

Update your disaster plan

By Daniel Potterton

As an agency owner, you know how important it is to adapt to changes in the industry, technology, and your clients. However, when was the last time you updated your agency's emergency-response plan?

Think about it: When was the last time you and your emergency-response team took the time to review your agency response plan? The likely answer is, "not recently enough."

Emergency planning is vital to an agency and principals and owners should treat their plans like living documents. An emergency-response plan isn't something that goes into a drawer to be forgotten. Updates should be made for technology upgrades; changes in clientele; emergency situations; or new staff. If possible, edit the plan as changes are made. Being stuck with an outdated plan can make disaster scenarios worse; don't compromise your agency simply because you didn't take the time to make necessary updates.

Refreshing your plan will give you the tools you need to respond to a disaster in the most effective way, but don't assume your work is done once updates are applied. Principals, managers, and owners should test emergency-response plans at least once a year. Parts of your response to a crisis, like notifying the teams involved, can be tested more often: while equally vital, they are less resource-intensive. Without testing, there's no guarantee everything you spent the time to update will go smoothly during an actual disaster. Drills help you and your employees understand crisis roles and responsibilities.

There are three types of drills worth conducting periodically to ensure your emergency-response plan is up-to-date. Each is important for different reasons and learning how to manage them will give you an edge in keeping your employees and workplace safe and informed/knowledgeable.

Critical-task drill

Simple to execute, a critical-task drill breaks down the timeliest aspects of an emergency response for testing. Critical task drills may test elements such as team member notification; arrival and set-up of the emergency command center; community emergency contacts; and the communications plan.

Test channels of communication and your list of contacts more frequently than you would your overall plan. Whenever an employee or vendor is added or removed from the plan, it should be tested. Plan to do several critical task drills a year, testing a different task each time, to remain prepared for potential crises.

Full-scale mock crisis drill

Planning a full-scale disaster drill is a far more significant investment of time and resources, so doing more than one a year is impractical. However, full-scale drills do offer an opportunity to bring together agents, clients, and people from all departments of your agency for an event that represents as real a crisis experience as possible.

A full-scale drill can be more complicated to schedule based on the number of people involved, but it is an important step in the process and, to get the most out of the time invested, should be facilitated by the crisis-management vendor. In addition to the various agents and employees across your agency, consider involving local first responders, members of the Red Cross and area hospital staff. Helping members of your community understand your crisis-response plan while meeting the people they'll work with in the event of an actual crisis will facilitate cooperation, confidence, and a sense of control.

Planning a drill of this magnitude takes a large amount of effort. Including your leadership team and members of your emergency response team allows for a more efficient, informed organization. Take into account the disaster scenarios most likely to affect your organization, selecting one for the drill and including all relevant departments. For added drama, you may consider integrating local high school theater students or community actors to play victims, lending your drill a greater sense of realism.

Tabletop drill

A tabletop exercise is an equally effective, more resource-efficient way of drilling for a crisis. Such drills help team members review their checklists and pinpoint areas of the plan that feel rusty or outdated without having to simulate a full disaster.

Tabletop drills often are coordinated by a facilitator, either from within your agency or hired from an external crisis-management firm, who takes members of the emergency-response team through an imagined disaster situation step-by-step around a conference table, allowing for low-stress problem solving.

Facilitators, especially trained representatives from outside companies, can lead your team through a number of potential situations involving active shooters, natural disasters or civil unrest. Walking through these scenarios with your disaster plan as a

guide will prepare staff for real-life crises while building collaboration skills within your agency.

Tabletop drills usually last three-to-four hours and should be followed by a “hot wash,” or a summary session that helps identify any gaps in your planning. Use statements like “We should keep doing ...”; “We should stop doing ...”; and “We should start doing ...” as a guide during the hot-wash process.

How you complete each statement determines the necessary adjustments you may make to your plan and future drills. Using tabletop drills in conjunction with critical-task and full-scale mock crisis drills each year will keep your emergency-response plan current and team members prepared to respond should a disaster take place.

Keeping your plan current and being prepared to execute it is the best way to remain prepared—and possibly save lives—if and when a crisis arises.

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