LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE HAITI EARTHQUAKE

The 7.0-magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti yesterday has caused major devastation in a country that already suffers from extreme poverty and poor infrastructure. Although this tragedy may not directly impact your business, Haiti’s response to this event highlights trends that will have implications for how your organization responds to emergencies.

Crisis Communication Channels Are Evolving

The way that people are communicating in a crisis is changing. Despite the fact that landline telephones and other traditional means of communication were not available following the Haiti earthquake, the growth in mobile communications meant that up-to-date information on the crisis was still available via social networking channels such as Facebook and Twitter. In the past, we relied on information being released from trusted sources such as professional journalists or government officials. However, we are now seeing some of the most relevant and timely updates coming from eyewitnesses in the area posting photos and information from their cell phones. Businesses should plan on this trend occurring in similar crisis circumstances in the future.

How Can Your Company Leverage Social Networking and Mobile Devices in a Crisis?

In the event of a crisis affecting an area in which one of your offices is located, there may be value in monitoring social networking sites for updates. While it is clearly dangerous to make decisions based on unverified information from non-professional sources, these updates can be useful as secondary information. Additionally, there can be valuable opportunities created for your company by setting up social networking channels in order to initiate a two-way dialogue with your employees when primary methods of communication may not be possible. Some companies may be wary of making internal communications of any sort public, especially in a crisis; but if communicating with staff via a Twitter account doesn’t sound like the right fit for your organization, there are other options. An application called Yammer is at the forefront of corporate social networking. This free, web-based application allows people from the same company to communicate while making these communications inaccessible to anyone that doesn’t have a verified company e-mail address. Yammer is also accessible on mobile devices, both via a website and via an iPhone “app”. This is one way to leverage the growing ubiquity of internet-enabled cell phones and “smart” mobile devices.
Use Multiple Communications Channels

During a crisis, businesses should not rely on every member of its workforce being able to access the Internet. An effective crisis communications program uses several channels to ensure that all employees are kept informed despite any service interruptions that are often experienced during a crisis. In our next product release this spring, Preparis is upgrading the emergency messaging feature to include multiple channels for communication including text, e-mail and voice.

How Businesses Can Prepare for an Earthquake

The earthquake in Haiti also serves as a reminder that there are no warning systems that can effectively predict when an earthquake will occur. It is vital that your business is prepared ahead of time and knows how to respond. Earthquakes in the U.S. are often considered to be a West Coast threat, but more than 45 states throughout the United States are at risk. Find out the risk level for your U.S. office locations here: http://www.fema.gov/hazard/earthquake/risk.shtm

To prepare for an earthquake:

- Refer to Preparis’ shelter-in-place guide to help identify safe places at the office and at home where you can take shelter during an earthquake.
- Make sure shelves and furniture are securely fastened and store breakable items in lower cabinets with doors and latches.
- Ensure electrical wiring and gas connections are in good repair as these can be potential fire hazards during an earthquake.
- Ensure crisis team members have completed the earthquake exercise available in the Preparis Learning Center.

For more information

Visit your company’s Preparis portal for a READ-REACT-RECOVER protocol and a training exercise on earthquakes. If you have any further questions, you can e-mail the Preparis X-Force at xforce@preparis.com.