

Not If, But When: Homeland Security and Charlotte's Hospitality Industry

by Robert Schurmeier

Robert Schurmeier served as Deputy Chief of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department before leaving to form Charlotte-based U.S. ISS Agency, LLC (ISS), a security consulting firm specializing in contingency planning, risk and threat assessments, pre-employment screening, etc.

Most Charlotteans have forgotten the day in the mid 1990's when an angry man walked into a local government facility with an explosive device and what he identified as weaponized anthrax. Every hotel, restaurant, and government facility in downtown Charlotte was in the potential "hot zone," or area of infection. The ensuing standoff ended safely, but it capped off a period of just under ten years in which the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area experienced – in addition to an anthrax scare – an epic natural disaster in Hurricane Hugo and a more localized one in the tornado that tore through southwestern Mecklenburg County.

These events illustrate how real the threat of a disaster has always been in Charlotte. Of course, in the post-9/11 world, we understand that the threat is now magnified across the country, and Charlotte is no exception. As the federal government continues to focus on identifying the nation's "critical infrastructures" in order to anticipate potential terrorist targets, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area receives more and more government attention due to its relation to two such infrastructures – the financial sector and nuclear energy resources.

Unfortunately, Charlotte's private sector has largely failed to follow the government's lead. Many hospitality businesses, particularly medium- to small-sized ones, do not plan for disasters because management officials cannot justify the costs when compared to the low probability of a catastrophic event occurring. Put simply, most in the hospitality industry do not see the *business value* of contingency planning. This conclusion, however, is often the result of a less-than-comprehensive assessment of the risks involved.

A proper risk-based approach generally involves consideration of three related elements – threat (i.e., likelihood of danger), vulnerability, and consequence. With respect to the threat, as discussed above, disasters are rare but they can and will happen. Too many business owners, however, fall into the classic trap of confusing frequency of occurrence with probability of occurrence. In other words, they ask *if*, whereas they should be asking *when*.

The second element of risk analysis, vulnerability, reveals the unique challenges facing members of the hospitality industry in the event of a disaster. Many of your guests would be in unfamiliar surroundings, and would therefore look to you and your staff for direction and even care. In addition, due to the high turnover rate in the hospitality industry, many employees lack the necessary training for effective emergency response.

These two factors – the confusion of your guests and the lack of training in your employees – illustrate the serious vulnerability of hospitality businesses faced with catastrophic events.

The final element of risk analysis, consequence, is perhaps the most powerful argument in favor of contingency planning in the hospitality industry. Because of the inherent vulnerability of hospitality industry guests discussed above, the reputational damage associated with failing to properly account for their security in the event of a disaster can hardly be overstated.

In the end, the media and the general public will single out two groups of businesses after a disaster – those who performed well and those who did not. The question is, in which group do you want to be?

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