

Storm planning: It's big business for private firms

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There's no shortage of advice this year on how to prepare for a hurricane. After two record storm seasons, both the message and the messenger are expanding.

Government agencies, weather gurus, nonprofit groups and, yes, newspapers have long preached preparedness. But now more than ever, private business is getting into the mix.

As the start of hurricane season approaches Thursday, major companies such as Office Depot, Grainger and Energizer are publishing their own hurricane guides, launching awareness campaigns and hosting seminars.

Smaller businesses such as law firms, banks and employment agencies are also offering tips for their niche.

Some are providing specialty advice
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Helping firms get ready can make them customers

▶ HURRICANE from 1A

not found elsewhere, and many are putting more emphasis on helping small businesses.

They say they have the expertise, so they want to share it.

"Private industry should be taking more of the focus on this," said Tom Serio, director of global business continuity for Delray Beach-based Office Depot Inc. "We have the experience, we know what happens in disasters, we lived through hurricanes. We want to help share that with small business and explain why they need to plan."

Planning's a business, too

And while the advice is free, it's also a good business move, experts say. It can create goodwill and brand recognition with customers, drawing them to the companies' products.

In other words, preparing businesses for hurricanes has become a business of its own.

"They have the experience, they could provide good information and they stand to benefit from it. That's reasonable," said Richard Lutz, a University of Florida marketing professor. "Almost all major companies are going to be looking at that as a return on their investment."

Companies likely are putting more efforts into hurricane planning because the recent storms have created a more receptive audience, Lutz said. It also may be a reflection of two years of criticism of the federal government's relief efforts.

"The reason you might see more private sector activity is because of the widespread publicity of the damage and the general impression that the government wasn't able to handle it," Lutz said, adding, "The private sector with its profit motive and greater efficiency has the capability of helping people be more proactive."

Serio said businesses are obligated to help.

"Government didn't respond like they should last year," he said. "Companies need to be accountable for themselves."

Office Depot released an online storm preparedness guide at the beginning of this week. It's the first such effort for the retailer. The company is also offering a free online seminar for small businesses Tuesday.

Serio enlisted a disaster recovery expert to help develop the colorful 12-page presentation.

"We are a small business provider. This is just another way that we can support them," he said. "There's a lot of mystique about planning. We're trying to make it very simple."

And maybe sell some merchandise?

"Of course it drives people to our products, it drives people to our stores," he said. "But we have the solutions. It's not just a marketing thing. It's got some good insight from people that do this on a day-to-day basis."

More specialized advice

Businesses, skilled in advertising and marketing, perhaps are better at delivering the message to consumers, Lutz said.

Their printed materials and sponsored events tend to be more eye-catching than the same information from government officials.

Businesses often can offer specialty advice beyond the government's tips. Computer companies are teaching folks how to protect their data. Banks are releasing financial tips, and lawyers are offering legal advice.

As long as it's accurate, there's no such thing as too much advice, said Adrienne Moore, president of the Florida Public Relations Association.

"You can never have too many avenues to get the message out there, because people get their information in different ways," she said.

One West Palm Beach law firm, Schwarzberg Spector Duke Schulz & Rogers, hosted two breakfast meetings last week for businesses.

The firm specializes in employment law and offered tips on a variety of storm-related issues, such as: Can businesses require workers to come in? Do they have to pay them if the business is closed?

A first for the firm, much

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of the agenda stemmed from questions that came up after last year's storms, said managing member Steve Schwarzberg.

Schwarzberg wants to educate businesses so they'll look to his firm in the future.

"Our bottom line: We have established ourselves as the go-to firm for employment law in Palm Beach County," he said.

Maintenance supplies giant W.W. Grainger Inc. also published a hurricane guide this year and is holding a series of awareness events across the state, offering tips to businesses to get them through the storms.

"Responding to and preparing for hurricanes is a major focus within our company right now," said Dave Smetana, regional branch services vice president for 10 Southeastern states, including Florida. "We've prepared for hurricanes in the past, but we haven't publicized it like we are this year and really being proactive."

The Lake Forest, Ill.-based company sells businesses equipment to run their facilities, including an assortment that could prove useful after a hurricane, such as goggles, gloves and gas cans.

Fittingly, Energizer is also among the companies pushing preparation. Batteries are, of course, at the top of most hurricane supply lists.

St. Louis-based Energizer Holdings Inc. launched its "Plan. Prepare. Protect." program this month with a series of safety messages. The program runs through July, with awareness events in seven cities including Tampa and Miami where they'll be helping consumers put together home emergency kits.

The effort includes a product pitch with a new line of flashlights and lanterns.

"It's generating business, but it's giving back," said Tricia Schuler, the company's North America director of lighting.

IBM has been hosting free town-hall meetings and online seminars for years to help businesses prepare for disasters, from hurricanes to ice storms. But those sessions seem to be more urgent this year because that potential hurricane is less of a hypothetical and more of a certainty, said Dick Fordham, development manager for IBM's business continuity and recovery services.

"There's probably more advice coming from businesses this year than you've ever seen before," he said. "There's so much pressure about these hurricanes. It seems that everybody's jumping on the bandwagon."

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