

When disaster strikes, be prepared

By ROBERT E. REAVES

When Mother Nature unleashes her fury on America's landscapes, the result can be catastrophic, unbelievable and tragic. Just ask the victims of any hurricane, flood, blizzard, tornado, hail or ice storm. Recent extreme weather along the Atlantic seaboard brought this message home strongly.

Although you can't harness these forces, you can prepare your organization to anticipate the worst and be ready to perform to the max.

The most destructive storm

Of all the severe weather events, hurricanes rank at the top for property destruction. When Hurricane Fran hit North Carolina three years ago, the damage was devastating. The Federal Emergency Management Agency declared 34 North Carolina counties disaster areas, with damage in the Raleigh-Durham area alone estimated at \$930 million.

Michael Currin, president of Greenscape Inc., Raleigh, NC, will never forget Hurricane Fran. "We were without power at our office for close to 10 days and we spent one full week clearing access at our customer's properties," he recalls.

Maintain customer focus during storm cleanup, says Currin. "We called all our customers to let them know our first objective would be to clear access to their property. After that was accomplished, the second phase was brush removal," he says.

"Natural disasters are not something on which you

Landscape experts reveal how they prepare and focus their organizations for weather's worst damage, and still manage to build customer loyalty



Equipment manufacturers often assist local cleanup efforts by bringing in extra equipment. These units were used to clean up after Hurricane Opal. Photo above and right courtesy Vermeer Mfg.

should build your business. Stay focused on your customer and don't get sidetracked by short-term financial gains after a storm," he warns. "We sent a letter to all our customers after the hurricane, letting them know we would be charging standard labor rates for the cleanup. We have could have easily charged our customers more, but they would have remembered."

Line up your subcontractors

Dan Standley, owner of Dan's Landscaping & Lawn Care in Terrytown, LA, has firsthand experience with hurricanes. Two years ago, a major hurricane hit the New Orleans area, damaging the landscapes at

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Prioritize customers' storm damage, then let them know when you can be at their property.



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many of his commercial accounts. "Fortunately, we had advance agreements with subcontractors that operate Bobcats and hauling equipment to remove all the sand and mulch from parking lots," he says.

Standley stresses it is important to build relationships with subcontractors and recommends giving them at least \$300 to \$500 of incremental business during the year.

"When a storm hits, you'll be at the top of their list to help you out," he says. "It's also good to have arrangements with at least two tree companies, along with dump sites where you can take the debris."

Savvy contractors also suggest helping customers prepare before a big storm front or hurricane hits, if they can. "Call your clients and ask them if they need any help to prepare for a hurricane," Standley suggests. "Many people are not prepared for major storms. During the last hurricane, we helped clients with storm shutters and sand bags to reduce their storm damage."

Written and visual documentation of equipment is another critical component of storm preparation. "We videotape all our equipment once a year and put it in a safety deposit box, along with a written estimate of value," he says. "Also, we update our insurance once a

Employees of Dan's Landscaping & Lawn Care clear away storm debris.



Dan Standley keeps on good terms with subcontractors.

year, making the decision to lower or raise coverage as needed."

Freak snowstorms? They're ready

While no hurricane is likely to hit Denver, snowstorms do. Late spring and early fall snowstorms aren't uncommon. Just ask Tom Tolkacz, president of Swingle Tree & Landscape Care in Denver. "On Sept. 21, 1995, we received 25 in. of snow in less than 24 hours. The leaves were still on the trees," he recalls.

To prepare itself for snowstorms, Swingle Tree has its own storm plan.

"Our storm plan is a written document, about 10 pages long. It's dynamic, to make adjustments as needed," Tolkacz explains. "We review our storm plan during March and early September."

He says the first thing that happens during a major storm is the huge volume of calls from customers. "We tell our customers our first priority is to clear major hazards — something that causes damage to life, limb or property," he says.

Questions about insurance coverage always arise where there is storm damage. "We find most insurance companies will cover a certain percentage of damage if a tree hits a home, building or vehicle," Tolkacz says.

When a snow or ice storm damages a tree, Tolkacz says the extent of damage usually can't be determined from the ground: "You've actually got to get up in the tree and get a close look at the damage. Many times you end up removing limbs and leaders from trees that customers may not have thought were damaged. It's important to explain this to the customer."

Swingle Tree has a special storm supply cabinet — an inventory of tools never touched unless there is a storm. "This is a wise investment for a company," advises Tolkacz. "We have an advantage in our case, since we are a distributor of chain saws and other equipment. But it never hurts to order an extra chain saws. We also work with our communication vendors to acquire additional cell phones in case of a storm."

Bad blizzard blues

When it comes to blizzards, weatherwise management goes into high gear. Ed LaFlamme, branch manager of TruGreen LandCare in New Haven, CT, won't forget the blizzard that hit New England in 1978.

"Conditions were so bad that Connecticut closed the roads for three days. Every year, I plan for another blizzard like 1978 and work backwards," he says.

"To supplement our heavy equipment needs, we have arrangements with independent contractors and tow companies in every city we operate. If we have a problem, we simply call them on their cell phone and

get them out to help us,' adds LaFlamme.

During a blizzard or major snowstorm, LaFlamme assigns routes. "Don't stretch your crews too thin. And for larger accounts, assign specific trucks to serve only that account," LaFlamme says.

He believes cellular phones are an essential management tool during storms: "With cell phones, it is so much easier to talk. We have the capability to talk to everyone at the same time. It is a combination cellular phone and two-way radio."

