

Preparing for Disaster

Recommendations Based on the Blackout of '03

by ROBERT J. KWORTNIK

Based on the experience of hoteliers caught in the blackout of '03, this checklist will help managers plan for power interruptions due to either man-made or natural causes. An organized approach to disaster planning provides a guide for maintaining guest service and for supporting the staff members who will provide that service in difficult circumstances. The checklist will help managers analyze the most likely problems caused by a protracted power outage and outlines preparations to address those problems.

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The overall lesson of recent natural and man-made disasters is that almost any hotel needs to plan for the eventuality that it will have to operate without its utilities, including electricity and running water. While it may not be possible to prevent

utilities from failing, a hotel operator can mitigate the effects of the loss of utilities by planning ahead. The experience of hoteliers who remained in operation during the large-scale blackout that struck North America in August 2003 provides a roadmap for disaster preparedness. The checklist presented here is distilled from the lessons of preparedness (or lack of it) that surfaced in the study presented in this issue “Safeguarding Hospitality Service.”¹

Facilities and Process Management

- *Know where you are vulnerable if power goes down.* Create a checklist of all components of the service delivery system. Managers should know what facilities and processes will run on backup power and for how long. This way, plans can be devised to deal with failing systems before it becomes a last-minute scramble.

- *Document this examination of the service delivery system.* Hotels need more than just an oral history of what occurred and how management responded during the blackout. A written document that describes the effects of electrical-power loss on facilities and processes helps to minimize confusion and can lead to better preparation.
- *Perform “what-if” scenarios, simulations, or drills, and plan appropriate responses.* What if power failed during cold weather? What if power were out for two days or more? What if running water were not available? Although it is not possible to imagine all scenarios, the blackout of '03 shows that the unexpected can happen.
- *If your hotel does not have standby power, price out a generator set. If your hotel does have standby power, price out expanding its capacity.* According to the vice president of engineering at one hotel chain, properties in the chain that did not have standby power “stuck out like a sore thumb” during the blackout and threatened the brand’s image. The chain immediately looked into plugging that gap, even at costs of around a million dollars. However, providing backup power need not cost millions. For a few thousand dollars, one can buy portable generators that will provide enough electricity to supply some critical systems.
- *Provide support beyond the National Electric Code (NEC) for emergency systems.* The NEC is intended to provide *minimum* standards. The blackout showed that minimum standards are inadequate for ensuring guest comfort and safety during a protracted blackout. Excellent hotels should not equate minimum regulatory standards as acceptable customer standards.
- *Investigate adding at least some air-conditioning and lighting functionality to standby systems.* The loss of HVAC and lights was a major problem during the blackout and a main source of guest dissatisfaction. For those hotels with standby power capacity, it is realistic to

cool or heat and illuminate at least a few public rooms.

- *Locate and mark phone lines that are not susceptible to power loss.* When PBX systems went down, typically after battery backup failed, hotel managers were thankful to have a few functioning telephone lines powered by the telephone company’s network—assuming these lines could be found. Another option: obtain at least one cellular phone for the hotel.
- *Keep the tools needed to ensure the functionality of manual processes in a fail-safe box.* Have available credit card imprint machines, registration cards, telephones, battery-operated calculators, and tools and instructions for opening automatic doors and elevators. Make sure to have a backup supply or a way to make keys for electronic locks.

Emergency Planning and Management

- *Formulate or revise emergency plans.* If your hotel does not have emergency plans, write them. If your hotel does have plans, make sure these are current and are reviewed regularly. If plans do not account for extended power outages, new plans are necessary. Good plans minimize risk by detailing procedures (what to expect, what to do, when to do it, and who should do it) in the event of an emergency.
- *Run drills and tests.* Regular drills with staff will not only help to ensure that emergency plans are current and appropriate but will also surface unpleasant surprises, such as faulty backup systems.
- *Train and retrain staff on emergency procedures.* Sometimes the problem with emergency plans is not the facilities or processes needed for implementation but the people doing the implementing. Staff members may not know what to do during an emergency. Turnover is one cause of this, but so is inadequate or infrequent training. This training should be viewed as an investment in the service quality that is just as important as upgrades to facilities.

- *Stock up on emergency supplies.* Perhaps the simplest and least costly emergency-planning action is developing a checklist of needed emergency supplies and ensuring that these items are always stocked. Supply items include flashlights (perhaps featuring the company name) and batteries, glow sticks, lanterns, bottled water, and nonperishable food. Some unexpected needs reported by respondents were gasoline and baby products (diapers and formula). Emergency supplies are a provisional fix; ideally, plans should help ensure that lights do not go out. However, for hotels on a budget, stocking up on supplies provides a ready solution.
- *Consider convenience and comfort.* Other items worth stocking in the hotel “blackout box” are battery-powered fans, chemical heat packs, and battery-powered radios and televisions. Radios and TVs are also important for helping to keep staff and guests informed during an emergency. In addition, though hotels did not report supply problems with pillows and blankets during the blackout of ’03, the situation might have been quite different in colder weather.
- *Keep cooking.* Buy a grill for cooking and keep the propane tank full. Even hotels without food and beverage (F&B) service should consider an on-site grill for food preparation. Another option: identify area restaurants that can function without electrical power and contract with them to be a supplier.
- *Buy extension cords.* One of the problems with portable generators is venting exhaust. Thus, if the generator is placed away from hotel doors and windows (as it should be), extension cords will be needed to bring the power back in. This is particularly important if the recipient of the power is a guest with medical equipment.

