

## **Safe or Sorry...**

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In addition to being a full-time meeting and event planning professional, many of us are active in our communities. Some of us are even activists and find ourselves in the midst of brewing pots of political maelstroms and recently, one comes to mind that should make all professionals sit up and take notice.

I attended a public forum this past Fall on an evening that had serious inclement weather warnings posted throughout the entire day. Conditions were rife for severe thunderstorms and cell clusters that could have made the “perfect storm”, including conditions ripe for tornadoes. Attendance was imperative as a poor “showing” would have been counterproductive to a great deal of hard volunteer work by a good many. People came from as far as Milwaukee and Madison, as well as us “locals”. I had been in communication with this branch of government many days prior to the meeting and asked to please be provided with all pertinent information about location, directions, meeting agenda and protocol for public input and so on. I wanted to share this information through my eblast list to notify others of the meeting protocol they should expect with public input and participation. The professional public relations contact through this particular branch became exceedingly peeved with my request. After receiving a limited agenda only, I emailed back with some recommendations, sharing that I was a meeting and event planning professional, and received a terse response that he too “was a professional” and that he had a plan and we’d find out when we arrived.

As meeting expectations were set and sadly missed with a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation that ran one hour over the time allotted on their agenda with people getting antsy in their seats, they began the process of taking questions and comments from the audience ala “Phil Donahue”. At no time at the beginning of the meeting were there any housekeeping announcements where attendees were asked to turn off pagers or cell phones, shown where the exits were located nor were they advised of what to do in the event of a weather emergency and where attendees should go to take protective cover.

Suffice it to say, this was the evening the tornado touched down in Stoughton. While many miles away from Stoughton, in Oshkosh, water spouts and tornadoes had been spotted over our lakes and land, causing warning sirens to go off repeatedly, advising people to take immediate protective shelter. After what felt like an eternity with no one from the lectern even being aware of the sirens in the background, I raised my hand and said, “I’m not certain if you’re aware of this or not, but there are tornado sirens blaring in the background and it would be prudent if you would please advise us of your safety protocol in taking protective cover as tornadoes have been spotted in our immediate

vicinity”! Mind you, we were in a large combination brick and steel pole type maintenance building on the second floor and there was no basement.

With all humility, watching this group of government employees run around like a group of Keystone Cops in panic mode, they ran to the back of the room to view the evacuation procedure in event of a fire to quickly learn there was no recommendation for tornado protocol, it made me sit up and take note that they didn't have a clue as to what should have been done, or what needed to be done and thankfully, no one was injured in the process. I can only shudder and think what might have happened at this meeting had it taken place in Stoughton or their surrounding areas that evening.

We should all be safety conscious when planning meetings or events. We have an ethical responsibility to our attendees, not to mention liability, and it should be taken with grave seriousness. I had the pleasure of working with many student and peer volunteers on a large-scale production here in the Fox Cities again this past summer. Handouts included information as to safety protocol and a clear understanding that EMT's were on the grounds until 8:00PM, response after 8:00PM would take 2-3 minutes for an ambulance to arrive, radio protocol was addressed with advisement of the location of any emergency and then supporting the security staff of the client to maintain order, keeping guests calm and assisting with evacuation if necessary, ensuring all the guests' safety. During walk-through site visits, they were made aware of where all exits were located for each part of the function, as well as other impediments that needed to be evaluated and changed prior to the event launching. Their eyes were wide open and their recommendations were taken into account as changes were made to address safety. In addition, our main team of stakeholders discussed ad nauseum with our entire team at our final preproduction meeting in our “GAP Analysis all the “what if's” and “what else might we be missing” that could potentially be a risk or potential hazard that we might have had to contend with, ensuring everyone's safety. Yes, is it tedious at times, but it is imperative.

In the advent of 9/11, companies quickly responded with the compiling of emergency and/or disaster plans. Many have confessed their books have dust on them and haven't been taken down from the shelf since they were written and approved. This topic has been a hotbed this past Fall and early Winter with so much devastation occurring during the hurricane season and cities, states and federal organizations not being as prepared as they could or should have been in the midst of Mother Nature's lack of mercy to our Gulf Coast areas.