Manage your customers' expectations

For the Northeast, "ground zero" for snowfall is very likely Syracuse, NY. Rick Kier, president of Pro Scapes Inc., Syracuse, prepares for the worst and hopes for the best. Pro Scapes begins its transformation to winter equipment in autumn. "Between September and November, we spend several days training our drivers, including returning ones. One of the things we discuss is how to deal with deep snow," he explains.



Ed LaFlamme assigns specific crews (below) to large accounts.

Snow removal contracts are vital to Kier's business. "In our contracts, we note there are special events that are not covered — deep snow over 10 inches, ice storms, quickly accumulating snow, wet heavy snow and any winter event that requires us to use special equipment, techniques or time to move the snow."

Should one of those circumstances occur, Kier's contract offers customers two choices: Pro Scapes can perform any extra work as soon as possible and charge as it deems fair and reasonable; or Pro Scapes will not perform any services unless the customer advises it how to proceed. "This enables us know in advance how each customer wants us to handle the account during special weather events," explains Kier.

He says it is important to set the customer's expectations properly. "We had a 43-in. snowstorm once and we had some customers thinking we would plow at the same price as a normal snowfall. You must set their expectations properly in writing. That allows you the freedom to do what you need to do."

Kier also gives his customers priority codes based on their value to the business. "A priority-one customer

might be a condo complex with a complete landscape management agreement. A priority-two account could be one where we mow, fertilize and plow; a priority-three might just be plowing," he notes.

Pro Scapes also has a blizzard plan. "Our plan contains a list of people who are willing to subcontract, as well as the type of equipment available. We have a list of names, plus available cell phone and pager numbers," he adds.

"I started plowing in 1978 and have learned the hard way through experience, advice from other contractors and as a member of the Snow and Ice Management Association (SIMA)," he says. Kier recommends a written agreement with subcontractors. "SIMA provides such a contract model for companies that hire subcontractors," he adds.

Keep equipment rolling

Last year, Mark Neidich, fleet manager at Groundmasters in Cincinnati, OH, never thought it would quit snowing. "After enjoying an Indian Summer that lasted through Dec. 28, we had a continuous string of snow storms that did not quit until March. Last year,

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10 steps to weatherwise management

1. Call your customers. Let them know you're coming, but will help those in most need first.
2. Don't gouge customers. Charge regular customers your regular rates in an emergency.
3. Build subcontractor relationships ahead of time. Make agreements that they will be available in emergencies. That includes finding debris dumping sites ahead of time.
4. Videotape and record all vehicles, riding and hand-held equipment, then put these in a safe place.
5. Update your insurance annually. Understand wide scale insurance coverage changes so you can advise your customers in an emergency.
6. Make a written customer service storm plan noting equipment to be used, crew details, schedules/routes, customer priority lists, subcontractors, supplier sources, communication plan, etc. Update this annually.
7. Devise an internal storm plan anticipating damage to your office(s). This is your "Plan B," where you create a system for intrastaff communication, storage/protection of key documents/valuables, insurance updates and claims, first aid, physical safety and more.
8. Anticipate special conditions in customers' contracts. Include services that will require extra time or fees so customers know beforehand what to expect.
9. Hold an emergency training event for staff and subcontractors. Talk out scenarios, check out equipment and order supplies before they're needed.
10. Stock adequate replacement parts, supplies, protective gear, safety products, nonperishable food & drink for drivers, etc. to weather long-term emergencies.



Organize your crews for a snow emergency

- ▶ Make your plowers take a break after 10 to 12 hours of plowing. This keeps them refreshed and alert. Sometimes they need a break more than sleep.
- ▶ Encourage plowers to take refreshments and snacks with them.
- ▶ Plowers should have additional clothing with them in case of break-downs. Most plowers work in a "shirtsleeves" and are not often dressed for working outside the truck. Gloves, scarves, jackets and socks should be carried.
- ▶ Plowers should have some form of communications equipment, such as cellular phones, two-way radio, Nextel system or a CB radio.
- ▶ Carry spare parts that might break (lift chains, quick disconnects, plow pins, etc.). Don't forget to carry jumper cables.
- ▶ Carry a snatch strap or tow chain to pull out other plowers that are stuck.
- ▶ Put a bag of rock salt in the bed of the truck to handle ice patches.
- ▶ Don't let the gas tank get too low. Condensation in the tank can cause fuel line freeze-up. Use dry gas when temperature fluctuations are wide.
- ▶ Have a pad and pencils to keep track of work that is done. After several visits to a site, a plower can forget all he or she did during a snow event. By writing down the information, customers will be accurately invoiced.

—John Allin, board president of the Snow & Ice Management Association Inc. (SIMA). call 814/456-9550; Web site: www.SIMA.org

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we did \$1.5 million in snow removal in Cincinnati alone," he notes.

Groundmasters starts preparing for winter in August. "We examine our trucks and salt spreaders, making sure everything is in good working condition. This is a major undertaking, considering the amount of equipment we have," Neidich says. "We hook up all our winter equipment the first week of November to ensure everything is working properly. At last count, we had 46 snow plows and 19 salt spreaders.

"We are a full-service shop and capable of doing everything except front-end alignment. We keep a full stock of parts. A company with repair capability should stock the most commonly damaged items — bolts, pins, hoses, plow pump motors, clips and alternators," Neidich suggests.

Regardless of your weather, a preparedness plan is essential. Take the time to tailor a program for your company before the next disaster or storm strikes.

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