

Chapter VII: Crisis Communications

Traditional channels of communication are almost always compromised following a major disaster due to the disruption of telecommunications and transportation systems as well as the chaotic environment caused by the disaster itself. Businesses struggle with contacting their employees, their vendors, and their customers – as well as their local economic development organization. Businesses don't always know who to trust or where they can get accurate information. Rumors and wrong information spread quickly in this type of environment, which can greatly impede the recovery of businesses and industry or encourage them to permanently move away from the impacted community or region.

For example, if a business hears from an unauthorized source that the power won't be restored for four to six weeks, when in reality the utility company is about to receive external resources to expedite restoration services, the business owner is likely to make a decision to relocate out of the area, which will further exacerbate the community's ability to recover, with the loss to the tax base.

Therefore, the business community must have a seat at the table with the community decision-makers who are making critical choices regarding disaster response and recovery. This is done at the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), where business and industry should have a representative. This business representative should be long established as part of the community's official emergency support function (ESF) so that trust is well established. If the utility company and community leaders know at an early stage that company "x" will shut their doors and relocate out of the area if their power isn't restored in "x" days, then efforts can be put in place to meet that need and retain the firm.

The public sector will make emergency management decisions that will have a direct consequence on local businesses and their ability to recover. Economic development organizations and chambers of commerce must lead a communication role in a crisis, since businesses are likely to contact them first for information to make better business decisions.

Multiple Audiences in Crisis Communication

Communicating with the Business Community

The key role of a lead organization in economic recovery, or a recovery team of multiple economic development organizations, is to address the following urgent 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, provincial 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 the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC)

Economic development organizations (EDO) and/or chambers of commerce should make sure they have a senior staff member serve at the local area's Emergency Operations Centre (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, provincial 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 of the EDO representative at the EOC. This representative can learn about available federal and provincial 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 EDO 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, social media, 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 crisis, then the media will turn to an alternative source. Quite possibly they will turn to a disgruntled business owner or resident who seeks to represent the community (and perhaps your organization) in a negative light as being unresponsive to local business needs.

Emergency Communications Checklist

As a result of the Economic Disaster Recovery Project (EDRP), an emergency communications checklist was created by the British Columbia Economic Developers Association (BCEDA) and Economic Developers Alberta (EDA). It is a resource that can be used by economic development organizations and businesses to formulate their emergency communications plan. Though many of the items may seem obvious, in a crisis, having a plan with complete information can save time and cost - and reputation.

The Emergency Communications Checklist can be found in [*Resource Appendix 11*](#).

Creating a Communication Strategy Before a Crisis

Regardless of the nature and severity of the disaster, a key responsibility of any economic development organization with 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 EDOs and chambers 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 provincial 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 may also want to communicate to those in a position to provide assistance - such as provincial 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 can become further strained. Advance planning to

discuss and allocate 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.

likely to discuss issues that impact local businesses’ ability to respond and recover such as: business re-entry, access to property, and a phased approach to power restoration. 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 be 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. In a disaster, businesses will first approach organizations they can rely on for timely and credible response and recovery information.

The community’s lead EDO 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 creating the area’s emergency management plans and for the key decisions that have a direct impact 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 having the valuable communication role of 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 re-entry 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 regions have a structure in place at the regional and provincial levels that enable industry and business input at the emergency management table. In the U.S., states such as Florida, South Carolina and Louisiana have established a state-level emergency support function (ESF) for business and industry to

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, are

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 business representative are included in the community's Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) in the event of a disaster. We are not aware of a similar model in Canada.

For those regions that have not established a provincial-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 province'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 agencies.

It is recommended that the community incorporate information from the following 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 provincial and federal governments. For example, Galveston, Texas, produced a six-page recovery report one month after Hurricane Ike, which included the impact 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 provincial 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 provincial 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.

Establish an Internal/External Crisis Communication Plan

EDO's should create a crisis communications plan with communication strategies that are developed 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- both internal and external members of the community.

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 can craft a press release in advance to be used and updated in the case of a major incident.

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, such as an external hard-drive 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 non-profit 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.

Creating Your Crisis Communications Plan

Step 1: Establish a Crisis Communications Team.

Establish strong team members that know the community and assign responsibility for a primary and secondary spokesperson, a technical expert, and a public relations officer.

Step 2: Be Creative and Expect the Unexpected.

Run different scenarios on different types of disasters that may happen. Include your geographic area, the current (and future) political climate, potential security and communication challenges, financial concerns, weather, logistical issues, health considerations (and the ability to respond), etc.

Step 3: Establish a Strong and Diverse Lists of Contacts.

It is important to have a contact list of those who have a critical function either internally or externally for your organization (employees, vendors, clients, and key local officials). Ensure you have comprehensive contact details include emails, cellphones, addresses and other phone numbers. You never know what kind of a disaster may occur so you will need to have as many ways as possible of communications available.

Step 4: Update, Update, Update.

Review your plan frequently, but at least a minimum of once per year. It is important to run the unexpected scenarios, update your list of team members and the contact list. People move and change addresses frequently.



Crisis Management Process

Shell has a global Crisis Management process with four stages:



In the Prepare stage, Crisis Management Team (CMT) members are nominated and trained to address a crisis. Contact information is gathered so that they can be contacted 24-hours a day, seven days a week. This information is continuously updated and a Crisis Management Manual is prepared. Activation follows a consistent process as outlined in the Crisis Management Manual. Once activated a consistent and repeatable process is executed by the Crisis Leader, Chief of Staff and Communication Lead. The Resolve phase contains a number of detailed steps, including Stakeholder Engagement. The Learn phase follows the Crisis so that the Crisis Management process can be continually improved.

