

Sink or Swim

Planning ahead can keep operators afloat during a water disaster

IF YOUR RESTAURANT WERE SUDDENLY HIT WITH A MAJOR WATER DISASTER LIKE A BURST PIPE OR THE SEVERE FLOODING THAT THE MIDWEST EXPERIENCED, WOULD YOU BE PREPARED?

"Most restaurants haven't experienced a disaster, so most don't have a disaster plan," says Steven Grover, assistant director of the National Restaurant Association's technical services department. "Restaurants think of developing the plan after the disaster."

Plan for the worst

Restaurants aren't the only businesses failing to plan for a major disaster. The faculty and students at the University of Texas at Arlington recently conducted a study and found that only two-thirds of the companies surveyed had disaster recovery plans in place, and 40 percent of those with plans had never tested them to see whether they were effective.

The survey concluded that 43 percent of all businesses hit with a major disaster would never reopen, and 90 percent would be out of business within two years.

According to Elizabeth Sprinkel, acting executive director of the Insurance Research Council in Oak Brook, Illinois, very few businesses think they are at risk of experiencing a disaster. "We did a Small Business Attitude Monitor in which we surveyed businesses with two to 50 employees," Sprinkel says. "We found that they don't think it's going to happen to them."

Sprinkel says the survey results also found that more than 50 percent of businesses did not obtain insurance for disasters.

According to Karen Gahagan, director of information services for the Insurance Institute for Property Loss Reduction in Boston, restaurateurs need to have their environments assessed very carefully to determine what needs to be covered, especially in the event of significant water damage.

"A lot of restaurant owners think, 'Well, something might happen, so I'll get around to it.' By the time they get around to it, it's too late," Gahagan says.

Bailing out the business

Many businesses, including restaurants, were hit hard during the 1993 flooding in the Midwest.

Thom Sehnert, owner of Smoke House Market and Annie Gunn's Restaurant, experienced the Midwest flooding firsthand. The Chesterfield, Missouri, business was extensively damaged due to the flooding.

"We weren't prepared for the scope of the disaster," Sehnert says. "We had a disaster plan in place, but no one projected the flood would be as devastating as it was. While we had an outline, it wasn't applicable, because we were totally destroyed. We were out of business for seven months."

Sehnert adds, "The area we are in never flooded before. We got 13 feet of water. In most floods, the water will come and go. The water we had stayed two-and-a-half weeks, then went down very gradually. We were left with a cleanup that was incomprehensible."

Due to the tremendous support Sehnert received from the community, including more than 200 volunteers who helped fill sandbags in an unsuccessful effort to stave off the floodwaters, Sehnert decided to stay in the area and rebuild. He was one of more than 500 businesses that decided to rebuild.

The \$2 million restoration of the 4,400-square-foot market and restaurant, plus the construction of a 1,350-square-foot addition to the restaurant and a 2,800-square-foot addition to the market, has now given the business its 1936 pre-flood look and character, while totally modernizing the structure and systems.

"We have been very fortunate," he says. "Our sales have doubled."

To give back to the community that so generously helped the restaurant, Sehnert is now on the board of the St. Louis chapter of the Missouri Restaurant Association. He talks to other restaurant owners about his experience and how they can prepare for or avert disaster. "Even though they think it could never

BY CYNTHIA SCANLON



Daily donations of ice to Hurricane Andrew victims earned Red Lobster the nickname, "Red Lobster Red Cross."

backed up to their buildings to provide clean water during the flooding.

Another important consideration is how various aspects of the operation can be modified to make the best use of available water resources.

"And that would include menus, cleaning dishes and paper service if enough clean water is unavailable to do dishes," Grover says. "That's going to take preplanning. After the disaster hits, you're not going to be able to buy any of those things, because everybody else is going to be grabbing them."

Flood food

During the floods in the Midwest, certain foodstuffs that required a lot of water to prepare, such as rice and pasta, were not allowed to be cooked. So a comprehensive restaurant disaster plan should also include a disaster menu—and the simpler the fare, the better.

Fast food is sometimes uniquely suited to disaster situations, because of the ease and limited preparation such food takes, says Grover. Hamburgers and hot dogs, for instance, require no water to prepare.

