

The Day of the Hurricane
(DISASTER PLANNING- The final chapter)

By Joseph Marion

This is the last of my three columns outlining all that went wrong with our disaster recovery plan when Hurricane Wilma hit our office. Next issue, we will return to our normal theme of the “Reseller Market” but the Publisher of Processor and I felt that by sharing the details of our experience, we might be able to help our readers avoid some of the pain we went through.

Two months have passed since power came back on and things have returned to “normal.” As we put our generators back into storage, we would also like to put out of our minds all the pain that we went through, but to not learn from our mistakes would be foolish. The Weather Bureau predicts that this severe weather pattern will persist for few years to come and we all better be prepared.

Power

Don’t assume anything. We assumed that fuel would always be there. After all, we live one hour from the Port of Miami, one of the largest fuel depots in the country. We learned the hard way that two weeks without fuel will have a rippling effect on the infrastructure. For example, the generator at the remote office of the telephone company which services us ran out of gas and the employees who were supposed to fuel the generators could not get to work. Our employees spent all morning waiting in line for gas and all night staying awake to feed our generators with the little gas we could find.

A Staged Approach

Have a flexible disaster recovery plan with several “stages.” Here is what we have done:

Stage One, Battery Power- We have installed enough battery power to keep all of our mission critical equipment up and running for 24 hours. That will give us enough time to evaluate the extent of the disaster and decide whether to go to Stage 2 or directly to Stage 3.

Stage Two, Generators- We have purchased a few generators and containers to store enough gasoline to keep us running for another 48 hours and to put fuel in our employees’ cars. Remember to purchase generators that are designed for sensitive electronic equipment. For small offices I highly recommend the super quiet Honda EU3000 which is equipped with an inverter to generate a very clean power and can be joined in parallel for even more power.

Stage Three, Alternate Facility-We have set up a backup facility in another state which is identical to our primary facility. Should our disaster look like it will last longer than 48 hours, we will switch our operations to that location. We have chosen 48 hours even

though we can run for 72 hours to give us some extra time should things go wrong. And we found out last time what can go wrong, will go wrong! We also chose 48 hours because we found out that the stress, wear and tear on our employees got overwhelming keeping us up and running on generators for a longer period of time. Remember, in the case of a disaster, they are dealing with their own problems at home.

Data Center

As I stated, we have equipped our back up data center with equipment and software which is identical to our primary facility. We have measured the bandwidth our Internet requires at our primary site and even duplicated that at our backup site. You might have all the equipment you need, but you will fall short if your internet connection is not up to speed.

We have also set up procedures with the company that hosts our Domain Name Server (DNS) to “point” our URL (www.ascdi.com) to the backup location within 24 hours, if need be. This way it will be transparent to our customers that they are accessing our web site on different servers.

Personnel

We learned a lot about employees during a disaster. A disaster does not just hit the Company, but its employees as well. While you might have the greatest disaster recovery plan in the world, you must also keep in mind that your employees are dealing with their own issues too. Employees will first deal with disasters at home before they focus on their work. So don't assume that there will be anyone around or able to “get to the office” after a disaster to implement your plan, but rather implement your plan BEFORE the disaster strikes. And test it out several times during the year.

Hosted Services

For many, a hosted data center (or back-up data center) is the solution. There are many companies who can provide you with that type of service including ASCDI U.S. Members ITGL (www.itgel.net), Abacus Solutions (www.abacusllc.com), and IPS of Germany.

The very nature of a disaster is its' unpredictability. No plan is perfect so you need to be ready to modify your plan during a disaster as needed. Don't lock yourself into a plan that is not working, as we did.

It is a new year now and the memories of the Hurricane are fading like a bad dream for some. For me, it will be hard for me to forget the lessons learned from the day of the Hurricane.