Sorry
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Managing Misfortune

What you do before and after a disaster strikes can make all the difference

by Mary Bergin

The location of Two Lakes Supper Club—between Washburn and Bass lakes in Portage County—is a big customer draw, but this year the seasonal restaurant’s setting turned into a liability for the first time since opening 70 years ago.

“Our restaurant was flooded due to rising water-table levels and excessive run-off from thawing fields,” explains Maggie Jagielo. “We did not have a sump pump in our basement because for the entire time (husband Jeff Jagielo’s) family has owned it, it was never necessary. We were literally in the lake and there was nothing we could do.”

That was mid March, two weeks before their scheduled opening. Instead of concentrating on the kickoff to a big anniversary year, the couple fought four feet of basement water by running five pumps 24 hours a day, for two weeks, and stacking 1,000 sand bags to keep water from coming to the basement door. “The water was also coming up through the floor and foundation,” she recalls. “We were hoping it would recede, but it did not.”

Insurance did not cover the aftermath of damage. The supper club opened a couple weeks later than expected. Owners used personal funds and money set aside for a new roof to stay in business.

“We lost $60,000 when all was said and done, which I think is really lucky,” Jagielo says. “Could have been much worse.”

She is thankful the restaurant’s first food order of the season was not delivered before the flooding began.

When dealt a disaster

Lightning or a tornado strikes. A blizzard or ice storm hovers. Human missteps can also cause disasters that endanger property and life. Regardless of the type of catastrophe, consequences can be profound.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) says at least 40 percent of businesses do not reopen after being compromised by disaster. Of those forced to close at least five days, 90 percent fail within the next year.

continued on page 14
So exactly what constitutes a disaster? It is “any type of emergency requiring the immediate attention of the restaurant owner to prevent or mitigate damage to property, injuries to customers or employees, or reputational harm,” says Matt Anderson, a risk control manager for Society Insurance.

“A disaster puts a stop to restaurant operations for a period of time and may be difficult to overcome to remain in business.”

To truly prepare for disasters, you need to think beyond fires, storms and floods. “Additional situations could include refrigeration loss, water or sewer outage, foodborne illness outbreak, pest infestation or active shooter event,” Anderson observes.

Reputational harm can cause irreparable damage too. One example: An employee with the highly contagious norovirus comes to work and unknowingly infects customers, who spread rumors about improper sanitation. And in some cases, an outbreak can even be started by an ill customer. Don’t underestimate the potential for social media to decimate the restaurant’s reputation.

**Planning for the Worst**

Having a good emergency plan makes a huge difference in how quickly and completely business bounces back.

An emergency plan lays out instructions that can be developed and implemented during emergency situations. Cover these bases, in this order:

**Mitigation.** Identify your biggest internal and external vulnerabilities in the event of an emergency. Identify ways to prevent an emergency or reduce damage if a disaster happens. Review insurance coverage and policy limits.

**Preparedness.** Come up with strategies to make your business less vulnerable. What is the plan to prevent food spoilage? Do you have emergency shelter and evacuation plans? Burglar alarms? Video surveillance? Critical computer files backed up off-site?

**Response.** Know what actions to take to save lives and prevent further property damage. Train new employees, during orientation, about how to respond. Require other employees to review the emergency plan annually. Make team drills a part of the training.

**Recovery.** Contact your insurance company. Secure the site to prevent further damage. Consider contacting a disaster recovery contractor.

Source: Society Insurance

**Where there’s smoke...**

Life and livelihood can be compromised in an instant. One cigarette, recklessly discarded outdoors, was all it took to temporarily shutter The Steaming Cup, Clarke Hotel and Spring City Wine House in August, 2018. It would be months before the latter two downtown Waukesha businesses would reopen.

You could say The Steaming Cup, which escaped fire and water damage, was lucky because operators Jason and Cristina Tofte only needed to deal with smoke. They agree, to a point, but the road to reopening was not simple and took nearly three weeks.

“We didn’t realize all the extra steps you have to take because of smoke damage,” she explains. “Every inch had to be cleaned and sanitized or replaced.”