"You can take them frozen and throw them on the grill," Grover says. "Each establishment must evaluate its own menu and determine what would be the easiest and most expedient foods to prepare in a disaster."

Keeping the important stuff above water

A burst water pipe or other water emergency could conceivably shut off your gas or electricity temporarily. Provisions should also be made for that.

"There's no one off-the-shelf disaster plan that works for every establishment," Grover says. "It has to be custom-fit to your particular restaurant based upon your menus. There are as many different disaster plans as you have establishments."

If your business records are on computer, make backup copies of all data, including software programs, and store

those tapes off-site with your computer data as well, so you will have something to show your insurance company.

Consider stockpiling clean supplies in a secure, sanitary location, possibly off-site. Check with your local health department to see whether special rules and regulations apply for storing of restaurant supplies.

Grover reminds restaurateurs to think about even small things in preparation for a water emergency. For instance, "If you switch from heat sanitizing to chemical sanitizing, your plan would require you to have enough chemical sanitizer to last for a period of time," he says.

Put the plan to the test

Once your plan is formulated, test it. "The plan must be tested in order for it to be viable," says Andy Marks, senior account executive for Chubb Services Corporation, a risk-management consulting firm in New York City specializing in business contingency planning. "It's a living document, and it needs to be updated and run through its paces."

Remember to include your employees in your disaster plan. Each employee should have specifically assigned responsibilities in the event of a disaster, and those responsibilities should be put in writing. "If someone is not available, you need to replicate their capabilities somehow," says Richard Luongo, assistant vice president of Chubb Services Corporation. "There needs to be flexibility in job functions, and all of this needs to be documented."

Luongo says a disaster plan can be tested by calling up employees at four o'clock in the morning and having them report to the office as though there were a real emergency. The proceedings should be videotaped.

"It's interesting to see how people react when they are truly stressed, and that's going to simulate what may happen if there's a real disaster," Luongo says. "You can then review the tape and fill in the missing pieces you didn't think about when you were relaxing in your office."



Smoke House Market and Annie Gunn's Restaurant in Chesterfield, Missouri, had to be rebuilt after the 1993 flood. The restored building appears below.



happen to them, I tell them not only can it happen, it does happen, and here's what it does to your life," he says.

Trial by twister

Companies with disaster plans usually fare better during inclement weather. In the early 1970s, a Red Lobster restaurant in Omaha, Nebraska, was severely damaged by a tornado. Dick Monroe, vice president of public relations for Red Lobster, says that disaster was the impetus for creating their corporate and storewide plans.

"We weren't looking at a crystal ball and saying, 'What if?'" Monroe says. "It was more like looking at the damage and saying, 'Why did we let that happen?'"

Red Lobster, a division of General Mills Restaurants, Inc., headquartered in Orlando, Florida, now has disaster plans for its corporate headquarters as well as all of its individual restaurants. The detailed plans are kept in procedure manuals and allow restaurants to begin handling a disaster long before corporate headquarters even knows about it.

Red Lobster facility people are ready at a moment's notice to fly anywhere and take control of the situation. "You can imagine some poor manager who's never experienced a disaster wondering where to start first," Monroe says. "The plans and facilities people take the burden off the manager. Rather than worrying about what decisions need to be made, the decisions have already been made in a calmer time.

"And when forecasts indicated that Florida might be hit by Hurricane Andrew," Monroe adds, "our people gathered up plywood and supplies. They were the first to get windows boarded up and things prepared. They were also first in after the hurricane went through to assess damage and start construction."

In addition to dealing with its own emergency, Red Lobster also trucked in 45,000 pounds of ice several times a

day to residents of the hurricane disaster. "We were there so quickly, they were calling us the Red Lobster Red Cross," Monroe says.

"The restaurant serves a vital community need during a disaster," says Grover. "Most people won't be able to prepare food, and people need to eat."

Disaster master plan

So what are some of the things that restaurant owners and operators need to think about when creating a disaster recovery plan and, more specifically, to protect themselves against a major water emergency?

To begin with, conduct a complete survey of your restaurant to determine which areas and services are vulnerable to loss. Check with your insurance agent to see what kind of coverage you'll need. Then create a contingency plan for each potential problem area of your business. In the event that you might be forced to leave your operation, ask yourself whether it would be possible to re-establish your restaurant on a temporary basis somewhere else.

