



Chapter VII: Crisis Communications

Overview

Traditional channels of communication are almost always challenged following a major disaster due to the disruption of telecommunications and transportation systems. But they can also become conflicted by a multitude of urgent and conflicting messages. Businesses may struggle to get in touch with their employees, their vendors, and their customers. A disaster can introduce a degree of uncertainty into what would otherwise be routine communications. For example, many businesses may feel a need to communicate their “closed” status, but they could be reluctant to broadcast that message too widely so as not to damage their “brand.” Also, businesses don’t always know which information sources are credible or trustworthy to get accurate information. Rumors often spread quickly in this type of environment, which can greatly impede the recovery of businesses and industry.

For example, if a business hears from a familiar, but unofficial source (like a neighboring business) that the power will not be restored for four to six weeks, the business may make deleterious decisions when the truth could be far more positive. Therefore, it is vital for the business community to have active communication channels to local officials and from local officials.

The EDO can serve a critical role in facilitating that communication. Their engagement can assist businesses in communicating their needs/issues to local officials, provide platforms to announce restoration status, and in receiving the most current and accurate recovery information. This way, the EDO can serve as an “independent” and credible source for information to provide the local marketplace with the most accurate information from which businesses can make better decisions.

Multiple Audiences in Crisis Communication

Communicating with the Business Community

The key role of a lead organization in economic recovery is to address the following communication needs of business and industry following a major incident:

Listening to businesses to understand their needs in order to:

- Help connect businesses with available resources and services providers
- Understand the need to work with all local partners to persuade decision-makers at the local, state and federal level of any needed additional resources to meet local business needs



- Quickly disseminate relevant information to businesses regarding available resources, and connect them to service providers who can help with cleanup, financing, business counsel, and rebuilding efforts.

Communicating with Stakeholders at the Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

Chambers of commerce and/or economic development organizations (EDO) should make sure they have a senior staff member serve at the local area's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to facilitate communication and dispel rumors and misinformation among the business community. The EOC functions as the central location for coordinating and carrying out the emergency planning, training, and response and recovery efforts of the local jurisdiction. The EOC helps to ensure the continuity of government operations in the event of a crisis. In a case where the EOC is fully activated by a major incident, it will include the co-location of representatives of various municipal departments, emergency responders, state and federal agencies, and non-profit and faith-based organizations.

Communication regarding local business damages and what they need to recover is an important function that the chamber or EDO representative can play at the EOC. This representative can learn about available federal and state resources that may be available to local businesses and help facilitate this communication in the days and weeks following a disaster. This position of business and industry representation at the EOC should be established well before a major crisis. It is unrealistic to assume in the chaotic environment following a disaster that the local chamber will be automatically invited to participate.

Communicating with the Media

In addition to communicating with the business community, the lead economic development organization or chamber of commerce, along with its partners, must develop a communications strategy for dealing with the media, before a community experiences a major crisis. Depending on the magnitude of the disaster and the competition for news coverage, the media will be seeking to fill space in their 24/7 news cycle with details on your community's disaster. Is your community prepared to handle that type of attention from regional, national and global media outlets?

With the rise in 24-hour cable programming, online news and blogs, communities are struggling to communicate at the speed and demand of media outlets to deal with the public's insatiable appetite for content. If a spokesperson for the business community fails to respond to the media's interest in a comment about a crisis, then the media will turn to an alternative source. Inevitably, negative messages about the business environment and the recovery process will be brought to light in this process. EDOs must maintain an active effort with their local officials to maintain a "unity of communication" on messaging. Those messages must be factually accurate and unambiguous recovery information to provide a clear contrast with the propensity for sensationalism.

Communicating with the State and Federal Government

While the EOC will be heavily staffed with local, state, and federal emergency management officials, there is often a need to communicate regularly with economic development-focused agencies. These officials at the state and federal levels can be very helpful in guiding EDOs to available resources, funding, and help them



inform future recovery actions. Also, there will likely be a steady demand for impact information *from* the state and federal level as they evaluate their need to engage and prioritize the delivery of recovery assistance.

In addition, necessity after a major disaster is maintaining regular and active communication with state legislators and the communities Congressional offices. Keeping these representatives well informed of the recovery challenges and opportunities can be very helpful in engaging them as advocates on your behalf. In addition, by being well informed about the recovery progress they can, in turn, make more informed decisions and recommendations to support agency actions, supplemental appropriations, and legislated waivers for existing requirements.

Emergency Communications Checklist

A checklist created by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) can be used by both economic development organizations and businesses to formulate an emergency communications plan. Though many of the items on the checklist can seem obvious, in crisis, having a plan with complete information can save time and cost – and reputation.

Access the SBA Emergency Communications Checklist in [Resource Appendix 12](#) or at <http://www2.agilityrecovery.com/assets/SBA/emercommsba.pdf>

Creating a Communication Strategy / Plan Before a Crisis

Regardless of the nature and severity of the disaster, a key responsibility of any economic development organization playing a lead recovery role is to develop a crisis communication strategy that will address the following factors:

- **Communication between economic recovery partner organizations and businesses.** A key problem identified in many disaster-impacted communities is the difficulty in communicating with affected businesses, particularly those that temporarily relocate out of the area. Partners in economic recovery such as local chambers and EDOs can't help the business community recover if they cannot communicate with each other. Having a plan in place can help these partners reconnect with their member businesses, meet their needs, and work to ensure that they don't relocate permanently.
- **Communication between local government/disaster response agencies and the business community.** The business community needs to know the status of recovery efforts; how to access assistance; and what decisions are being made at the state and federal levels that will affect them. Inaccurate information can spread quickly through the business community and harm confidence in recovery efforts. Businesses need clear and accurate information from trusted sources.
- **Public relations or image considerations.** The community will want to influence its image as perceived by external audiences so that its economic recovery is not jeopardized by incorrect or negative perceptions. Simultaneously, the community also may want to communicate to those in a position to



provide assistance – such as state and federal governments – that such help is needed. This can be particularly challenging when tourism is a major industry for the community.

