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Trends, Best Practices, and Opinions on Community Involvement

Disaster Relief: What's Your Policy?

What to consider when deciding how--or if--to respond to a disaster

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When a disaster of immense proportions like Typhoon Haiyan hits, corporations around the world have to make two important decisions:

Should we respond? If yes, how should we respond?

In the best case scenario, the company already has a policy that dictates its disaster response. But not every company does, and many end up scrambling to figure out what to do each and every time.

If you are still undecided about what to do about Typhoon Haiyan or disaster relief in general, read on for some help in answering the questions above.

The first thing to remember is that help will be needed for a long time to come. Many companies rush in with donations--cash and otherwise--in the first weeks and months following a disaster. While there are many reasons why you might want to support the first response, there are plenty of other reasons to wait and be part of the recovery and/or rebuilding efforts. One big reason to wait is that too often the affected region gets forgotten once it leaves the headlines, but the needs remain. Nearly four years post-earthquake, Haiti is far from being rebuilt. In LBG Associates' own neighborhood, people displaced by Superstorm Sandy are still displaced a year later. (See sidebar for the four different phases of disaster management.)

First Things First: Should You Respond?

No company can respond to every disaster. Whether it is a typhoon in the Philippines or tornadoes in Illinois, disasters are happening all the time across the globe. The best case scenario is that the company has created a matrix for deciding when to respond and when not to. We create these matrices for our clients to facilitate their decision-making. Typically, a matrix would include at minimum three considerations: employees, location of the disaster, and scope of the disaster. They can get much more complex, of course, but as a start you should look at the direct impact on employees, whether the disaster happened where you have significant operations, and the magnitude of the disaster. You

The Four Phases of Disaster Management

In our *Issue Briefing on Disaster Relief* (free for the asking--email us at lbgassoc@gmail.com), LBG Associates defines disaster management as follows:

"Disaster management" is the collective term that encompasses all aspects of planning for, and responding to, disasters. Disaster management includes both pre- and post-disaster activities, is

can also add into the matrix indirect impact on employees, location of major clients, suppliers, and other key stakeholder requests for assistance, public relations, and more.

Right now, a company may choose to respond to both the typhoon and tornado disasters. Although very different, the sheer magnitude of the typhoon damage may trigger a response, while the presence of operations or employees in southern Illinois may do the same.

Should you give the same to the Philippines as to Illinois? The extent of your response should be based on degrees of impact: how many people or employees have been affected? Is the location a priority market or large operational site for the company? Is doing nothing a huge PR risk for the company?

primarily focused on preventing disasters and reducing the impacts when they occur, and is based on the concept of active community participation in all four phases of the disaster cycle: **mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.**

Response is the phase most companies participate in, although forward thinking companies with relevant competencies or operations in disaster-prone areas think about mitigation and preparedness a lot. The **recovery** phase begins when basic human needs such as food, clothing and shelter have been met and the work shifts toward clean-up and rebuilding.

As important as what you do or not do is your ability to explain your response to your stakeholders and the public. If your decision-making process is sound and your actions are in line with your historical responses, you are less likely to be criticized (although someone will always think you have not done enough). So, think through different scenarios and decide your response in advance of a disaster instead of being purely reactive.

Staging Your Response

As a company, you may want to consider how your resources can best impact the victims of a disaster. A building supply company can provide lumber and materials in the recovery phase and let others supply cash in the response phase. A transportation company can supply rail, air or truck transportation of relief supplies, or partner with the building supply company to deliver building materials. Engineering companies can send in pro bono help in the recovery phase and mitigate and/or prepare for the next disaster. Your decision requires a thoughtful assessment of the gravity of the situation and an understanding of the resources your company can contribute.

Here's an example of one client's plan:

In the immediate wake of the disaster, this client expands its matching gift program to include prescreened disaster relief NGOs. This company has a number of different partners that provide different kinds of aid and relief and among them reach a broad portion of the globe. It notifies its employees of the match via email and intranet and uses this communication to send the message that the company is concerned and compassionate. All of this is prearranged with its matching gifts vendor so that the process is reasonably seamless.

Then, it allows itself time to gather data. This includes determining employee and senior management expectation or requests for support, direct requests for support to the company from the affected communities, data from its partners about the situation on the ground, and available company resources. It also watches other companies' responses, particularly its competitors. Then it decides which NGO or NGOs will receive help (cash, in-kind, employee time) and the level of commitment. Within two weeks, it has a considered and defensible response.

Following Hurricanes Katrina and Irene, the Asian tsunamis, the earthquake in Haiti and Superstorm Sandy, many companies took the time to create policies and plans for future disasters. If you haven't yet adopted a disaster relief and recovery plan, there is no better time. When it comes to disasters, the motto "be prepared" goes for corporations across the globe, not just those in harm's way.

About LBG Associates

LBG Associates is a woman-owned consulting firm focused on designing, implementing, and managing corporate citizenship and community outreach programs and initiatives. Founded in 1993 by Dr. Linda Gornitsky, LBG Associates drives social change through advice, implementation, research, and training. Find more information at: www.lbg-associates.com.

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