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Elliot Consulting Services - Business Survival Tips

Emergency Communications

July 2006

Greetings!

"Who ya gonna call?" is a well-known line from a popular 80's movie about ghost hunting, but if that movie were re-made today it would be more appropriate to ask the question, "HOW're ya gonna call?"

The first inbound toll-free phone numbers were introduced in the late-1960's and that technology dramatically changed the way that businesses focused on the importance of customer communications. As the technology evolved so did the businesses' dependence on instantaneous communications as an integral part of their need to remain in direct contact with their customers.

The past several years have brought disasters of every type and size to all corners of the country including major hurricanes in the Gulf coast region, severe winter storms in the Northeast, sweltering heatwaves throughout the Deep South, tornados and flash flooding in the Midwest, massive wildfires and seismic activity on the West Coast, as well as a host of man-made disasters including cyber attacks, power outages, structural fires, supply chain disruptions, and workplace violence. Each incident has reminded our clients to ask questions about the resiliency of their communications networks and crisis response options.

Effective disaster readiness plans need to be evaluated and tested before an actual emergency situation; and one of the most important elements within that plan is a company's ability to communicate with their disaster management team, their employees, their customers, their stakeholders, their business partners, and the media during, and immediately following, a time of crisis.

How will you run your business if your phone system is inoperable because of a power disruption or a fire within your facility? Or perhaps something on a larger scale results in 'network busy' signals instead of connected phone calls? Or even a major regional event knocks out the entire telecommunications infrastructure? What alternatives do you have in place, and have they been tested for effectiveness?

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When considering communications alternatives, today's businesses have numerous emergency communications options available to them with a full range of capabilities and a wide variety of price points. The following list will detail some of those choices, and at the conclusion of the list are some links to provide additional sources of information.

Live-Operator Call Handling Service: Many businesses use a live-operator service to handle after-hours and overflow telephone calls during the normal business day. This same service could be easily adapted to handle calls during an emergency and provide a business with centralized message collection, outcalling of messages to cellphones or an alternate worksite, and a means for your employees to call in and leave information as to their whereabouts and their personal situations. Many of these services will allow text messaging to cellphones in the event that cellular traffic is disrupted, and some offer a web interface to retrieve messages and update call handling procedures.

Pre-recorded Hotlines: A seldom-used phone number (preferably toll-free) could be configured through your phone carrier to play a recorded announcement generally made by a senior company official to give status updates on your physical facility and overall business operations. Many times, companies will have an "internal" hotline for their employees, and a second "external" hotline for customers and vendors. These recorded announcements should not reside within your premise phone system, but rather be hosted through your network provider. The communications officer within your company can update the information on these announcements several times a day, as needed.

Call Redirection Services: Another popular option for voice communications is to stop the inbound calls within your phone carrier's network and then use a call redirection service to forward the phone calls to pre-determined locations and numbers. This technique guarantees that the inbound calls will reach a live representative from your company or be directed into a voice mailbox for later callback. These services are very effective so long as the business configures the options well-prior to the emergency situation.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP): As the technology improves, more companies are moving away from traditional facilities-based PBX systems with hard-wire connections to telephone desksets. Instead they are utilizing IP-based phone systems which direct the voice call to a physical IP address which can be configured to ring to a deskset, a cellphone, or phones at an alternate location. The entire IP phone switch can be housed off-site within a data hosting and storage facility, thus removing the vulnerability of a traditional on-site PBX phone system.

Announcement Services through Local Broadcast Media: Should you need to reach many people around the area in a timely fashion (such as school closures or major facilities shutdowns) then you might wish to consider an announcement service through the local Radio and Television stations.

Text Messaging Services: Most of us watch in amazement as teenagers furiously type text messages to each other on their cellphones without pausing to realize that this same technology provides a phenomenally effective means for emergency communications. Reliable text messaging notification systems have become a very popular way to send and confirm receipt of critical alerts to selected individuals, small groups, and entire organizations. The text messages are sent as short message "blasts", and the message will reach the user even when normal cellular voice channels are congested. The popularity of the "one-to-many" text messaging service has provided a new favorite among emergency managers.

Satellite Phone Communications: By far the most reliable emergency voice

communication service is portable satellite telephones, however the price point may prove impractical for most companies. The equipment is priced at several hundred dollars per handset, and the service fees can run up to \$1 per minute of talk time. For larger corporations and critical emergency operations teams satellite phones are a good choice to add to your emergency communications arsenal.

Email communications: If you are able to access your Email server from a remote location, and if your employees have both power and a solid internet connection, then you can utilize Email as a way of maintaining contact with your customers and your employees. This solution will rely upon the development of pre-planning strategies for server access, remote computer facilities, and Email access. It also depends heavily upon having both power and an internet connection – whether wired or through wireless access cards that fit into the PCMCIA slots of laptops. This configuration can also allow users into core business applications while they work from a remote location. Larger corporations may also wish to investigate services which run a mirrored copy of your Email service on remote servers, and therefore provide guaranteed connectivity to corporate Email during a time of crisis.

Mobile Wireless Devices: The rising popularity of PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) devices such as Blackberry's and multi-function cellular phones offers one more alternative for accessing Email and limited business applications. Once again, this configuration is heavily dependent upon remote server access and battery power for the portable devices.

Web Communications: One additional option which is gaining popularity among the IT community is the abundance of web communications channels now available. Free Email services, web logs (blogs), and simple webpage configurations would allow for the transfer of non-secure information and files during a time of crisis.

Conclusions: Obviously the “best” emergency communications solution for any company would be built around a blend of these alternatives, and it would be tested and refined regularly. Use the 3-step process of Plan, Respond, and Recover to cope with business disruptions, and make sure that you pre-plan your emergency communications strategy before you need to depend upon its success.

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Useful Websites



- [AnswerFirst Communications](#)
- [Voice Continuity Services](#)
- [Inteligy](#)
- [ReadyAlert](#)
- [MessageOne](#)
- [Globalstar](#)
- [Iridium Satellite](#)
- [Intelsat](#)



About Elliot Consulting



Elliot Consulting Services is a 3 year-old consulting firm based in the Tampa Bay area which specializes in business survival solutions. We help companies create, develop, and implement business continuity plans which are designed to protect their vital business resources and operational processes. ECS will also review, audit, and help modify a company's existing disaster recovery model to ensure that the essential components of the organization will continue to function in the event of an unplanned disruptive incident. Finally, the team from Elliot Consulting can assist with disaster recovery training exercises to test the thoroughness of a company's preparedness model. Our consultants are certified business continuity planners and business resiliency specialists with Fortune 500 experience. Additional information can be found on the [ECS website](#).

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