- **Potential conflicts among, and capacity of, economic recovery partner organizations.** Economic recovery partners must ensure that the needs of their business constituents are being met in the time of a crisis. Local communities often have multiple economic development organizations and chambers of commerce, which may or may not have a history of working closely together with their business networks. In a crisis, these relationships with each other can become further strained. Advance planning to discuss and divide up roles and responsibilities among partnering organizations – who will do what, with whom, how and when - will go a long way in ensuring that no one group is overwhelmed with recovery work. Backup plans should be in place in case one or more of the partner organizations is directly impacted by the crisis, and unable to fulfill its role.

Case Study: EDO Role in Post-Disaster Communication in Polk County, FL

The Central Florida Development Council (CFDC), Polk County's Economic Development Organization (EDO), understood that communication was crucial when Polk County was struck by a series of three hurricanes in 2004/05. The Polk County Emergency Management office released a daily news flier in English and Spanish on general community recovery, and the CFDC in partnership with the county's 13 chambers of commerce provided needed information for the business community. CFDC updated its website homepage on a daily basis to provide updates on recovery information needed by local businesses.

Updates included a list of vacant space for temporary needs, a list of licensed contractors within the region, and business recovery resources such as capital and technical assistance programs. The list of licensed contractors was especially valuable, to avoid scams by unlicensed contractors taking advantage of the disaster. The CFDC also provided hard copies of the list to each of the 13 chambers to distribute through their own business networks to make sure the information was distributed despite power outages.

CFDC also utilized local media to communicate about the locations of economic recovery meetings and services available to local businesses. CFDC spent approximately \$15,000 on several newspaper ads in the local newspaper.. Although expensive, this was crucial in reaching businesses without power and internet access.

To learn more of Polk County's story, you can read the full case study in the [Case Study Appendix 2](#).

Maintaining Open Communication Channels

Local government will make emergency management decisions that will have a direct consequence on local businesses. Emergency management plans, prepared far in advance of a major catastrophe, will be launched, which are likely to discuss issues such as business reentry, access to property, a phased approach to power restoration, etc. which impact local businesses' ability to respond and recover. Changes to or awareness of these emergency response plans should occur before a disaster impacts the community.



Before the Disaster: Establishing a Place at the Table

EDOs can serve as the link between government-led emergency management and the business community, but channels of communication must be established long before disaster strikes. To gain a seat at the table, EDOs and chambers of commerce need to be regarded as a valuable communication link to local businesses by making sure they regularly communicate with their network and provide value-added services day-in and day-out. In a disaster, businesses will first approach organizations they are confident they can rely on for timely and credible response and recovery information.

The community's lead EDO or chamber should ensure that either a staff member or a representative from the business community participates in emergency preparation and planning activities, particularly in close communication with the local area's Office of Emergency Management. This individual should be a member of the EDO's Crisis Communications team. The local jurisdiction's emergency manager is responsible for the creating the area's emergency management plans and for the key decisions which have direct impacts on the business community after a disaster.

Economic development representation enables the business community to have a voice in the emergency planning process. This can include playing a valuable communication role in discussing those plans with the business community as well as sharing feedback with the emergency manager on how their crisis plans might impact individual businesses and their ability to respond and recover. The EDO can also advocate for policies that recognize business concerns such as reentry into a disaster-impacted community, priorities for utility restoration, and services to the business community to enable business operations to resume quickly.

The most prepared States have a structure in place at the state and local levels that enables industry and business input at the emergency management table. States such as Florida, South Carolina and Louisiana have established a state-level emergency support function (ESF) for business and industry to enable greater coordination and planning between different government agencies, the private sector and other non-profits. These ESF teams are also established at the local level, which enables them to receive FEMA funds for planning, and ensures that your business representative is included in the community's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in the event of a disaster.

For those states that have not established a state-level ESF structure that is mirrored at the local level, consider advocating for a 'business and industry' ESF structure to be established that will help ensure the business community is appropriately involved in disaster response and recovery.

After a Disaster

Economic development organizations provide key links to inform local government officials about the needs of business and industry, and can advocate for recovery resources and services where there may be gaps. This includes resources in cleanup, financing, business counseling, and rebuilding. The target audiences are those in a



position to provide additional assistance beyond the private sector and insurance – primarily, the state’s political leadership and the federal government.

Messages should communicate the disaster’s economic impact (quantifiably, to the extent possible); convey any plans the community has made for economic recovery; and request specific assistance from the appropriate agency(ies).

It is recommended that the community incorporate information from the following two efforts in their communication strategy:

- **Use a post-disaster economic impact analysis.** An independent, third-party assessment of the disaster’s economic consequences will support the community’s efforts to secure resources from state and federal governments. For example, Galveston, Texas, produced a six-page recovery report one month after Hurricane Ike, which included impacts to the community; an economic climate profile (pre- and post-storm); major initiatives taken after the storm; and issues to address going forward. The State of Louisiana and GNO, Inc. have performed economic impact studies to quantify the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill as well as the moratorium imposed by the Federal Government after the spill. For more information, see the chapter in this toolkit on conducting a post-disaster economic impact study.
- **Determine which local and state departments are taking the lead on different recovery issues.** Don’t assume that communicating with one agency will provide the most comprehensive or accurate information on how funds will be used for economic and business recovery purposes. This is where it pays to build relationships in advance of a disaster with state and federal officials who can provide advice and resources.

Providing Timely Information and Dispelling Rumors

Providing timely and accurate information from a credible source to business and industry will help to dispel rumors and misinformation that can be harmful to the business community following a major event.

Before a Disaster: Establish a Crisis Communication Plan with a Process for Internal and External Communication

It is recommended that economic development organizations or chambers create a crisis communications plan with communication strategies that are developed ahead of time to anticipate problems. This plan helps the organization to be better prepared to communicate effectively in the event of a major crisis. The plan should consider multiple audiences to communicate with – both internal and external members of the community - and the valuable messages to consider communicating with different audience members.

EDOs should identify a system for communicating with staff after a disaster as part of their business continuity planning effort. They should also be concerned about the perception of their community after a disaster by what the local, regional and national media communicate to their audience. EDOs and chambers can craft a press release in advance to be used and updated in the case of a major incident.



Peggy Bendel of Bendel Communications International, a globally recognized leader in crisis communication and media training, has outlined what should be included in that plan. See the text box below.

