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# Safeguarding Service: Emergency Preparedness Essentials

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# Safeguarding Service: Emergency Preparedness Essentials

## **Abstract**

This tool provides a checklist to help hotel managers prepare for the loss of electrical power, whether in a natural disaster or by failure of the power grid.

## **Keywords**

Cornell, tools, facilities management, disaster, service failure, recovery

## **Disciplines**

Emergency and Disaster Management | Hospitality Administration and Management

## **Comments**

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A T C O R N E L L U N I V E R S I T Y

SAFEGUARDING SERVICE:  
*EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS*  
*ESSENTIALS*

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by Robert J. Kworntnik, Ph.D.

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**CHR TOOLS FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY, No. 3**

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**CHR Tools for the Hospitality Industry, No. 3:  
Safeguarding Service:  
Emergency Preparedness Essentials**

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# Safeguarding Service: Emergency Preparedness Essentials

by Robert J. Kworntnik, Ph.D.

## Summary

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THE OVERALL LESSON of recent natural and manmade 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 power from failing, a hotel operator can mitigate the effects of the loss of power and other utilities by planning ahead. The experience of hoteliers who remained in operation during the large-scale blackout that struck the northeastern United States in August 2003 provides a roadmap for disaster preparedness.

Based on a study of hotel service failures and recovery efforts, hotel operators would do well to take precautions along the following four areas:

- Emergency planning and management;
- Facilities and process management;
- People management; and
- Customer management.

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT IS TO DESCRIBE ESSENTIAL PREPARATIONS FOR DISASTER MANAGEMENT. In particular, I present a checklist that covers the eventuality that your hotel will lose its electrical power for an extended time. While we can always hope that natural or other catastrophes will not affect our operations in this way, the truth is that many hoteliers have faced challenges in recent years due to storms, human error, and terrorism.<sup>1</sup> On August 14, 2003, for instance, the largest power failure in North American history affected some 50 million electricity customers, including thousands of hotels—caused, apparently, by human error. That another blackout has not occurred may be lucky, for the power grid remains largely unchanged since that incident.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of hotel managers' responses to the 9/11 disaster, see: Masako S. Taylor and Cathy A. Enz "Voices from the Field: General Managers' Responses to the Events of September 11, 2001," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (February 2002), pp. 7–20. Also see: Christopher R.J. Knable, "September 11, 2001: Recovering Hospitality at Ground Zero," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (October 2002), pp. 11–26; and Greg Stafford, Larry Yu, and Alex Kobina Armoo, "Crisis Management and Recovery: How Washington, D.C., Hotels Responded to Terrorism," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (October 2002), pp.27–40.

<sup>2</sup> See: "Resources for Understanding the Blackout of 2003," at [www.pserc.wisc.edu/Resources.htm](http://www.pserc.wisc.edu/Resources.htm).

Furthermore, almost a year to the day from the Blackout of '03, as it became known, hundreds of thousands of electricity customers in south Florida were rendered without power for a week after Hurricane Charley ripped into the Gulf Coast with unexpected force. Shortly after that Hurricane Frances took down power for millions on Florida's west coast, including some of the same territory still cleaning up from Charley—and then the peninsula battered down for yet another hurricane, Ivan. In the fall of 2003, Hurricane Isabel interrupted power for some 6 million electricity customers along the mid-Atlantic coast—many for a week or more. In the recent past, ice storms in the Midwest and Northeast have led to multi-day power outages, and the mismanagement of the power supply in California produced rolling blackouts on the West Coast. In summary, extended power outages are hardly uncommon. The question hotel managers face is not so much whether electrical power will fail, but whether their hotels are prepared when power *does* fail.