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. See below for further ideas of what to include in your crisis communication plan as it relates to external communication.

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.

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](#).

Acknowledge the Disaster is Occurring

If a weather event such as a tornado or flood is clearly on its way, EDOs should acknowledge it through all communication channels (social media, e-mail, 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 reassuring. This is especially important if the EDO communicates with tourists and visitors.

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 inaccuracies. Ideally there will be one official source; 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; if 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 if 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 visitor's bureau or EDO.

All accommodation properties should be informed of these details as well, and in turn, will inform 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 status updates. It's important that such information be optimized for viewing on mobile devices, not just computers.

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. The participation of EDOs is critical 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 critical information is efficiently disseminated.

Determine Organizational Roles for Communicating

In advance of a disaster, economic development organizations, chambers and partners in 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. After a crisis, all of these groups will have an important role 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.

This group of business representatives should either establish a crisis communication plan for the business community, or encourage its development by the local jurisdiction (often through the emergency manager). It should indicate which economic development

organization within the community takes the lead in coordinating communications with local businesses after a disaster.

In the Garner, North Carolina (near Raleigh) crisis communication plan, the economic development director serves on the city's crisis communications team in the event of a major incident. While a city may look to its economic development director for this communication role, local government can also designate the local chamber of commerce if applicable. Following major flooding in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 2008, the city established a Recovery and Reinvestment Coordinating Team (RRCT). 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 with the 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, provincial and federal partners
- Coordinate post-disaster media and political strategies.

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 Centre (EOC). Through the centre, 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 nonprofits, arts and cultural groups, schools, organized labour, landlords, the Downtown District, local government, and neighbourhoods. 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](#).

Communication Strategies

After a disaster, it is essential to communicate on all platforms to reach businesses with information for their own recovery process: the timing on restoring utility service; a community's inspection and rebuilding requirements; a list of local- and/or provincial-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, provincial and federal government assistance programs, such as Industry Canada's Small Business Financing Program, 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 centre and other small business assistance efforts.

Local business leaders also need to be aware of response efforts, and be involved in the decision-making process of plans to rebuild the community. Even when local government has not yet made decisions about the process, 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 promote these recovery resources through the local media as well as using grassroots efforts when Internet and phone lines are not working. Some Florida communities distributed flyers to advertise local business recovery centers immediately after a hurricane to ensure direct contact with local business owners. In Joplin, Missouri, 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 were compassionate to those business owners who were often still in shock regarding their loss. This effort went a long way in establishing trust when the business owner was deciding where and how to rebuild.

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 e-mail, 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 centre.

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. It is important to be aware of provincial and federal rules and regulations regarding mass communication.

Social Media

Social media has become an essential component of disaster communication. Wireless networks enable the Internet to be accessed by smartphones even when telephone or cellular networks are down. In Joplin, the chamber started posting critical information on their Facebook page only one hour after the tornado struck 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. They can communicate with their customers and the public, letting them know they are back in business. For example Yelp has encouraged customers to shop at local businesses by listing those that have re-opened after a disaster.

Under Mayor Michael 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 access²⁰.

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.

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 neighbourhoods 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.

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.

²⁰ <http://www.emergencymgmt.com/disaster/Sandy-Social-Media-Use-in-Disasters.html> https://communities.firstresponder.gov/DHS_VSMWG_Lessons_Learned_Social_Media_and_Hurricane_Sandy_Formatted_June_2013_FINAL.pdf

- **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, or software like ExecutivePulse.
- **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 Centre and Hotline

A business recovery centre (BRC) is a one-stop shop set up to provide local, provincial, and federal resources and services for businesses after a catastrophic event. They typically include a suite of public and private sector partners such as Community Futures, 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 centre to avoid confusion with individuals needing social services. For more information on these centres, 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 media releases, e-mail 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 e-mails, 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 e-mail 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. Face

to face communication can also be effective, through printing and distributing hard copies of your message to stakeholders.

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.

Developing a Media Strategy

Communities need to understand how the general public perceives the damage to their economic assets and craft effective marketing campaigns to change perceptions. Vivid images of the floodwaters not receding and tornado damage often plague the minds of Internet and television viewers, keeping patrons away much longer than is necessary.

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

More often than not, there is the 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 media to point out recovery problems to show the need for additional financial aid. This is not the proper outlet for gaining sympathy from provincial 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 disaster at its worst.

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. 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 public relations firm. 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 Media Releases

Communicating with the media traditionally requires sending key information through a media release, media alert, or other proactive communication. As a common tool, developing media 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 media release in a calmer environment than during a crisis.

The media 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 media 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 media release is distributed efficiently by your organization following a major crisis:

- **Proofread.** Writing a media release before a disaster allows ample time to proofread for spelling and grammar. Credibility will be harmed by poorly written media releases.
- **Use a wire service for distribution.** Services to distribute media 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 media 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 the media 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 that 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 one million dollars 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.

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

The following tactics can help you in crafting messages for the media:

- Discuss and promote noteworthy achievements during redevelopment and rebuilding. Every groundbreaking event and ribbon cutting ceremony should have its own media release with a personalized story.
- Publicize information about incentives available for business investment.
- 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 specific details are unknown at this time than to remain silent on a subject with the media. Media experts recommend it is better to be prepared with a comment like “The situation is under investigation at the moment, so it would be premature to give you a statement.” Then be sure to follow up later when you have the facts.

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](#).