Four Essential Steps for Creating Your Crisis Communications Plan

Step 1: Designate the Key Members of Your Crisis Communications Team – and Their Backups. This includes a primary spokesperson, a secondary spokesperson, a technical expert, and a chief communications or public relations officer.

Step 2: Brainstorm “What-ifs?” Be Creative – and Pessimistic! Explore all aspects that might precipitate a crisis, including your geographic area, political climate, security issues, financial concerns, weather, logistical issues, health considerations, etc.

Step 3: Determine Who You Will Need to Contact in Various Crises, and Gather Their Contact Details. It is important to have a contact list of those who play a critical function either internally or externally for your organization (employees, vendors, clients, and key local officials). Make sure to have ALL of their home and office contact details so you can communicate with them even if the power is out, and it’s a Sunday or a holiday weekend.

Step 4: Update Your Plan, Frequently! Review your plan at least once year, particularly the ‘what-if’ scenarios, the crisis communications team roster, and contact list.

Source: Bendel, P. (2012). *Four Essential Steps for Creating Your Crisis Communications Plan. It’s a Crisis! NOW What?* Tucson, AZ: Sutherland House Publishing (pp. 33 – 46).

Establish a Process for Internal Communication

Economic recovery partner organizations must themselves be prepared to communicate in a disaster situation. At a minimum, they should have:

- A system in place for backing up key office files and data, and a method for accessing that information in different crisis scenarios. It may be valuable to have the backup located in a secure location in the “cloud,” or at a minimum offsite (and out of harm’s way in areas that are subject to regular incidents such as hurricanes, floods or tornados).
- Updated staff contact information, including nights/weekend contact details, and a system in place for communicating with staff after a disaster.
- Current contact information for business clients – ideally, the name(s) and contact information of one or several key executives who would be the main contact for business recovery issues in a post-disaster situation.

This is important not just for major employers, but also for small businesses and cultural, tourism and other relevant nonprofit organizations. Partners in economic recovery may want to consider sharing this information with the lead economic recovery organization so that a central contact database can be created.



Establish a Process for External Communication

Economic development organizations and chambers of commerce should also determine how they will communicate with external partners such as the media in the event of a crisis. The plan should designate who serves as the primary and secondary spokesperson, what to consider sharing and what to avoid. Spokespersons should be media-trained, on camera! Doing this well in advance of a crisis helps the organization to be better prepared to communicate during one. See below for further ideas for what to include in your crisis communication plan as it relates to external communication.

Case Study: Joplin Internal Communications

Rob O'Brian, president of the Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce, noted that having a business continuity plan for his chamber was an important tool after Joplin was struck by an EF-5 tornado, the most powerful ever to hit the US. The plan included methods for effectively communicating with internal staff members even when phone and internet lines were down. The chamber's plan designated emergency meeting locations and used SMS text messaging . It also had on file the cell phone numbers of key local business owners.

For more on Joplin, see [Case Study Appendix 1](#).

For more information on efforts to prepare your organization and the local business community for a major disaster, see the Disaster Preparation chapter in this toolkit.

Acknowledge Reality!

If a weather event such as a tornado or hurricane is clearly on its way, EDOs should acknowledge it through all communication channels (social media, email, website, phone recordings, TV, radio). Messages should acknowledge the nature of the disaster, mention any factual information such as potential areas of impact and if possible, provide a time for the next update. The message does not need to be lengthy but should be positive. This is especially important if the EDO communicates with tourists and visitors. For example, Branson, Missouri's Convention and Visitors Bureau posted the following message on its Facebook page after an EF-2 tornado hit on February 29, 2012:

Good morning fans. We experienced some strong storms early this morning and did sustain some damage in Branson and surrounding areas. Thankfully, we received ample warning and have no reported fatalities. We have already been overwhelmed with the outpouring of support from local and regional agencies. Cleanup will start in the morning and we look forward to seeing you here in 2012 to celebrate our Centennial year!



On October 28, 2012, Atlantic City, New Jersey's 12 casinos had evacuated in advance of Hurricane Sandy. One day after the storm hit, the Atlantic City Tourism District posted the following message on Facebook with a photo and a link on Twitter:

STATEMENT ON THE CONDITION OF THE ATLANTIC CITY BOARDWALK

By Atlantic City New Jersey (Notes) on Tuesday, October 30, 2012 at 8:03pm

The entire oceanfront Boardwalk in front of the Atlantic City casinos is undamaged with all dunes and lights intact. There is minimal-to-no visible damage to casinos and other businesses fronting the Boardwalk along the ocean.

The Atlantic City Boardwalk that was washed out by Hurricane Sandy is an area limited to the Boardwalk fronting the Absecon Inlet only. That small section of the Boardwalk is located in South Inlet, a prominent residential section of Atlantic City. It is a small stretch of Boardwalk that is being shown in video footage and photos.

Sometimes it is not possible to provide all available information to the media. It is acceptable to withhold information for reasons such as public safety or the potential for a criminal investigation. However, presenting factual information as soon as it is known helps avoid the spread of inaccurate information. Ideally there will be one official source of information on these essentials, usually the Emergency Manager.

A Note about Tourists

When a disaster occurs without notice, tourists already in the area need information about local conditions and where to find help – for example, whether the airport is open and flights are departing. If roads are closed or transportation is compromised in other ways, visitors need information and help to determine how they'll get home, or whether they can continue with a planned trip to the community. Any updates should note the availability of accommodations, transportation links, and open attractions and other resources and services needed by tourists. This information will normally be provided through the official tourism promotion organization, Convention and Visitors Bureau or Chamber, if tourism marketing is one of their functions. All accommodation properties should be informed of these details as well, and in turn, will apprise the tourism promotion organization of their status and ability to care for their guests.

Before Hurricane Isaac struck in August 2012, the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau created a webpage to provide tourists and tourism stakeholders with updated information. It also included the announcement on its Facebook profile, and invited partners to post updates there about their status. It's important that such information be optimized for viewing on mobile devices, not just computers.



Case Study: Coordinated Communication in Cedar Rapids for Flood Recovery

The recovery effort after the 2008 flood in Cedar Rapids, IA could have been severely hampered because of damage to the communication channels. Phone lines and internet were down, and the high volume of traffic caused cell towers to become overloaded. Although mass media was an effective tool for evacuating the community, it was difficult to use during recovery due to the many different programs and organizations running simultaneously. Resources were not being used efficiently and different groups would be unknowingly handling the same tasks.