Any kitchen item with plastic—down to spatulas and food storage bins—was tossed. So were seven artificial Christmas trees and every holiday decoration in storage.

The entire limestone building sustained almost $100,000 in damages. The Toftes are renters who were responsible for their insurance deductible, “which was very affordable,” but the experience was a good reminder to choose a deductible that can be covered if disaster occurs.

*continued on page 16"*
It also is important to let your insurance agent know if inventory changes significantly. The Steaming Cup had installed tens of thousands of dollars worth of new painting and custom furniture as part of a remodel one month before the fire.

**Logic, records, timing**

For the Toftes, some procedural decisions involved weighing the cost of discarding an item against the labor required to make it usable again. Keeping a can of food meant removing the paper label, sanitizing the can and then affixing package information.

Make sure you have good records of inventory, food to furnishings, Cristina Toftt advises. When The Steaming Cup’s stock of tea was discarded, owners immediately knew where to re-order because they were organized.

Timing was a significant challenge: Food prep wouldn’t happen until food was delivered, but deliveries weren’t scheduled until the premises were cleared by the health inspector.

She says emotional worry was the hardest part. It was a relief to hear wages and tips for The Steaming Cup’s 15 to 18 employees were covered by insurance, but anxiety accompanied the wait for verification.

Health and insurance inspectors were the Toftes’ coaches during the ordeal.

Having a positive relationship with them during everyday business made it easier to work together during troubled times. “They are your partners, trying to make sure your people are safe” is the way Cristina sees it.

**Quick, creative thinking**

For Mark Dougherty of Mark’s East Side, Appleton, it’s also beneficial to maintain solid relationships with business partners and peers. “Don’t be afraid to call and ask for advice or help,” he says.

The restaurant was without power for three days in August, 2013 after six tornadoes swept through northeastern Wisconsin. Damages exceeded $30 million in Outagamie County. Dougherty minimized losses by sliding meats and seafood into a walk-in freezer right away, and then not opening the door until power was restored.

All ice in two bins—one 800 pounds, the other 600 pounds—was moved into a walk-in cooler. “Then we just didn’t go into it, and at around 40 degrees, the ice didn’t melt as much as

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**Fire Prevention**

Excellent kitchen maintenance prevents fire, which is a leading threat to the restaurant industry. Roughly 5,600 restaurant fires are reported in the US annually; an easy majority involve cooking and nearly one-half involve grease.

**Seven ways to stay vigilant:**

- Clean exhaust hoods and ducts at least twice a year—use correct filter sizes and clean them more often.
- Hire a qualified technician to do kitchen equipment repairs.
- Replace antiquated equipment or equipment parts.
- Refuse to leave food cooking unattended.
- Refuse to allow grease buildup in deep fryers, on walls or on the floor.
- Follow a daily checklist of cooking equipment to shut off before the last employee leaves.
- Store grease-soaked linens in a metal container with tight-fitting lid.

Source: Society Insurance

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**Emergency Plans and Handbooks for Food Safety**

Many organizations offer guidance on food safety in emergency situations.

The Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response (CIFOR) offers an Emergency Handbook for Food Managers. Visit CIFOR.us and search for “emergency handbook.”

The Conference for Food Protection offers an Emergency Action Plan for Retail Food Establishments.

To learn more, visit the website foodprotect.org/guides-documents/emergency-action-plan-for-retail-food-establishment.
you'd expect,” he recalls.
His parents bought the 1948 building in 1967, with subsequent expansions. The mix of additions means “you can't just buy one generator to remedy a problem” during a power outage, and that forced Dougherty to get creative.
He borrowed a construction company's turbo heater to cope with a wintertime exhaust fan issue. During a power outage, he borrowed refrigerated delivery trailers from a food purveyor. “They had no shelving, but we made it work.”

Making time to give back
The motto “Sun Prairie Strong” was born out of tragic circumstances in July, 2018 after contractors hit an underground gas pipeline that broke, leveled one block of buildings downtown and killed a firefighter. Salvatore's Tomato Pies, which had sustained flood damage only two months earlier, was rocked by the explosion but remained standing.
Owner Patrick DePula didn't gain access to his pizza-pasta restaurant until two days later and reopened about three weeks after that. Electricity was shut off, which meant losing all cooler contents, including 800 pounds of cheese. “The amount of food we will toss is staggering to me,” he said on Facebook at the time.

