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INSIDE . . .

- Enterprise, Know Thyself!
- Seven Steps to Ensure Regulatory Compliance
- CIOs, How Good is Your Disaster Recovery Plan?
- 2007 Other Services Survey

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Culture Clash

Disaster Recovery Challenges of Museums

By CRAIG S. PHILSON, CRM

While developing a disaster recover plan is difficult for any operation, cultural institutions face the challenge of protecting not only their facility's livelihood, but the daunting task of ensuring that history, art, and other cultural artifacts be safeguarded for future generations. Art pieces, historical documents, archeological items, and even a historical building's architectural features are often "one of a kind" and cannot be backed up on computer or duplicated. The challenges faced by museum directors, conservators, and others in charge of protecting cultural history offer a fine balance between protecting and altering the very item you are trying to preserve, such as an historical building. When it comes to disaster recovery planning for these institutions, there often is a "culture" clash.

Museums and similar cultural operations are unique in that their mission, in fact, their duty is to conserve, care for, and protect the items their organizations represent. As with any person involved in risk management, this duty



Before and after photos of a statue at the Biblical Arts Center in Dallas, Texas, after a 2005 fire. The museum reportedly lost between 2,500 and 3,000 pieces from its 5,000-piece collection of biblical artifacts and religious-inspired art. Restoration of the remaining 1,500-2,000 items may take 10 to 15 years to complete. Groundbreaking on a new facility is to begin in the Spring of 2007 with the museum opening again in 2008.

Photos courtesy of Dr. Val Robinson, Biblical Arts Center

most likely describes your job goal. The difference between cultural institutions and most other operations are that the entire staff's goal is preservation.

While in general business we are trying to preserve our market share and grow profits, museums are in the business of preservations of their contents, which is the art or items from which their audience profits. Whether the museum embodies the American Indian culture, fire fighting equipment, 20 century pop art or antique doll collections, each institution is formed to showcase the beauty, historical value, and the authenticity of its pieces. Whether the facility is a small operation that appeals to only a select audience each year or a large operation hosting a world-wide population and multiple traveling exhibits annually, each has a similar intent – to preserve their piece of history.

In a broad sense, isn't preservation what every business is doing when action is taken to develop a strategic plan aimed at lessening the effects of a disaster on their operations?

One of the main goals of a disaster recovery program is to preserve those items that will help your business continue on in the face of the catastrophe that it confronts. The real challenge for cultural institutions is protecting their history without compromising it.

Disasters

Museums face the same types of disasters as all businesses: fire, earthquake, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes and terrorism. Each disaster has multiple sources of loss when analyzing the potential damage to art and cultural items. Fire, the most common source of loss, results in heat, smoke, loss of power, explosion, water, and physical damage from collapse. In 2005, the Biblical Arts Center in Dallas, Texas, experienced such a setback.

The fire, caused from faulty wiring, resulted in a total loss to the 25,000 square foot structure. According to Museum Director Scott Peck, the museum, which presents biblical artifacts and religious-inspired art, lost between 2,500 and 3,000 pieces from its 5,000-piece collection. All items were damaged with heat, water and smoke.

Groundbreaking on a new facility is to begin in the Spring of 2007 with the

museum opening again in 2008. Peck expects restoration of the remaining 1,500-2,000 items to take 10 to 15 years to complete. Although time consuming and tedious, conservation and restoration of museum items is done without question as long as funding is available. Could a manufacturing facility afford to spend years to restore equipment needed for production? Obviously not. This mission of preservation is paramount within cultural institutions.

Natural disasters take their toll on cultural facilities. Weather related disasters could result in damage from those items associated with fire along with saltwater, silt/dirt, mold, and flying objects. An earthquake's slightest tremor can cause damage to museum items which are not properly secured. Earthquakes can completely destroy a facility with violent trembling which can also result in fires from the damage.

The Museo de Arte Popular Americano in Santiago, Chile, was faced with exposure to an earthquake registering 7.8 on the Richter scale on March 3, 1985. The result was the loss of the building and most of the collection which included artifacts and major Chilean ceramics. The salvaged pieces were moved to another museum until a new building was constructed, about 12 years later in 1997.

In widespread, regional disasters, persons you expect to carry out your disaster plan might not be available or dealing with personal losses.

On August 29, 2005, the New Orleans area was struck by Hurricane Katrina. Exposed to this disaster was the New Orleans Museum of Art, the city's oldest fine arts institution. The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) has a permanent collection of more than 40,000 objects, valued in excess of \$200 million.

At the time of the event, nobody present had the authority to give the order to leave. If they evacuated, there would be no employees left to protect the museum's contents.

Museum Director John Bullard was on vacation, and Deputy Director Jacquie Sullivan was assisting family away from the property. To complicate an already potentially grim situation, the phones inside the museum had failed. When Federal Emergency Management Agency

(FEMA) representatives arrived at the museum, NOMA employees inside the museum were left in a predicament. FEMA wanted those evacuees to move to a safer location, but there was no way to secure the artwork inside.