To learn the lessons from the Blackout of '03, I conducted a study of hotel managers' responses to that power outage shortly after the event. Results of "The Blackout Study" suggested that many hotels' operations are susceptible to problems with the loss of power, especially if the outage lasts longer than a few hours.<sup>3</sup> Based on a survey of managers at hotels that lost electricity and continued to serve their guests, the blackout exposed a range of vulnerabili-

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<sup>3</sup> The full study on which this toolkit is based is described in: Robert J. Kwortnik, "When the Lights Went Out: Hotel Managers' Perceptions of the Blackout of '03," *CHR Reports, The Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University*, Vol. 4 (2004), available at [www.chr.cornell.edu](http://www.chr.cornell.edu).

ties in hotel service delivery—from inoperable emergency systems to nonfunctioning toilets. Hotels responded to the challenge with considerable poise and effort, relying on hotel employees for service recovery. The fact remains, however, that the lodging industry needs to be better prepared for future events like the blackout by safeguarding service and, by extension, employee and guest well being.

The checklist presented here is distilled from the lessons of preparedness (or lack of it) that surfaced during The Blackout Study. It assumes that

**Many automated processes reverted to manual operation during the Blackout of '03. Computers at 72 percent of hotels were either shut down completely or seriously compromised.**

your hotel's structural integrity has not been compromised. The focus here is a set of recommendations for how to prepare for and manage during a power failure across four main areas of hotel operation: emergency planning and management, facilities and processes management, employee management, and customer management. Some recommendations come directly from the hospitality professionals who experienced the blackout first-hand. Other suggestions are based on analysis of data reported by hotel managers across the blackout region and lodging sectors. The recommendations are shown in the box on the next page and discussed in this toolkit.

## EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS CHECKLIST

### Emergency Planning and Management

- Formulate or reformulate your emergency plan.
- Perform “what if” scenarios or simulations, and plan appropriate responses.
- Run drills and tests.
- Train and re-train staff on emergency procedures.
- Stock up on emergency supplies.
- Consider convenience and comfort items.
- Keep cooking (using a grill or other outdoor appliance).
- Buy extension cords.

### Facilities and Process Management

- Know where your hotel is vulnerable if power goes down.
- Document this examination of the service delivery system.
- Know which systems are on emergency or standby power and which are not.
- Provide support beyond the NEC for emergency systems.
- If your hotel does not have standby power, price out a generator set. If your hotel does have a standby power generator, price out expanding its capacity.
- Investigate adding at least some air conditioning and lighting functionality to standby systems.
- Locate and mark phone lines that are not susceptible to the loss of electrical power.
- Keep in a known location the tools needed to ensure the functionality of manual facilities and processes.

### People Management

- Give service providers tools to perform even better.
- Train key staff members on manual processes.
- Cross train staff members on key processes and skills.
- Empower employees to solve problems and make decisions during times of crisis.
- Be visible and encourage staff to do the same.
- Reward professionalism and “service above self.”

### Customer Management

- Determine expectations.
- Investigate how to facilitate the co-production of the service experience by employees and guests during emergency situations.
- Encourage empathy.

## Emergency Planning and Management

Planning for extraordinary events such as power failures, storms, or man-made threats is a critical task for hospitality managers operating in a post-9/11 world. While it is not possible to anticipate every scenario that might disrupt hotel operations, it is possible to plan for the certain events, such as blackouts or weather-related problems common to a specific geographic area. The goal in such planning is to develop procedures for managing when the unexpected happens.

- **Formulate or reformulate your emergency plan.** If your hotel does not have an emergency plan, write one. If your hotel does have such a plan, make sure it is current and review it regularly (preferably, every six months). As detailed below, the plan should explain what to expect and when (e.g., what systems will go down in a power interruption and when they will fail), what to do, and who should do it. Although having a formal emergency plan may seem to be common sense, 20 percent of hotel managers responding to The Blackout Study said their hotels either did not have formal emergency plans or they were not sure whether such plans existed. Furthermore, 40 percent of managers said that nothing had been done after the event to better prepare for a similar occurrence in the future.
- **Perform “what if” scenarios or simulations, and plan appropriate responses.** Hotels were lucky that the Blackout of 2003 happened when it did—late in the afternoon on a nice summer day. For many hotels, that event served as a test—and a warning. What if power had failed, for instance, during the bitter cold of January 2004? What if

power was out for two days or more? What if running water was not available? (Indeed, the water supply failed at several hotels.) Managers need to consider such contingencies and to ready a specific course of action.

