Securing Disaster Recovery Objectives with Effective Communications

By CINTA PUTRA

Mitigation. Preparedness. Response. Recovery.

These four tenants of comprehensive emergency management are now repeated so frequently in the fields of disaster recovery and business continuity that they practically form a sacred mantra.

Unfortunately, simple repetition of this mantra is unlikely to invoke some mystical potential for organizational readiness. Mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery will fall short of their "comprehensive" goal unless they are interconnected and unified. The most critical tool for this is communication.

According to FEMA's "Emergency Management Guide for Business and Industry," communication is essential to any business operation, and is one of the core operational considerations of emergency management. It is the glue that binds the processes and procedures established by an organization to protect their resources and hasten a return to normalcy in the wake of a crisis or disaster.

Firms that fail to establish solid communication systems as part of their emergency planning haven't finished their planning – and have a lot to lose. While human loss is the gravest of possible consequences, firms may also suffer a loss of production or distribution facilities, inventory, data, customer base, market value, or their valuable reputation. When avoiding crisis may not be entirely possible, a communications plan is essential to minimizing the time and resources lost.

Considering an Emergency Communication System

Continuity planners and DR professionals must first consider the multitude of functions they may need to perform in an emergency and how an emergency communication system can support them during both short and long-term disruptions. Emergency communications may be asked to:

- Alert employees or the community of an incident
- Disseminate information to customers, partners, or vendors
- Contact and communicate with emergency responders
- Conduct evacuation of or account for personnel
- Communicate with employees' families
- Activate and operate an emergency operations center (EOC)
- Manage and coordinate a crisis response
- Shut down facilities or interrupt production
- Coordinate the restoration of normal operations

Managers should continue their analysis of emergency communications with an examination of their firm's unique critical tasks – evaluating their communication needs by asking who, what, and when. Who will need to communicate in an emergency, what will be communicated, and when will the system be utilized? An emergency communications system that is suitable for everyday use has a natural advantage over another that is emergency-only. Daily use of a communications platform breeds employee familiarity and confidence in the system. A crisis is obviously not the best time for an employee to utilize a communications platform for the first time – no matter how operator friendly it professes to be.

Scenario analysis can be an exceptionally useful tool for answering the questions of who, what, and when. Emergency managers should first examine actual events during which their organization suffered from exposure or business interruptions. The objective is to evaluate how an emergency communication system could have been utilized to minimize risks to the firm and its employees. A natural extension of this exercise is to then brainstorm a multitude of additional risk scenarios and apply "who, what, and when" to those as well. The result should be a clear, understandable picture of how an emergency communications system would truly benefit your organization in crisis.

Technologies on the Market

Today's automated systems are increasingly advanced and capable of equipping a business with the ability to minimize business interruption and loss. Originally created as a means to provide just emergency notifications, these technologies also are becoming a dynamic daily communications tool for some organizations.

Using a notification system to strengthen communication lines with employees, suppliers, vendors, and customers before an event provides firms with invaluable disaster mitigation and preparation. When a business interruption does occur, the system is then ideally suited to assist in response and recovery.

In a crisis, notification systems are ideally suited for operational tasks such as:

- Alerting affected employees and leaders
- Adjusting supply chains
- Relaying instructions to vendors and suppliers
- Re-routing or scheduling staff
- Confirming the location or safety of employees
- Keeping senior management informed
- Disseminating the operational status of company facilities
- Notifying employees when they can return to work

The Risk: Florida

In a period of just five weeks in 2004, many Florida corporations and small businesses faced three of the five costliest hurricanes in history. According to a report prepared by Fitch Ratings Inc., a Chicago-based bond rating firm, combined losses from the hurricanes could total between $21-$26 billion. These figures reflect damage and insurable loss, and may not even begin to capture the many other dynamics of business interruption.

Florida businesses have had more practice with disaster management and business continuity than most. But regardless of location, there is a tremendous amount at stake for businesses that are unprepared to respond or recover from loss.

Physical destruction or damage to structures, production lines, and inventory are the obvious perils. Less easy to capture are the negative impacts on employee productivity, customer retention, and the confidence of vendors, partners, and customers. Preparation for disasters has made great strides in the last decade, yet many businesses that experience a disaster will still go out of business.

Technology in Use

One of the largest U.S. Internet service providers used a mass notification system to communicate during the Florida hurricanes. Company leadership used it to activate the company's EOC and instantly link members in conference calls; arrange critical meetings and decision making sessions; disseminate network status reports from the areas hardest hit by the storms; provide updates to service restoration progress; and disseminate updates on the hurricanes themselves – their strength, location, and expected arrival times. With this particular notification system, the company's messages were sent via multiple communication channels (including phone, e-mail and wireless devices) in order to reach the maximum number of recipients.

A major shipping company – one of the largest container carriers in the North Atlantic – was also heavily impacted by the hurricanes. Its customers rely on the timely and consistent delivery of goods, and so reliable communication is naturally a critical part of the shipping company's operations. It employed a mass notification system during each of the four hurricanes in 2004 to provide employees with frequent updates on the operational status of shipping terminals and instructions to access a disaster recovery hotline. Managers also used the system to conduct frequent conference calls and disseminate important changes to employee staffing levels.

Yet another Florida organization – a retirement community – utilized automated communications to warn its residents of the oncoming storms. The tool ensured preparedness among residents while providing the executive director an emergency system capable of reaching residents by nearly any communications path. Residents were able to confirm receipt of all sent messages using their touch-tone phones, and the system tracked delivery. In one particular transmission, more than 75 percent of the individuals contacted confirmed receipt. Like other companies employing such technologies, the community has now found that it uses their "crisis" communication system for daily applications, including notification of alarm testing and scheduled power outages.

The examples above illustrate the significant benefits organizations have seen from their application of emergency-ready communications. Integrating the communication capabilities of a mass notification system into an overall business continuity plan has resulted in both cost savings and cost avoidance for these firms. Time is money. Any company hoping to survive a significant business interruption must be able to get back on its feet more rapidly than its local competitors, or be able to minimize an interruption not suffered by similar firms.

Improvements in employee safety, security, and confidence may be less financially quantifiable, but each can also amount to efficiency gains for your company or organization. Finally, the ability to reinforce customer confidence and retention will go a long way toward ensuring that when the crisis has passed, and normal operations resume, there will still be a solid base of customers.

Implementing a reliable, effective communication system is a core element of emergency management that cannot afford to be poorly planned or executed. Even detailed continuity and disaster recovery plans are worthless if they are not translated into action. Communication is the key to both disseminating the plan to key individuals and employees and executing the plan in a crisis.

The best mass communications systems are powerful enough to meet a broad range of requirements and have become dynamic communication tools even in non-emergency applications. As more organizations realize cost, safety, and business continuity objectives from such technology, effective emergency communication tools will become an even more critical component of a holistic disaster recovery plan that truly achieves and integrates mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

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