People Management

- *Help hotel-service providers perform even better in their roles.* This first involves acknowledging customer-

service successes and promoting those actions. It also involves recognizing the stress and discomfort emergencies place on staff members as they strive to compensate for facilities and process problems. One of the best ways for hotel owners and managers to let employees shine is to give them the tools for this and to reduce the impediments. Better, more formal planning for emergencies and service recovery can reduce the physical and emotion burden that is all too often placed on the shoulders of employees.²

- *Use staff input to determine how problems experienced during emergencies can be minimized.* Employees on the front lines are your best resource for developing solutions to service difficulties. Use their input to determine potential service-failure points.
- *Train key staff on manual processes.* In our information society, the knowledge embedded in automated processes is easy to lose. During the blackout, the ability of staff to quickly implement manual processes for tasks such as guest check-in and billing helped to minimize service disruption in these areas.
- *Cross-train staff on key processes and skills.* Cross-training offers many benefits, and the resulting advantages were on display during the blackout. Foremost is the ability to reallocate staff to operational areas in need, such as F&B or housekeeping. Equally important is the sense of perspective this gives employees as they wear the hats of co-workers and pull together as a team.
- *Empower employees to solve problems and make decisions during times of crisis.* Extraordinary circumstances demand novel operating policies and procedures. Although key decisions should be guided by contingency plans, circumstances will arise when employees will have to “go off script”—to siphon gas from the hotel van for a guest in need of fuel, to use water from the swimming pool to flush toilets, or to unlock the vending machines to feed hungry travel-

ers. These are service-defining moments. Employees need the authority to make such decisions and the confidence that they will not be punished for their choices.

- *Be visible and encourage staff to do the same.* In an emergency situation, the line of visibility between back and front of house should be minimized. Guests need assurance that a hotel's leaders are in control and protecting guests' safety and security. Floor patrols, information updates, room escorts, and similar overt actions show guests that you are there.
- *Don't underestimate empathy.* People traveling away from home already feel vulnerable. Emergencies heighten this sense of lack of control. What is needed is understanding, patience, flexibility, personal attention, and genuine caring. The same is likely to be needed by hotel staff members, who will have their own worries. Empathy matters and is a critical dimension of service quality during times of crisis.
- *Reward professionalism and "service above self."* Outstanding employee behavior sets an example for a customer orientation that most hospitality organizations seek. Rewarding such behavior can help to solidify a true service culture.

Customer Management

- *Determine customers' tolerance levels during unexpected events.* It is important to know what customers expect during emergency situations. For example, during the blackout guests expected hotels to have emergency lighting, which is reasonable, as well as standby power. However, guests also were dissatisfied with the lack of guest room lighting, air-conditioning, telephone service, and elevators, among other items. This dissatisfaction suggests that guests expected these facilities to be operational, even during a power failure.
- *Measure customer-perceived service quality and satisfaction.* Service quality is determined by the customer. Most hotel managers believed that service quality was high during the blackout, yet they based this assumption primarily on

one dimension of service quality—interaction with service personnel. A more thorough analysis of service-quality perceptions across key dimensions (e.g., reliability and assurance) is important.

- *Facilitate the coproduction of the service experience by employees and guests during emergency situations.* Guests can play a key role during emergencies by remaining calm, being understanding, and creating a positive environment for other guests. This role can and should be guided, first by managing expectations and providing news and information to guests, and second by devising and integrating into emergency plans specific roles and scripts for guests—in effect, by treating guests as “quasi-employees.”³ For example, if having guests gather in the lobby during an emergency helps with information flow and reducing panic, this should be documented so staff can direct guests to perform this behavior.

Still Not Prepared?

The study that led to these recommendations began as an effort to understand the effects of the blackout on a variety of properties. What I learned from that study is that much of the hospitality industry was not and still is not prepared for unexpected events such as a protracted power failure. A tremendous effort by employees made it possible for hotels to continue to provide hospitality during the blackout, but the fact remains that the service system remains largely vulnerable to unexpected events. Though we may not be able to control the occurrence of such emergencies, there is much more we can do to control the effects through a managed approach to safeguarding service.

Endnotes

1. See Robert J. Kwortnik, “Safeguarding Hospitality Service When the Unexpected Happens:

- Lessons Learned from the Blackout of '03," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (February 2005): 13-39.
2. Kate Walsh, "A Service Conundrum," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 41, no. 5 (October 2000): 40-50.
 3. Robert C. Ford and Cherrill P. Heaton, "Managing Your Guest as a Quasi-Employee," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (April 2001): 46-55.



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