DePula and wife Nichole purchased the century-old, three-story brick building in 2016, five years after beginning business one-half mile away. “We poured not only our lives into this place, but also all of our resources,” he acknowledged online. “Seeing it broken, battered and abandoned is heart-breaking.”

Despite the restaurant’s precarious situation—they were missing way more than half of their income, but expenses remained the same if not more—the restaurant’s staff pulled together to cook (off premises) for the area’s first responders and families. GoFundMe pages raised more than $11,000 to defray the cost of payroll, cleanup and other needs until insurance kicked in.

Reinvent yourself
When a water main break at Field Table in downtown Madison drenched the business, owner Trish Davis said she experienced both emotional and business devastation. Since the flooding wasn’t from natural causes, “others were ahead of me” in getting insurance claims addressed.
Dealing with the unexpected is part of lifelong conditioning, having been raised on a farm and seeing her family deal with risks in and out of their control. So Davis decided to seek opportunity in the face of adversity.
The flooding, “brought my team closer and made me more transparent with them about the business” as more goals and numbers were shared. “I think transparency lowered their anxiety about the future... and it sort of forced me to become a better [restaurant operator].”

Field Table, which opened four years ago, closed for three months in 2019. That gave Davis time to address flood damage and “take corrective actions” in other ways.
The business began as a bakery, coffeeshop, market and farm-to-table restaurant serving craft cocktails. “I was working with several hundred suppliers, and it had gotten too complicated,” she explains. “I needed to simplify. We had to figure out who we really wanted to be.”
In another life, her work helped corporate America develop and launch products nationally. That included computer engineering, molecular diagnostics, cleaning supplies and more. Now the focus shifted to culinary

Online Resources
Go to the website ready.gov/business for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) advice on how to prepare for specific disruptions, such as a tornado or inland flooding.
Search “emergency preparedness” at osha.gov to retrieve an extensive online catalog that addresses topics from anthrax to the Zika virus.
The same search words at sba.gov produces guidance from the US Small Business Administration, and small businesses can apply for financial assistance when disaster strikes.
The National Restaurant Association is developing a comprehensive resource entitled “Always Ready” to prevent and address emergencies.
branding, and even the restaurant name changed, to Merci.

"Being farm-to-table is a great foundation for a restaurant, but so many say they do this," Davis says. Field Table "didn't convey anything extra" to set her work apart from the pack. The new name reflects incorporation of more French cooking techniques and a priority to treat others with gratitude. "There's still 'farm-to-table' under the hood of it all."

Tough business decisions accompanied the change. Davis works with far fewer suppliers, but what remains is "a core of great farmers who fit" the new identity. Staff turnover happened because of the cuisine change, and "I want every item to be perfect, on the plate and in the cocktail."

In retrospect, the single mom with three children wishes she would have taken better care of herself during the transition. Don't underestimate the power of "more sleep, rest, hydration." WR

**Winning Ways at Waffle House**

When a hurricane hits, the Federal Emergency Management Agency uses a "Waffle House index" to help define the degree of devastation.

The comfort-food chain is known for staying open 24/7, even during major holidays and bad weather. If a Waffle House closes, FEMA places the neighborhood on "red alert." An area with a Waffle House serving a limited menu gets a "yellow alert," and those in full operation are on "green alert."

Waffle House tends to stay open during hurricanes and other natural disasters because of an "Always Open" motto and mindset. The manager of each location gets a "storm playbook" about how to prepare for and deal with natural disasters. That includes how to go about business without electricity and running water.

The first Waffle House opened near Atlanta in 1955, and now the US has at least 1,700 outlets, most in southern states. Playbook procedures describe how to assess and control risk.

"Establishing a disaster communication plan establishes you as a good corporate citizen and secures brand equity," observes the National Restaurant Association. Waffle House received an Operator Innovations Award in 2012 for its efforts.

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