

## Launching Effective Emergency Response Services In The Contact Center

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The unprecedented string of natural disasters in 2017, including hurricanes Harvey and Irma, had devastating consequences for individuals, communities, and businesses. It also illuminated a significant need for companies of all sizes operating across every industry and geography: proactive emergency response plans.

According to a 2016 survey by Arcserve, approximately 20 percent of companies do not have a documented disaster recovery plan. As such, when faced with a catastrophic situation, business leaders are forced into reactive positions, many without so much as a plan for finding employees, verifying their safety, or conveying critical updates about pay and available resources.

Contact center managers are no strangers to reacting quickly to urgent client needs.

In fact, more often than not, our services are retained following an issue or event that requires rapid response and consistent communication to a broad group of stakeholders. But, when lives and livelihoods are at stake, a reactive position is neither desirable nor effective.

Businesses – large and small alike – would be well served to have emergency contact center response services proactively baked into their disaster recovery plans. And those plans would benefit measurably from the contact center's expertise, most notably its ability to ramp up operations quickly, facilitate voluminous inbound and outbound calls and emails, maintain strict security protocols, and provide near-real-time progress reports to company leadership.

But emergency response services are not like traditional contact center programs. They require a unique, tailored approach to infrastructure, recruiting, training, quality assurance, and marketing. The following is a practical guide for contact center leadership considering launching an emergency response service line.

### Technology and Infrastructure

Contact centers cannot support emergency response programs unless their technology infrastructure and business continuity plans are solid. Fundamental technology should include a network capable of connecting the physical contact center with satellite locations that can handle workflow in the event the contact center goes offline. Operations must be able to support multichannel communications, as response programs may necessitate the use of phone, email, text, chat rooms, and IVR systems. And the importance of analogue systems, such as in-house printers, can't be discounted. Physical 'crisis cards' with critical contact information, distributed to all clients and their employees at the time of engagement, will ensure they have the information they need to reach the contact center during an emergency.

From a business continuity perspective, ensure written disaster recovery plans are functional and understood by all managers. Confirm data storage protocols on both cloud-based platforms and in off-site facilities are consistent. Finally, consider doing a disaster test run once a year to confirm the facility's capacity to maintain operations during crisis situations. When your operations are prepared for anything, you can better support your clients in preparing theirs.

### **Recruiting + Staffing**

All contact center programs are unique and, as such, require agents to have a specific skill set. For emergency response programs, managers should define the qualities they're looking for in an agent – these might include patience, composure, a can-do attitude, and the capacity for empathy – and share those characteristics with partner recruiting agencies for use in vetting potential candidates.

Once the right agents have been recruited and emergency response programs are deployed, they should be staffed aggressively to maximize the number of inbound and outbound calls while minimizing ring and hold times. Failure to staff appropriately may cause additional stress or anxiety by callers and could damage the efficacy of the program entirely.

### **Training + Onboarding**

In emergency situations, accelerated onboarding is often required. As a best practice, contact center managers should prepare an abbreviated training session that fulfills mandatory requirements and enables agents to get to work quickly. A condensed training might allow for the completion of standard paperwork remotely, freeing in-person training sessions for hands-on activities such as role playing and job shadowing, which are critical to building agent confidence and job proficiency.

Empathy training is a requisite part of any emergency response training program. Effective empathy training will incorporate storytelling and multimedia, such as emergency response videos, audio, and transcripts, to convey a clear and unfiltered view of the reality experienced by many callers. The challenge for managers lies in helping agents maintain empathy and compassion, call after call, week after week, without becoming desensitized. The only way to do this is to reinforce expectations through ongoing learning and development modules, scheduled every two to three weeks, at minimum, during emergency programs. A one-time empathy training module will not suffice.

### **Quality Assurance**

Emergency response programs can be overwhelming, but maintaining the quality of the program is still a principal objective. Since emergency response can be very personal, consider inviting clients to participate in the QA process by weighing in on KPIs or remotely monitoring calls. For clients who are unable to take a hands-on approach to quality assurance, keep them informed as the program unfolds by delivering hourly or daily status updates. In addition to sharing program metrics such as call volume, consider sharing anecdotal information, including caller feedback, which will help provide peace of mind in a difficult situation.

Finally, evaluate the performance of all internal stakeholders at the culmination of an emergency response program. Insights from employee surveys, client feedback, and one-on-one meetings with managers should be leveraged to assess progress and improve quality in future programs.



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## Emergency Response Services as a Value Driver

Company decision-makers and leaders do not like to believe that their business will be the target of a disaster, natural or otherwise, which makes marketing emergency response services particularly challenging. That said, the unique expertise and infrastructure of a contact center makes it an ideal partner for companies that need a more robust, inclusive disaster recovery plan.

In many cases, it's up to the business development team to make a strong case for why clients should include emergency services in their disaster recovery plans. Remind potential clients that emergency response services are not like traditional insurance plans, written to protect equipment and help rebuild infrastructure. These services, on the other hand, are deployed as a way of maintaining a line of communication with a company's most important assets – its employees – during its most difficult times.

Incorporating emergency response is good for company morale. It shows employees they are valued by their companies and that leadership cares about their wellbeing as much as it does about company systems and business continuity. To this end, there should be some element of business development around emergency response services incorporated into every new business proposal or pitch as the services are a value driver for any client in any sector.

Natural disasters and other catastrophic events are unavoidable. How a company reacts to crises, however, says a lot about what it values. Those that proactively integrate emergency response services into their disaster recovery plans are making an investment in their businesses and demonstrating the value they place on their team members. And contact centers – with their unmatched operational, training, and quality assurance expertise – are a natural partner for companies of all shapes and sizes that need more comprehensive, effective disaster recovery plans.

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