Six security and maintenance employees remained on duty during the hurricane and were joined by 30 evacuees, including the families of some employees. The museum, located on the higher ground of City Park, was able to re-open its doors on March 3, 2006, six months after the disaster with no loss to its indoor collection.

Acts of terrorism are considered a relatively new exposure to businesses. Acts of terror can impact any operation and have left their mark on cultural institutions as well. The Sept. 11, 2001, attack on New York resulted in a significant loss of art and artifacts that was stored or displayed at the World Trade Center.

According to a survey done by the Heritage Preservation, the value of the art lost in private collections housed at the World Trade Center was an estimated \$100 million. The value of public artwork destroyed, as well as those works in other World Trade Center public places, is estimated at \$15 million. Lower level rooms beneath the Trade Center Towers held important archaeological artifacts from an 18th-century African burial ground, discovered in 1991 during the construction of a federal courthouse. The World Trade Center also held archives from a 19th-century working class neighborhood, along with photographic and computer records documenting the excavation of the Five Points neighborhood. Only 18 of the 1 million unique artifacts documenting the lives of 19th century New Yorkers survived.

Loss resulting from an act of war is generally excluded in insurance policies, so this exposure has little restitution. War, historically, has lead to many losses as the theft of cultural items has been part of the "spoils of war."

This has taken place over the past 15 years in Bosnia (Zemaljski Muzej), Afghanistan (National Museum of Afghanistan), Croatia (Gradski Muzej), Kuwait (Kuwait National Museum) and Iraq (Iraqi National Museum). The Iraqi National Museum held rare artifacts documenting the development of mankind in one of the world's earliest civilizations,

ancient Mesopotamia. Among the museum collection were more than 80,000 cuneiform tablets, some of which had yet to be translated. Many of these items were lost during the war and others vanished when subsequent looting occurred in the invasion's aftermath. The losses, as with any historical item, are irreplaceable.

Disaster Recovery Planning

With the focus of cultural organizations on the restoration and acquisition of items for preservation, the operations often fail to properly address the need to plan and prepare for disaster. As with all businesses, museums should have a disaster recovery plan in place to reduce loss and preserve their assets. Many organizations fail to develop plans, but instead rely on the knowledge of key personnel who have the information needed to execute the basic steps in disaster recovery. The failure to develop a plan can have dire consequences to businesses and cultural institutions alike.

Four basic steps to address disaster recovery planning are:

1. Prevention/Loss Control
2. Preparedness/Planning
3. Post Event Response
4. Recovery

Prevention/Loss Control

Prevention can start with evaluation

of your facility and the hazards exposing the building and collection. Plumbing, electrical, equipment maintenance, roof condition and protection systems are some items that can create an exposure. Keeping a well maintained and properly organized facility is often the key to success in eliminating sources of loss from internal sources. Are collections stored away from windows and pipes? Are roof gutters and drains regularly cleaned? Are temperature sensitive items furnished with back-up power for HVAC and humidifiers?

Many institutions are hesitant to improve the protection of their facility due to the fear that the cure is worse than the disease. The idea that "water from fire sprinklers will cause more damage than the fire" is hardly the truth. If the fire isn't controlled due to lack of a fire sprinkler system, how do you suppose the fire department is going to control the fire? They generally use high pressure hoses. How much damage will that create? Even with water a concern, there are safe alternatives such as an FM-200 system which uses a gas to stop the fire and leaves no residue. This type of system is currently used to protect the Declaration of Independence. Budgets on protective systems should be properly funded. For cultural institutions, the board of trustees should be involved to get their support for annual funding of budget items involving disaster recovery.

The decision to save money on the short term can cost an organization 10-fold in a loss. The historic home of Franklin D. Roosevelt was being furnished with fire detection devices. A decision was made not to place detection devices in the combustible attic space and save \$2,500. An attic fire occurred in 1982, and the resulting restoration cost amounted to more than \$2 million.

Regular inspections of property exposures and preventive measures such as infrared scans of electrical equipment can identify and eliminate hazards before they cause a loss. Time and money spent on prevention and planning are the keys to success in diverting a disaster altogether

Preparedness/Planning

Once you have evaluated and addressed the hazards identified, an institution must take the information gathered in the assessment and determine the plan, resources, tools, and training needed to address any given event which may arise. Museums are often hosting traveling exhibits, so plans should include emergency procedures for each exhibit along with those plans for the permanent collection. Plans, as with any organization, should be coordinated with local fire officials to determine best practices in developing a fire fighting strategy. Cultural institutions should lobby for priority status in an emergency event. The time to do this is in the planning stages not after an event has occurred that affects an entire community. If you can get cooperation from the local officials, your organization may reduce losses associated with lack of control of your facilities site.