Companies, independents, suppliers....everyone should be looking at safety at all times and making adjustments as the tides of life take such swift and many times, deadly turns . Tyra Hilliard, JD, CMP, Associate Professor of Tourism & Convention Administration at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas shares, “My experience has been that it's a tough subject to broach with meeting professionals. Some attendees in my sessions have been disappointed because they just want me to tell them what to do in case of X, Y or Z. As we know from SARS, tsunamis, 9/11; we never know what might happen next. For that reason, I can't just tell people ‘what to do in case of...’. Meeting and event professionals

need to look at this as a process, a strategic imperative. Making that interesting and informative without being boring and depressing can be a challenge”!

Here’s a “jumping off” checklist of what you should have just for “starters” for each meeting or event, keeping in mind that there are no cookie cutter templates as each event and meeting has a complexion of its own, but it provides a positive springboard for ensuring your attendees’ safety:

- Company Disaster Plan
- Emergency Protocol (Emergency numbers, local doctors, hospitals, etc. as well as who is in charge.)
- Key Meeting/Event Contacts List
- Incident Reports (Just in case...)
- Insurance Certificates on Hand in Event/Meeting Binders
- Announcements at the beginning of every meeting or event pointing out protocol for safe exit in the event of an emergency.
- Review with your site of their own disaster plan. When was the last time they “practiced” with their site staff and what the emergency protocol is internally to ensure public safety? Who takes the lead? Are they willing to bring in their security department to be a part of your team?
- In the event of inclement weather, who makes the call to remain outdoors, take the event inside or have a “rain date”? If you’re not the decision maker, do you have a plan in place to protect your staff and attendees?
- Always make certain you have a central meeting point should you ever have to evacuate or move to a place out of harms way.
- Make certain you have what’s necessary to account for all your attendees with guest and rooming lists, as well as staff, dependent upon the circumstances surrounding your meeting or event. Many were still missing months after the hurricanes wrecked their havoc in New Orleans and Mississippi.
- If you’re an outsourced independent party that is providing goods and services, does your contract have a clause that addresses the safety of your vendors, suppliers, employees or contract employees safety in the event of an emergency?
- Do you or members of your staff maintain current CPR certification? First Aid Certification?
- Do you look at everything from a birds-eye and worms-eye view as well?
- Do you carry duct AND gaffers tape in your “bag of event and meeting tricks”?
- If you have décor as part of your overall event, can you pass the BIC lighter test if a fire marshal were to make a surprise inspection? Do you maintain information about flame retardancy in your event folder for a pop inspection? There’s nothing worse than having décor mandated to be removed because it doesn’t pass safety standards. (Note: There are federal, state and local fire laws. Know where you are as the liability rests on you, the planner and not the client, site or supplier.)

This is merely the tip of the iceberg. Julia Rutherford Silvers, CSEP, who is also one of the world’s leading experts and authorities on risk management, says, “It is not a ‘light’ or ‘fun’ topic. It is not a simple topic either. The scope touches every aspect of an event

or meeting from the goal setting to the evaluations. For every item on the strategic or operational planning list, there are risks to be considered. I realize that meeting and event planners are already considering those risks when they make their decisions about the intent, extent and content of their programs. I think the challenge may be to recognize that as a risk a management function...bringing it forward is a conscious and deliberate action.”

Amongst the many pearls of wisdom our mother’s taught us as children growing up, “It is better to be safe....than sorry”!

Resources:

[http://www.juliasilvers.com/embok/EMBOK\\_structure\\_update.htm](http://www.juliasilvers.com/embok/EMBOK_structure_update.htm)

[www.davislogic.com/NFPA1600.htm](http://www.davislogic.com/NFPA1600.htm)

[www.contingencyplanning.com](http://www.contingencyplanning.com)

<http://www.nfpa.org/PDF/nfpa1600.pdf?src=nfpa>

[www.iacvb.org](http://www.iacvb.org)

[www.iaem.org](http://www.iaem.org)