To solve the communication issue, representatives from different programs and government organizations established the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Through the center, tasks could be divided and assigned more efficiently. Because Priority One, a regional economic development organization, and the Chamber of Commerce were invited to have a seat in the EOC, communication between the public and private sector was fluid—Priority One and the chamber could communicate information it learned directly from its business clients to the EOC and vice versa.

A week after the flooding, the city manager of Cedar Rapids also created the Recovery and Reinvestment Coordinating Team (RRCT) to facilitate collaboration between programs. The RRCT included the chamber, local non-profits, arts and cultural groups, schools, organized labor, landlords, the Downtown District, local government, and neighborhoods. Meeting once a week, the RRCT offered a unified response to issues caused by the flood. Some of the RRCT's accomplishments included obtaining grants, allocating CDBG funding, and collaborating with the Army Corp of Engineers on flood mitigation efforts.

To learn more of Cedar Rapids' story, you can read the full case study in [Case Study Appendix 3](#).

Unified Response in Communicating

In a disaster, consistent and accurate messaging from authorities builds confidence among community residents and business owners that the situation is being handled effectively. EDOs and chambers play a role in this process on several levels. As discussed above, they relay information from community leadership to businesses, and serve as a conduit from businesses to the government leadership. They also make sure they coordinate these communication needs with other business intermediaries so that there is a unified front in communicating and there is efficiency in getting out critical information.

Determine Organizational Roles for Communicating

In advance of a disaster, economic development organizations, chambers and other community partners for business and industry should convene in order to discuss how they would coordinate communication with the local business community in the event of a crisis. Each group often has their network of businesses that they regularly work and communicate with. All of these groups will play an important role after a major crisis in



disseminating disaster response and recovery information to business constituents through their established networks. While there are likely to be overlaps in business networks, there is also a constituency of businesses that are not represented. By engaging these community partners in your disaster preparedness efforts, you are encouraging communication and outreach to the broadest possible range of local businesses in the event of a disaster.

It is recommended that this group either establishes a crisis communication plan for the business community or seeks to influence such a plan created by the local jurisdiction (often through the emergency manager). It should indicate which economic development organization within the community should take the lead in coordinating communications with local businesses after a disaster.

In the case of Garner, NC (near Raleigh), the city has developed a crisis communication plan whereby it has established that the economic development director serve on the city's crisis communications team in the event of a major incident. While a city may seek to naturally turn to its economic development director for this communication role, the local government can also designate the local chamber of commerce, who may be the area's recognized business leader. Following major flooding in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 2008, the city established a Recovery and Reinvestment Coordinating Team (RRCT), whereby it invited the local chamber's executive director to serve on the team and regularly meet with other community leaders. See the Cedar Rapids text box for more information.

The designated organization playing a key communication role should be recognized as the lead by both local government and among the partners. The lead organization's role is to:

- Facilitate the flow of correct information to businesses
- Coordinate concerted outreach to reconnect with businesses and identify at-risk companies
- Build relationships with and maintain current contact information for economic recovery partner organizations, as well as city, county, state and federal partners
- Coordinate post-disaster media and political strategies.

Establishing a Business Emergency Operations Center or Network

Background

A Business Emergency Operations Center (BEOC) facilitates communication with businesses and industries, as well as owners and operators of critical infrastructures and key resources, to enhance emergency management efforts. BEOC supports that relationship and coordinating private sector involvement and support during a time of crisis. BEOCs work with businesses to improve their disaster preparedness; improve communication with business and industry before, during and after disaster events; rapidly develop sound economic-impact estimates to support decision making and requests for business assistance; coordinate response efforts to assist



businesses in their efforts to return to normal operations as quickly as possible; and help coordinate post disaster economic recovery.²⁶

Disasters often remind many stakeholders in the business community of the need to have an ability to improve the speed and connectedness of recovery communications. Several states operate BEOCs, including Louisiana, Rhode Island, Missouri, and New Jersey. They take a variety of forms: State funded²⁷, State and University Partnerships²⁸, and privately organized collaborations with Universities²⁹. There is also a National BEOC operated by FEMA.³⁰ They generally function as public-private partnerships, and provide a mechanism to quickly distribute information and facilitate communication between affected businesses, emergency response agencies, and needed response and recovery resources. These centers facilitate communication with businesses and industries, as well as owners and operators of critical infrastructures and key resources, to enhance preparedness efforts.

Business opportunity networks are a well-established components of economic development expansion and retention efforts. They provide a trusted space for collaboration and development of productive relationships between businesses in a specific geographic area, and often result in productivity gains, new business opportunities, and/or resolution of issues that businesses cannot accomplish alone. Based on expressed interest and capacity in central Arkansas economic development organizations, there may exist the opportunity to leverage the benefits of a business opportunity network with the operational responsiveness of a BEOC. The effect, in practice, could represent a network of partners who have clearly defined steady-state and post-incident responsibilities. Combining the functions of a BEOC with the advantages of business networking could provide an effective system to link public resources with private needs and coordinate business-to-business involvement and support during a time of crisis.

An effective Business Emergency Operations Center/Network could work with businesses to improve their disaster preparedness; improve communication with and between business and industry before, during and after disaster events; provide a venue for training and building of relationships between and among businesses and support organizations to enhance business continuity; coordinate response efforts to assist businesses in their efforts to return to normal operations as quickly as possible; and help coordinate overall emergency response and resilience efforts.