- **Run drills and tests.** By running regular emergency drills with your staff, you not only help to ensure that emergency plans are current and appropriate, but you may find potential unpleasant surprises, such as faulty backup systems.
- **Train and re-train staff on emergency procedures.** As illustrated by the critical role played by employees at all levels of the organization during the Blackout of '03, this training should be viewed as an investment in the service delivery system that is just as important as upgrades to facilities. Findings from The Blackout Study show that facilities failures were only part of the problem hotels faced. Some managers and staff members were unsure about what to do when power failed and how to switch to manual hotel systems.
- **Stock up on emergency supplies.** Perhaps the simplest and least expensive action in support of emergency planning and preparation is developing a checklist of needed emergency supplies and ensuring that these supplies are always in stock. Supply items include the obvious needs revealed by the blackout: flashlights and batteries, glowsticks, lanterns, bottled water, and nonperishable food items. Some unexpected needs reported by respondents were gasoline and baby products (e.g., diapers and formula).
- **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 members and guests informed during an emergency. In addition, though hotels did not report supply problems with pillows

***One particularly unpleasant side effect of the Blackout of '03 was loss of running water. Potable water became a problem for half the hotels in the survey, and more than one-fifth lost all water supplies.***

and blankets, the situation might have been different in cold weather.

- **Keep cooking.** Buy a grill for cooking and keep the propane tank full. Even hotels without F&B should consider an on-site grill for food preparation. Another option: identify area restaurants that can function without electrical power (e.g., restaurants with wood- or gas-fired ovens) 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 on medical equipment.

## Facilities and Process Management

The extent of the facilities failures and process problems revealed in The Blackout Study were surprising and, in some instances, unsettling. Although all of the hotels were able to accommodate guests, the hotel environment was often unpleasant. For example, the following elements of the hotel service delivery system were heavily or completely affected by the blackout: air conditioning and guest-room lighting (90 percent of hotels); cooking and refrigeration systems (70 percent); elevators and telephones (60 percent); hot water (40 percent); bathrooms (35 percent); emergency lights (30 percent); and

**Hotel managers were surprised to discover that some guests expected their property to have full backup power during the blackout. Guests were surprised to discover that for the most part that was not the case.**

potable water (25 percent). The latter two facilities failures are especially worrisome, for they directly influence guest and employee health and safety. Among the facilities lessons learned from the blackout experience:

- **Know where your hotel is vulnerable if power goes down.** Create a checklist of all components of the service delivery system. Facilities and processes should be examined for their susceptibility to power loss, both short term and long term. For instance, when power fails, automatic doors may freeze open or

shut, PBX phone systems may go silent, and kitchen range hoods may become inoperable.

- **Document this examination of the service delivery system.** 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.
- **Know which systems are on emergency or standby power and which are not.** With this knowledge, plans can be devised to deal with failing systems before the hotel faces a last-minute scramble.
- **Provide support beyond the NEC for emergency systems.** The National Electric Code is intended to provide *minimum* standards for emergency systems (typically, power lasting two hours). The blackout showed that minimum standards are inadequate for ensuring guest comfort and guest safety in a protracted blackout. Guests who experienced the blackout expected that emergency lights, telephones, and elevators (at least one) would work; however, these systems often faltered after a few hours, if not as soon as the blackout struck.
- **If your hotel does not have standby power, price out a generator set. If your hotel does have a standby power generator, price out expanding its capacity.** Analysis of facilities data from the blackout showed that hotels with backup generators were far better able to maintain service processes and standards than were hotels that relied on battery-backup systems. Even if it is not practical to supply the entire property with standby power, a few thousand dollars will fetch a portable genera-

tor that will provide enough electricity to supply some critical systems.

- **Investigate adding at least some air conditioning and lighting functionality to standby systems.** The loss of AC and lights was a glaring problem during the blackout and a considerable 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 the loss of electrical power.** When PBX systems went down, typically after battery backup failed, hotel managers were thankful to have a few functioning telephone lines that are 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 in a known location the tools needed to ensure the functionality of manual facilities and processes.** Have available credit card imprint machines, battery-operated calculators, registration cards, and telephones, plus tools and instructions for opening automatic doors and elevators. Make sure to have a backup supply of door keys or a way to make key cards for electronic locks.

