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How We Remained Open During Hurricane Sandy And Its Aftermath

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Wet dry wall is removed from an art gallery in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York following Hurricane Sandy. Photographer: Katya Kazakina/Bloomberg

Many businesses have elaborate and lengthy plans to deal with an emergency or casualty. For our New York City-based law firm, we have a three-step plan. Our plan is so simple we don't even have to document it. While larger operations need a formalized, written plan, I believe for most small business owners our process will work.

In fact, I know that this plan works as our law firm remained open during one of the worst disasters to ever strike New York City. We have many clients from outside the New York City area who were unaffected by the storm. They contacted us and wanted a response. I'm proud to write that we answered almost every telephone call, email, and fax, covered every scheduled case and even managed to get hired on a few new matters. All this while our building was closed for a week, mass transit was shut down, and most of our staff were without power and displaced from their homes.

Caveat: I want to first define what I mean by the word "open." I do not mean fully operational. In fact, I don't even mean that you could come to our office. Our building was closed and without power for one week following the storm. Instead, what I mean by "open" is able to answer and respond to calls, emails, and faxes, and ensure that all urgent work is covered. One person cannot replace the work of seven employees and roughly 25 of counsel attorneys. But one person can keep you treading water so that immediate needs are handled.

With the understanding that this process does not prevent business interruption or loss of revenue, here are the three steps:

Step 1: The remote employee

You need one key person who works remotely in a location far from your business's location. Of course, he or she better be highly competent and well versed in all facets of your business. In our case, our office manager, Rosemarie (who works from her home office in Jacksonville, Florida) is an A-player.

The rationale behind step one is obvious. When an area is hit with a disaster, your staff is rendered virtually useless. They are likely home-bound without electricity, Wi-Fi, and possibly even

cell phone service. Further, your employees are dealing with more pressing issues like protecting themselves, their family, and their home immediately before and during the emergency, and then dealing with food, gas, lack of hot water, and lack of power during its aftermath.

With a remote employee, your business has someone who is not impacted by the casualty and who can focus on keeping the business up and running by handling sales, operations, and customer service issues. As a side benefit, she could also monitor the television for traffic court closures and mass transit information, and update us with storm news.

Step 2: VOIP telephones

Get a VOIP telephone system. This internet-based system allows anyone with internet access and one of our telephones to answer our phone calls anywhere in the world. Plus, it is less expensive than maintaining landlines. To the customer, it appears that his or her call is being answered at the business location. Despite massive power outages, record flooding and hurricane-speed winds, Rosemarie answered almost every call that came in while the rest of our crew was dealing with the disaster.

Step 3: Cloud-based systems

The final step is having all your operations in the cloud. We use Gmail, Google calendar, and Google documents. It is free and works great. For faxes, we pay a small monthly fee to get them emailed to us. Finally, our database is cloud-based. This application handles sales, contact management, calendars, billing, and operations. Our application is custom-built but there are many off-the-shelf cloud solutions (a modern day oxymoron) that do the trick. With the cloud-based systems, most of our work can be done anywhere that has internet access.

While imperfect, if you implement these three steps, you can minimize interruption to your business and be in a much better position once the storm passes.

Matthew Weiss is an admitted business learning junkie. He reads only business books and magazines (well almost only) and attends dozens of business workshops, keynotes and panel discussions each year. In this blog, he provides quality, take-home value from "all of the above" and shares his personal thoughts and experiences. Weiss is a New York traffic lawyer and sole owner of Weiss & Associates, PC, a boutique law firm specializing in vehicle and traffic matters throughout New York State. He is also the Global Learning Chair for the Entrepreneurs' Organization. He can be reached at mjweiss@888redlight.com (<mailto:mjweiss@888redlight.com>).



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Raising taxes hundreds of billions will be good. I like that idea. Cause Washington won't waste that money. They'll spend it wisely. We should give them as much money as possible.

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Taxing assets is socialism. Memo. Socialism doesn't work.

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Tax religious organizations when all the donations they get have already been taxed? Then when they are paying taxes to the government, where is the money going to come from to support the outreach...

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Got to have a budget so you know what you're spending and where you can cut. Haven't had a budget in 4 years. Entitlements is the third rail and since everyone is always running for re-election...

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