These centers can provide several services to the business community:

1. **Business-to-business collaboration and communication** as a hub to connect private sector organizations with each other, and with emergency response and recovery efforts

²⁶ The Louisiana Business Emergency Operations Center (n.d) [Webpage]. Accessible at <http://www.labeoc.org/labeoc/welcome.aspx>

²⁷ Missouri State Emergency Management Agency (2012, January). *State of Missouri Business Emergency Operations Center* [Guide]. Retrieved from: <http://sema.dps.mo.gov/programs/lrmfm/BEOC.pdf>

²⁸ Ibid (1)

²⁹ Business Emergency Operations Center (2008, February 1) [Concept Overview]. New Jersey. Retrieved from: <http://chumer.com/beoc/BEOC.pdf>

³⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency (n.d.). National Business Emergency Operations Center [Fact Sheet]. Retrieved from: http://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1852-25045-2704/fema_factsheet_nbeoc_final_508.pdf



2. Interface with local and federal emergency operations centers to ensure assistance and resources are being directed to businesses in need
3. Business to non-governmental organization (NGO) collaboration, specifically to Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs) for more effective response
4. Facilitate business case management, as a key attribute of successful recovery efforts are those who position trained business counselors to facilitate the unique needs of impacted businesses.
5. Encourage Inter-firm Collaboration for more effective response and business continuity through facilitating the building of relationships and trust between and among businesses

These centers can provide and leverage assets to provide direct technical assistance to help businesses and communities, including:

1. Volunteer and Professional Staff, which is composed of pre-trained and pre-equipped individuals who have been empowered by their private sector employers, or receive grant and/or other funding as professional staff to participate in center outreach activities.
2. Physical, virtual, and mobile components, which include a communications hub linked to the state department of emergency management emergency operations, mobile aid facilities, and use of communications technologies such as smartphone applications (apps).
3. Volunteer registry, training, deployment, and management, working with VOADs and other NGOs to coordinate voluntary assistance to the business community.

Often the viability of a BEOC effort is that each partner organization, while contributing “out of hide,” it generally doesn’t do so far outside its established mission. The effect is a cooperative-like coalition where the capabilities and equities of many stakeholders can be integrated to provide the business community more efficient service offerings. Also, a public-private partnership model could be implemented, with contributions of donated staff time of organizations the state economic development agency, office of emergency management, economic development organizations (local and regional), business and industry associations, and the university system. Many models exist for long-term sustainment of support and private sector participation. One such model suggests businesses would be asked to pay a fee-for-service membership agreement. Other models focus at the organizational level as benefits of member organizations (like Chambers of Commerce or professional associations).

Communication Strategies

After a disaster, it is essential to communicate on all platforms to reach businesses with essential information for their own recovery process such as the timing on restoring utility service, the city’s inspection and rebuilding requirements, a list of local- and/or state-licensed contractors, how to select and pay a contractor, how to deal with insurance companies and more.

Businesses, particularly small businesses, also need information on how to navigate local, state and federal government assistance programs, such as the U.S. Small Business Administration’s (SBA) technical and other sources of financial assistance such as a bridge loan for working capital. See the chapter on Small Business



Assistance for more information on establishing a business recovery center and other small business assistance efforts.

Local business leaders also need to be aware of response efforts, and involved in the decision-making process of plans to rebuild the community. Even when decisions about the process have not yet been made by local government, it is still important for local officials to communicate with community stakeholders about the progress rather than leave a vacuum, which is likely to be filled with speculation and misinformation.

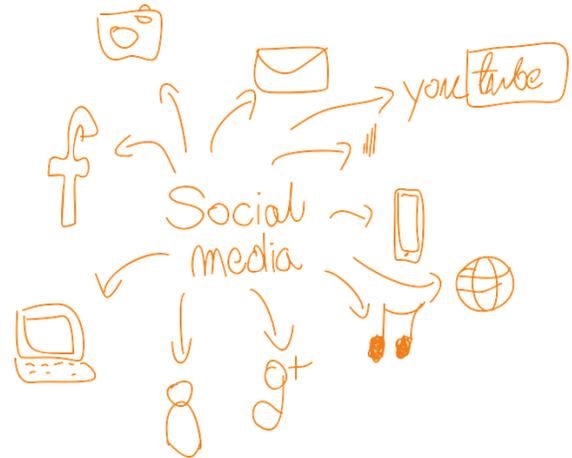
Communities should seek to market these recovery resources in the local media as well as using grassroots efforts when internet and phone lines are not working. Some Florida communities canvass with flyers to advertise local business recovery centers immediately after a hurricane to ensure direct contact with local business owners. In Joplin, MO, the local chamber went door to door to businesses a few days after an EF-5 tornado struck the area and destroyed one-third of the city. Chamber staff extended compassion to those business owners who were often still in shock regarding their business loss, an effort which went a long way in establishing trust when the business owner was ready to decide where and how to rebuild and needed assistance.

A summary of key information for business recovery and assistance should be made available in hard copy format to distribute to businesses without access to email, Internet or phone.

Texting

Due to differences in networks between texting and cell phone services, texting is often available even when cell phone networks are down. Especially in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, texting can facilitate immediate communication on where to find safe spaces and resources such as food and water or where to get in touch with immediate business recovery services such as the business recovery center.

- **Collect numbers before the storm.** In order to be prepared to send text messages in the event of a disaster, collection of key cell phone numbers prior to a crisis is essential.
- **Know your audience.** Text messages should be calibrated to the audience they are meant to reach. An internal text message will have a different tone than one sent to the general public.
- **Keep it simple and clear.** Craft messages that convey key information and are clear and easily understood by all. Consider sending messages in multiple languages if targeting a diverse population.
- **Arrange for a mass text messaging service before the crisis.** Contract with a mass text messaging service in advance of disaster. When sending a mass text message, be prepared for questions and requests for further information in response.



Source: <http://halspages.com/professional-services/social-media/>



Social Media

Social media has become an essential component of disaster communication. Due to wireless networks, the internet can be accessed by smartphones even when telephone or cellular networks are down. This makes it an essential tool for communication in the aftermath of a disaster. In Joplin, MO, the chamber started posting critical information on their Facebook page only one hour after the tornado hit the city. The chamber's Facebook page quickly became a credible source of business recovery information because their communications manager regularly posted timely and reliable information (see below text box on Joplin).

Businesses can also benefit from using social media. As they are able to open back up after an event, they can communicate with their customers and the public, letting them know they are back in business. For major disasters, application companies like Yelp have marketed the listing of disaster-impacted businesses in a neighborhood as having recently re-opened their doors to encourage local and regional residents to patronize their business.