### People Management

It is not uncommon for hospitality managers to rely on employees for service recovery when things go wrong. Findings from The Blackout Study show that employees deserved much of the credit for ameliorating an otherwise anxious, uncomfortable guest experience. From simple acts of service, such

as escorting guests to their rooms, to more heroic efforts, such as carrying buckets of water from the swimming pool to flush toilets, employees often put “service above self.” However, managers should not expect employees to carry the burden of service recovery, especially during difficult circumstances or for lengthy periods. The objective,

*Managers found themselves “winging it” during the blackout. Many had no emergency plan, while others had emergency plans that did not apply or that they simply disregarded.*

instead, should be to minimize disruptions to the service system in the first place. The following are recommendations for better management of hotels' human resources:

- **Give service providers tools to perform even better.** One of the best ways for hotel owners and managers to let employees shine is to give them the necessary tools to function during a blackout. This includes reliable backup systems, a solid emergency plan, and adequate training.
- **Train key staff members on manual processes.** During emergencies, the staff's ability to implement manual processes for tasks such as guest check-in and billing can help to minimize service disruption in these areas.
- **Cross train staff members on key processes and skills.** Cross training allows managers to reallocate staff resources to where they

are needed. Equally important, though, is the sense of perspective that cross training gives employees as they wear the hats of coworkers and pull together as a team.

- **Empower employees to solve problems and make decisions during times of crisis.** Although key decisions during extraordinary events should be guided by contingency plans, circumstances will arise when employees will have to “go off script,” for example, to siphon gas from the hotel van for a guest in

*The loss of cooking systems at 70 percent of the hotels studied was compounded by the failure of refrigeration facilities at 75 percent of properties.*

need of fuel or to unlock vending machines to feed hungry travelers. 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 emergency situations, 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 and you care.
- **Reward professionalism and “service above self.”** Rewarding

outstanding employee behavior can help to solidify a true service culture.

## Customer Management

Emergency plans must include expectations for guests’ participation in the service process. If nothing else, hotel employees will experience increased interaction with guests during emergency events. For example, the lobby at many of the hotels affected by the 2003 blackout became a meeting place where information was shared. One manager noted that guests stayed in the lobby playing games with other guests until they went to bed. In that regard, an essential finding of The Blackout Study is that the effects of the blackout were not as bad as they might otherwise have been, simply because many guests made the best of it. Hotel managers can foster this positive co-production of the guest experience by applying the following ideas:

- **Determine expectations.** As part of developing an emergency plan, managers should survey target customers to determine what guests expect during extraordinary circumstances. For example, data from The Blackout Study suggest that guests expected hotels to have both emergency lighting (a reasonable expectation) and full standby power (perhaps not so reasonable).
- **Investigate how to facilitate the co-production of the service experience by employees and guests during emergency situations.** Steps to manage expectations and provide news and information to guests can be integrated into emergency plans. For example, if having guests gather in the lobby

during an emergency helps with information flow and reducing panic, this should be documented so that staff members can direct guests to the lobby.

- **Encourage empathy.** People traveling away from home already feel vulnerable. Emergencies heighten this feeling. What is needed is understanding, patience, flexibility, personal attention, and genuine caring. The same is likely to be needed by hotel staff. Empathy matters and is a critical dimension of service quality during times of crisis.

### 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 The Blackout Study is that much of the hotel industry was not and still is not prepared for unexpected events such as a protracted power failure. While it's true that most hotels were able to provide lodging for their guests and even to non-guests, many hotels lacked basic amenities. A tremendous effort by hotels' employees made it possible to continue accommodating guests, but the fact remains that overall service quality was compromised during the Blackout of '03. Many facilities failures could have been mitigated, if not avoided entirely, with better planning, especially if that is coupled with an investment in auxiliary power-generation systems. ♦

## About the author

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