get to a stable state, where the site is under control and you can start implementing your plan to restore the restaurant to operation. This plan needs to be communicated to all involved, and be open to feedback. If the worst happens, things will be very confusing at ground level, so you must rely on your corporate support to give you recommendations and advice in regard to the big picture.

After the disaster, take plenty of photos and forward these up the chain of command, along with recommendations and other issues that can't quite translate through pictures. That way, decisions can be made at proper levels about the best way to proceed.

Throughout the process, remember that your objective is to restore the restaurant to operation. However, you should at no time take unnecessary risks to the structure and personnel; nothing will be gained if the situation is aggravated by your actions, someone is injured or worse.

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