Under Mayor Bloomberg, New York City increased its social media presence, which proved to be an effective communication strategy during Superstorm Sandy. Throughout the storm, NYC Digital, a part of the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, monitored social media for public reactions to the storm, sending daily reports to City Hall. Questions asked on Twitter were responded to directly, and the City's Tumblr account and Facebook page published information from each press conference. The public could sign up to receive text alerts from the Mayor's Office Twitter account, @NYCMayorsOffice, which served as an alternative digital resource to the City's website, once people lost power and Internet access.³¹

Communicating through Social Media

Below are some tips for using social media effectively, channel by channel:

- **Facebook.** New updates to this service do not prioritize chronological posting. Make sure to indicate time and date of post, and when the next update will be posted.
- **Twitter.** Tweet when there is news, but no less than once daily. Monitor Twitter for trends related to your community, and be aware that while tweets are up to the minute, they are not always reliable.
- **LinkedIn.** In the recovery phase after a disaster, use this service to connect with larger organizations to solicit support or spread messages on a national scale.
- **Yelp.** This app is often used to locate retail businesses and learn about the public's reviews of the service or product. There are creative examples of how the app has been used to advertise businesses in Lower Manhattan neighborhoods following Hurricane Sandy.
- **Blogs.** If your organization has a blog that has followers among your target audiences, and you have access to power, make sure it is updated frequently. In the ensuing weeks during the recovery process, monitor the local community blogs, and link to pertinent stories or calls for help.
- **Online message boards and bulletin boards.** Post-disaster, online message and bulletin boards, such as Craigslist can help locate missing persons or offer or seek assistance.

³¹ US Department of Homeland Security (June 2013). *Lessons Learned: Social Media and Hurricane Sandy* [report by Virtual Social Media Working Group and DHS First Responders Group]. Retrieved from: <https://www.llis.dhs.gov/content/lessons-learned-social-media-and-hurricane-sandy>



Case Study: Joplin's Social Media Strategy

On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado tore a path roughly one mile wide through the southern part of Joplin. The tornado had affected technology-based communications, so the Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce chose to communicate with businesses in person. The chamber had backed up its data to a secure server more than 80 miles away as part of its preparedness plan, so they were ready to assist businesses days after the tornado. Joplin also utilized social media extensively, posting on Facebook within an hour of the tornado to relay initial information and resources. The chamber rebuilt their website to focus on resources and provide an update on the status of the businesses. They also created an employer tracking system from emergency grant funds that was staffed through the workforce investment board.

The chamber also set up and staffed an information hotline in order to combat potential misinformation from other sources. The chamber dedicated several staff members to answering calls from businesses about utility restoration, cleanup, business services, rebuilding efforts and other practical matters important for businesses in deciding whether or not to return and rebuild. Three weeks after the tornado, 1100 chamber members and 200+ non-members had been reached in some form.

More information about Joplin's recovery can be found in the [Prioritizing Economic Recovery Actions Following a Major Disaster](#) webinar on www.RestoreYourEconomy.com and in the full case study in [Case Study Appendix 2](#).

Social Media for Business

What can businesses do to announce that they are open to customers during and after a disaster? Perhaps the best tool they have is their existing social media presence. Business can use their accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Vine, YouTube and countless other platforms to announce whether they are open, if they have a temporary location, and what products will be available or unavailable. Loyal customers will often support re-tweet and re-post the news that a vital or beloved local business is open again, even in a limited capacity, after a disaster.³² In order to be effective, however, this strategy depends on businesses establishing social media accounts and audience prior to any crisis. Therefore, EDOs should explain to business owners that social media can be used not just as a great fair-weather marketing tool, but also as a valuable plank in their disaster preparedness plans.

So that customers will not be confused by misinformation, EDOs might recommend to local businesses that they establish a special crisis communication team whose responsibilities will include social media. In case of emergency, employees should be reminded that only this emergency communications team is authorized to use social media to discuss any aspect of the business's emergency and recovery efforts.³³

³² Missouri Business Development Program (2014). *Recovering and rebuilding after a disaster: Part 1 – Where to begin?* [Article one from a series of seven on Business Disaster Recovery]. Retrieved on August 15, 2014, from <http://missouribusiness.net/article/recover-rebuild-disaster1-where-to-begin>

³³ Goldman, S. B. (2014, August 6). *The top ten business continuity and disaster recovery trends*. Retrieved August 15, 2014, from <http://continuitycentral.com/feature1211.html>



One publicity strategy for the crisis communications is to tie business-related posts into larger recovery efforts by adding messages of condolence to victims, support—and special offers—for emergency workers, or civic pride by using trending hashtags, such as the well-known #bostonstrong tag from the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. Another is to make the best of an unfortunate situation. For instance, during Hurricane Sandy, New York restaurants used social media to advertise ‘Sandy Specials’ and ‘Hurricane Menus’. Manhattan restaurant Pounds & Ounces tweeted that it was holding a ‘Bring your own flashlight’ party.³⁴ However, since customers may have limited battery life and internet access early in the disaster recovery, businesses should be relatively brief in their social media broadcasts.³⁵

Organizations leading the communication efforts can contribute to these efforts by generating standardized messaging and centralized platforms for businesses to use. In the aftermath of the Joplin, Missouri tornado, locals set up an online clearinghouse for information, www.joplintornado.info, which included a listing of businesses and their status (open, relocated, closed etc.) that businesses could update on their own.³⁶ When flooding hit southern Alberta, Canada in 2013, a task force which included Calgary Economic Development, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, and the Calgary Hotel Association launched a coordinated blog www.yycisopen.com and hashtag, #yycisopen, for businesses to use in posting their status updates.

Businesses can even incentivize locals to blog about their recovery efforts. When the 2011 Christchurch, New Zealand earthquake caused a precipitous decline in tourism, a campaign was announced, #blog4nz, to show that the country was open for tourism. “For 72 hours, organizers want travel bloggers to publish as many articles as possible about New Zealand and for Twitter to be dominated by Tweets about travelling to the country.”³⁷ In response, the travel industry, led by Air New Zealand, offered flights, hotel stays and other rewards to the Twitter users who got the most views and re-Tweets for the campaign.³⁸ In each of these examples, businesses coordinated with other local stakeholders to deliver a clear, consistent message about business conditions.