Grover says restaurants also need to think about things such as: What to do if water is in short supply or deemed unsafe for drinking? Will there be access to bottled water? Can arrangements be made in advance to have water delivered to the restaurant?

Some restaurants in the Midwest had tanker trucks

Salvaging submerged equipment

Should your restaurant experience a water disaster, call your equipment vendors (names and numbers should be kept in a safe place off-site), and inform them of the event and the damage to your operation.

Equipment that has been damaged by a flood needs to be sprayed down with clean water and dried off immediately.

Restaurants that are dependent on wells should go through a disinfectant step if the well has been flooded, advises Grover.

Grover also stressed that the building itself must be evaluated before people are allowed back in. "Water can damage foundations and walls, and soil could be eroded under the building," he says. "There could be a lot of problems that are not readily apparent with the structure, so building evaluation should be part of the disaster plan."

Finding the silver lining

Some ingenious operators try to find the silver lining in the gray cloud hovering over their waterlogged restaurants.

Take, for instance, Bart's Bar & Grill, a popular restaurant in Chicago, which experienced a man-made disaster that could have drowned the business. In April of 1992, a hole was accidentally drilled through a piling, sending the

Chicago River roaring through transport tunnels and into the basements and buildings of nearby businesses.

"When the flood broke out, we lost all our lighting and half our food," says Sylvia Medryk, a waitress at the restaurant. "We were out for four days, but other businesses took a month to get up and running. Some had fish floating in their basements; others had a lot of problems cleaning up all the water."

Rather than close down, Gerd Huesken, the owner of the restaurant, propped up a sign outside his business that proclaimed "Cocktails by Candlelight"—and then put 15 candles throughout the restaurant.

"We had the bar lit up by candlelight, because people still wanted to stop somewhere and eat," Medryk says. "We served cold sandwiches and had quite a bit of business. In fact, we ran out of food."

Four days later, Bart's Bar & Grill was back to business as usual. ❖

Cynthia Scanlon writes for Restaurants USA from Mesa, Arizona.

Mopping up the Mess

Here are some guidelines from the association's technical services department to help operators re-establish a safe and sanitary foodservice environment after a water disaster:

Cleanup and rehabilitation should involve only adults (no minors). Be sure to take a supply of safe drinking water from a municipal source or a private well outside the flood area.

Be cautious when entering flooded areas of buildings. Confirm that the utility companies have shut off the electricity and gas to the facility. Do not handle any connected electrical cords or appliances if the current is still on. Get assistance before attempting to disconnect equipment or open breaker boxes in flooded rooms.

We recommend that you not attempt to restart any equipment that has been flooded without first consulting with your service professional or local utility company.

Because of the possibility of gas

leaks or other flammables, do not light matches or carry flame lanterns into enclosed rooms.

Until the floodwaters have completely receded and you are assured that sewage-disposal systems are functional, avoid flushing toilets or using other plumbing fixtures. Discharge from a malfunctioning sewage system can increase the physical hazard or make the facility cleanup more difficult.

After the floodwaters have receded, drain surface pools by ditching or pumping. Drain flooded rooms by natural drainage or by pumping. Wash or flush down walls and floors with clean water, during the drainage or pumping process.

As a final cleanup of walls, floors, cabinets, counters, unmovable equipment, etc., use plenty of detergent to remove the dirt and stains, followed by a disinfection step using half a cup of chlorinated laundry bleach per gallon of water.

During the clean-up operation of the

interior rooms, provide as much ventilation as possible. Open windows, doors or vents, or provide portable mechanical ventilation.

Any clothes, carpets, upholstered furniture or paper products should be discarded unless they can be completely cleaned and disinfected. Movable objects should be put outdoors to dry in the sunlight.

Some salvage agencies or companies are equipped to process contaminated material without endangering employees or eventual customers. Discarded clothing, cleaners, paper and food items should not be left accessible to unauthorized scavengers pending pickup.

Individuals involved in cleanup should make sure that all clothing and parts of the body that come into contact with floodwaters or water-damaged items are thoroughly washed immediately after the operation.

Operators are also advised to contact local and state health departments for further re-opening requirements.