Prior to an emergency, a museum should research restoration processes and have them in writing and accessible when needed. Such information will be invaluable when the time comes. The same could be said for businesses in the general population. Researching restoration of equipment, paper files, and data should be done to steer your activities in the recovery process and save time.

Museum collection teams will need to be formed and trained on how to handle items that are salvageable without creating further damage. If possible, prioritize collections. Some items may be more valuable than others or simply more susceptible to damage. Arrangements for storage facili-



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ties will need to be made prior to the event. A list of vendors, conservators, restoration contractors, etc. will need to be collected and contact made to ensure they will be able to assist you in an emergency. Such a list is important for all types of organizations. Keeping it updated and accessible is often the challenge.

Post Event Response

Once an event has occurred, all the training and preparation will pay off. The lack of any substantial written and updated plan of action will be reflected in your organization's coordination of recovery efforts. Whether your organization is a software manufacturer or a museum, the up-front efforts made in assessing hazards and planning for dealing with them will show in the post-event response.

The safety of employees is the most important element in response to an event. Once the area is secured and safe, the objective is to protect the items that are unaffected, look for salvageable items, and begin the restoration process. If not addressed properly in the preparedness/

planning stage, the attempts by employees, volunteers, or emergency personnel to salvage art pieces can cause additional and perhaps unrecoverable damage to items. This could be similar to a manufacturing operation attempting to shut down a process, improperly resulting in additional damage to the property and products. Training and coordination of efforts are key actions in this stage. Over-eager individuals need to be reined in, and persons with knowledge of the collections susceptibility need to be involved in the salvage process. People want to help, and the person coordinating the efforts needs to be able to delegate efforts. This should have been addressed in the planning stages.

Efforts have been made to improve coordination of federal agencies and historical institutions. Often the cultural item in jeopardy is a historical building. Some museums use historical homes or buildings as their facility. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires each federal agency to identify and assess the effects of its actions on historical resources. The responsible federal

agency must consult with appropriate state and local officials, Indian tribes, applicants for federal assistance and members of the public to consider their views and concerns about historic preservation issues when making final project decisions. This could be the route of a proposed highway or the process of determining whether a building, after a disaster, should be demolished or restored due to some historic or cultural value to the community. Effects are to be resolved by mutual agreement, usually among the affected state's historic preservation officer or the tribal historic officer, the federal agency and any other involved parties.

Although NHPA is a good protective measure for historic preservation, there were noted deficiencies in coordination among the parties needing to implement it's intent. The hurricanes occurring in Florida at the beginning of the decade resulted in concerns involving lack of coordination between FEMA and historical preservation officials, lack of local level identification of historical sites, lack of local emergency management train-

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ing in handling and identifying historical resources, and overall lack of training.

The recovery process in a region-wide catastrophe could affect the speed and access to items required in your plan. The lack of trained human "resources" will hamper operations in the post event response stage. If the event is large enough, employees' families and personal property will be affected, and they may not be available. It is important to have a written plan with cross-training of roles. Plan for the worse, but hope for the best.

Recovery

Depending upon the cultural facility and the type of catastrophe, the operation may take years to recover. As mentioned earlier, items may take 10-15 years to restore due to manpower and funding. If the loss is a historic building, the time to properly restore could take years as well. In operations manufacturing or selling a product or service, this downtime is unacceptable. Because of this, a significant percentage of businesses involved in disasters, which interrupt operations, never re-open or recover.

Museums and similar operations are most commonly funded from the community and are often non-profit organizations. They derive their operating income from fund-raisers and endowments.

Income from admission and gift shop sales generally are not the major sources of funding. The loss at a museum could adversely effect the funding from contributors. If the event's consequences are magnified by the management's lack of disaster planning or loss prevention, the contributors could become dissatisfied with the institution and invest elsewhere.

Persons and museums lending works will need to be notified of the status of their collection and what is being done to preserve and salvage it. They may be able to assist in restoration and salvage activities. This would be similar to a business that would inform vendors and key customers of the status of the operations, since it has an effect on their operations.

The recovery stage of the disaster plan for a cultural facility can be long, but managed by good planning, involvement of

board of trustees and top donors and the community it serves. The museum may lose irreplaceable items but recover from the event over time with community support. For most businesses, a lengthy recovery period could lead to closing the doors forever.

Conclusion

The importance of preparing for disasters is crucial for the longevity of any operation. While disaster recovery plans are vital to all businesses, to those with the task of preserving history, a disaster recovery plan can have a substantial impact for years to come. At what level a museum safeguards its cultural and historical significant artifacts will determine what items will be seen by future generations as well as how much we value our history.



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1

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4

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8

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*Service Response Guidelines - Exceptions may apply under certain conditions, such as a local catastrophic event or storm situation.



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