³⁴ Morabito, G. (2012, October 31). *The ultimate Hurricane Sandy guide to NYC*. Retrieved August 15, 2014, from http://ny.eater.com/archives/2012/10/the_ultimate_hurricane_sandy_dining_guide_to_nyc.php

³⁵ Ryan, M. (2013, April 4). Social media has an emerging role in disaster recovery. *Houston Business Journal*. Retrieved August 15, 2014, from <http://www.bizjournals.com/houston/blog/socialmadness/2013/04/social-media-has-an-emerging-role-in.html?page=all>

³⁶ Joplin business status (2011). Retrieved August 15, 2014, from http://joplintornado.info/joplin_open_for_business/joplin_open_for_business.htm

³⁷ Blog4NZ takes New Zealand to the world. (2011, March 17). Retrieved on August 15, 2014, from http://www.newzealand.com/travel/en/media/press-releases/2011/march-2011/tourism-news_blog4nz-to-the-world_press-release.cfm

³⁸ Blog4NZ: NZ is open and pumping. (2011, March 22). Retrieved on August 15, 2014, from http://www.newzealand.com/travel/en/media/press-releases/2011/march-2011/tourism-news_blog4nz-pumping-nz.cfm



Case Study: New York City Department of Small Business Services Partners with Yelp

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy dealt a massive blow to businesses in the northeastern states of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. According to estimates from Dun and Bradstreet, the storm affected 1.5 million businesses located across 19 counties in the tri-state region.¹ The storm was particularly devastating to the southernmost part of New York City, where many neighborhoods were nurturing small retail corridors. In order to help these small businesses, the New York Department of Small Business Services partnered with online service Yelp to encourage patronage from users.

The partnership took a three-pronged approach. First, Yelp's local Community Managers launched an initiative called, "Yelp Builds Back," which encouraged Yelp users to shop locally, and publicized local charity events and recovery efforts. Yelp users could "opt-in" to show their support, and to share their commitment online with their networks. Additionally, a comment section on the "Yelp Builds Back" page provided a space for users to share more community rebuilding events.

The "Yelp Builds Back" page was directed by local Community Managers, and targeted towards local Yelp users, but the national offices of Yelp were also involved. Yelp donated advertising and featured links to drive users to the Support NYC Small Business interactive map and lists of businesses that were impacted by Sandy by neighborhood. The Support NYC Small Business map was built independently of Yelp, by the Department of Small Business Services. The map provided a space for businesses to report their re-opening and provide contact information. Furthermore, Yelp posted lists on their [blog](#), website, and mobile app directing users to eleven areas hardest hit by the storm.

The third prong of Yelp's engagement was to donate advertising to counter price gauging. Banner advertisements asked users "Have you experienced price gauging in New Jersey?" or "Have you experienced price gauging in New York?" If the user clicked on a button labeled, "Report It," they would be able to report their story to the New York and New Jersey Attorneys General offices.

Yelp's engagement bolstered an already strong program designed by the New York Department of Small Business Services. A comprehensive advertising campaign encouraged holiday shoppers to focus their spending on the hardest hit areas, and featured open businesses and their recovery stories featured on television, radio, bus shelters, and in print and taxi cabs.¹ In addition to the Support NYC Small Business map, the SDS created a "Back to Business" website with videos of open businesses featured on the map.

Yelp's engagement in Hurricane Sandy relief came at the behest of Brian Forde, the Senior Advisor to the U.S. Chief Technology Officer at The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. However, local leaders in smaller communities who are interested in harnessing the power of online platforms can reach out to local representatives, such as Yelp's Community Managers, for assistance in getting the word out about local businesses re-opening. As in the case of New York, engagement with online services may be best leveraged by already having a strong online engagement plan in place.



Web Portal for Businesses

Websites work best as post-disaster economic recovery tools, ideally as a page housed on an existing website, most likely that of the lead economic recovery group. It will contain business information that addresses both preparing for a disaster and critical resources for a post-disaster situation.

- **Central source of information.** The lead group and all partners should promote the site to business constituents as the place to turn for key information post-disaster.
- **Create a business contact database.** A web portal can house a database for displaced businesses to provide updated contact information. This process is easily achieved with accessible technology found on Google Drive.
- **Enable the site for mobile visitors.** Increasingly, mobile technology is used to browse the internet. A web portal should be easy to use via phone or tablet.
- **Ensure accessibility.** Provide business recovery materials and loan/grant applications in relevant languages to assist major demographic groups in your communities.

Business Recovery Center and Hotline

A business recovery center (BRC) is a one-stop shop set up to provide local, state, and federal resources and services for businesses after a catastrophic event. They typically include a suite of public and private sector partners such as SBDCs, SBA loan officers, business counselors, and other stakeholders that serve local businesses. Because their services are tailored to address business needs, they typically are established separately from a local disaster recovery center to avoid confusion with individuals needing social services. For more information on these centers, see the Small Business Assistance chapter in this toolkit.

External Communication

Typical channels of communication between economic development organizations (EDOs) and their members and public include press releases, email newsletters, and sometimes television coverage but in a crisis, these communication channels can be compromised. If electricity is unavailable, or internet service is disrupted, there is no way to send emails, and furthermore, no guarantee the message will make it to the intended recipients. Disaster communication requires a plan to utilize all available outlets.

Part of this plan includes technical elements. A basic step is to invest in a generator, which will ensure electricity for at least a limited amount of time. A further step is to set up at least one employee's cell phone as an internet hotspot, which can be used to send an email and update social media. Battery powered satellite phones can continue to operate even if electricity is out and cell phone towers are blown down. Basic technologies such as amateur (ham) radios and regular FM/AM radios can be helpful as well.

Appropriate and available means of communication change as the disaster cycle moves from triage to recovery. In the immediate aftermath, text messaging and social media tend to be the most effective way of reaching out. Contacting the media may not be as effective. At this point, the media is likely to be focused on covering the disaster while ensuring the wellbeing of their staff and equipment; however, as the recovery period begins, the media should be extensively engaged.



Seven Keys to Success in Crisis Communication

When a crisis arrives at your doorstep, it may be tempting to run in the opposite direction when the media is seeking your comment on the situation. Peggy Bendel in “It’s A Crisis! Now What?” provides advice in crisis communication to business leaders:

Key 1: Don’t panic!

Key 2: Gather your team, launch your plan.

Key 3: Know which crisis is yours.

Key 4: Be proactive.

Key 5: Make the power of the Internet and social media work for you.

Key 6: Continually monitor media coverage.

Key #7: Be consistent and transparent.

Source: Bendel, P. (2012). Seven Keys to Success in Crisis Communications. *It’s a Crisis! NOW What?* Tucson, AZ: Sutherland House Publishing (pp. 49).

Developing a Media Strategy

Communities need to understand how their economic assets are perceived to be damaged by the national public, and craft effective marketing campaigns to change perceptions. Vivid images of the floodwaters not receding, tornado damage or other impacts often plague the minds of Weather Channel and CNN viewers, keeping patrons away much longer than is necessary. This is critical with the rise of online news content, as these media images will exist indefinitely on the Internet.

To counteract these negative images, it is necessary to demonstrate to media outlets that important community milestones and successes have been achieved. Community leaders, CVBs, tourism boards, and chambers of commerce, etc. should not be shy in boasting about the local area’s successes in recovery.

More often than not, there is need to implement a strong “We are Open for Business” marketing campaign on behalf of the local community and its businesses. Through local, regional or national news channels, the public is informed that local businesses are still in operation and the community is in the process of recovery. Business successes in re-opening should be communicated in a personalized story format and be provided within the context of community recovery.

Mayors and city leaders have often made the mistake of using the national press to point out recovery problems within the community to demonstrate a case for needing additional financial resources. This is not the proper outlet for gaining sympathy from state and federal partners. Instead, it infuriates the business community that needs the support of the city’s leadership in sending a more positive message that the community will recover and casting a vision for that process.



Furthermore, once shared, internet search results of a community may return pictures of wreckage and news reports focused on the worst impacts.

As part of your media strategy, consider that media outlets will often update the progress of recovery within the community on the one-year anniversary of the event as well as the five-year anniversary. Be prepared to develop a media strategy for the anniversary in connection with a memorial event. Make sure to develop a more personalized recovery story that is positive and powerful and helps to improve the community's reputation.

Consider hiring a PR firm when appropriate and given the resources of your organization and the community. If your organization doesn't regularly work with a PR firm, consider having one 'on call' in the event of a crisis. Where it is possible, leverage the resources of your community partners and don't seek to communicate critical messages on your own. The repetition of key messages by various public and private sector partners will go a long way in helping the media pick up on more positive community messages.

Developing Press Releases

Communicating with the media traditionally requires sending key information through a press release, media alert, or other proactive communication. As a common tool, developing press releases before a crisis can help the organization to structure appropriate key messages to convey under various scenarios. It is best to consider drafting a sample press release in a calmer environment than when your organization is drinking from a fire hose following a disaster.

The press release should include contact information for the leader of the EDO, as well as contact information for agencies that are dealing directly with emergency response. Information from verified government sources should be included, but only if it is current and available. The press release should explain the role that the EDO will take in recovery, and point businesses to established locations of business response centers and online tools.

The following tips will help to ensure a press release is distributed efficiently by your organization following a major crisis:

- **Proof, proof, proof.** Writing a press release before a disaster allows ample time to proofread for spelling and grammar mistakes. Credibility will be harmed by poorly written press releases.
- **Use a wire service for distribution.** Services to distribute press releases to larger audiences can be costly but can provide direct access to media outlets not otherwise available.
- **Share everywhere.** In addition to sending your press release to an organization's own list and a paid distribution list, it should also be shared on websites, social media, and even printed and distributed to community partners.

Working with the Media

If your organization is an appropriate source to comment on a crisis, then make sure to provide a written fact sheet or press release with contact information that is being monitored on a 24/7 basis (a news reporter's deadline is often after hours). Your organization should establish a primary spokesperson who is known to the



media and is trained to handle media inquiries. For every spokesperson, on-camera videotaped media coaching is essential.

External messages need to dispel common myths and promote opportunity. Especially in the wake of a disaster, it's important to inform key audience members outside of the impacted region that certain industries are still functioning, or that the region has largely recovered.

Determine the target audience for the message(s) and seek funding to plan and execute the strategy. Marketing efforts to impact a community's brand image can cost thousands of dollars to more than \$1 million to effectively reach a national audience. Therefore, it is critical to understand the target audience and how to effectively reach them with limited marketing resources.

Case Study: Grand Forks Media Communications

The city of Grand Forks, ND was severely flooded in 1997 after the Red River submerged over 75% of the city. In order to manage external communications, the city established a public information office in June 1997. This type of communication is crucial for residents who are unsure whether or not they are planning to stay and rebuild in the community. The office had seven employees at its peak, who were responsible for managing calls and questions on the recovery effort. They provided regular reports of recovery initiatives, organized press conferences and published newsletters to keep residents aware and updated on the progress of recovery. The efforts taken by the public information office were important to communicate to the public that tangible progress was being made towards the city's redevelopment.

More information can be found in [Case Study Appendix 6](#).

The target audience can vary based on objectives. A sample of possible target audiences could include:

- Visitors
- Representatives of the tourism and convention industry
- Decision makers at domestic firms and/or international companies
- Investors and developers
- Displaced citizens and workers
- And more!

The specific messages developed should be delivered to specific audiences through appropriate modes of communication. The following tactics can help you in crafting messages for the press:

- Discuss and promote noteworthy achievements during redevelopment and rebuilding. Every ground breaking event and ribbon cutting ceremony should have its own press release with a personalized story.



- Effective use of the “sympathy card” in that your community has been impacted by a large-scale disaster will help to get stories of recovery out through national media outlets will be important.
- Publicize information about incentives available for business investment. Mississippi, for example, effectively used Gulf Opportunity (GO) Zone credits to attract businesses after Hurricane Katrina.
- Aggressively promote any new business activity, such as business expansion, in the national media. Construct and distribute a recovery story that is interesting and affirmative.

Do Not Use “No Comment”

Even in the case of ambiguity, it is important for your organization to not use the phrase “no comment” as it conveys a message of guilt or fault. It is far better to state that specific details are unknown at this time than to remain silent on a subject with the media. As Peggy Bendel recommends, it is better to be prepared with a statement such as “The situation is under investigation at the moment, so it would be premature to give you a statement. I’ll be glad to do so, as soon as we know the facts.” And then be sure to follow up!