

Crisis and Backup Planning

No event – no matter how well-planned and well-run – is immune to the occasional crisis or disaster. Take, for example, the Saturn car company of Spring Hill, Tennessee.

In 1994, Saturn planned a wonderful weekend event for its customers, complete with entertainment, barbecue, factory tours and family amusements for 38,000 guests. In

the middle of the party, a large tornado tore through the site, wreaking havoc and nearly causing panic. Thanks in large part to some **level-headed staff** and a **good emergency plan**, injuries were dealt with quickly, guests were kept calm and well-informed, and the entire party joined forces in a massive cleanup effort. In fact, Saturn has been cited for excellence in crisis and contingency planning by industry professionals.

Disasters and crises can range from relatively small (the guest of honor's plane is delayed due to bad weather) to huge and seemingly insurmountable, like the Saturn tornado. A good event planner will be able to think on his or her feet for the small stuff, and have a solid crisis plan in place for dealing with the biggies. You can't possibly expect to plan for every type of crisis, but a little advance planning will go a long way to ensure that you can handle whatever comes your way.

Prior to the day of the event, put together a **crisis response team** and develop a plan. Include venue staff and local emergency response officials. Decide who will handle communications with the emergency personnel, the press, the attendees and other key groups, and do a run-through of a staged emergency. It's a good idea to give everyone

on the team a laminated card with contact names and numbers, and make sure mobile

phones or walkie-talkies are available, charged and in good working order.

Maintenance Emergencies

If your event takes place in a hotel or convention facility you should discuss emergency plans with the **Director of Sales** and **Maintenance Engineer**. They should provide you with a contact at the site that will take care of any emergency or maintenance issues. If your event is being held in a private hall, find out who in their organization is responsible for facility management and ask for someone to be available during your event. In your contact list, keep numbers of 24-hour

locksmiths, plumbers and electricians.

TIP: Make sure you get written permission and permits squared away as early in the process as possible. Outdoor events taking place in public areas like parks will need to be cleared through the city, and they may have specific requirements regarding sanitation, setup, parking, security and traffic flow. Understand local ordinances and procedures, and never, ever, ever assume that you are in compliance. When in doubt, ask. Then get it in writing!

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Medical Emergencies

When planning a large outdoor festival or sporting event, it is advisable to have **first aid personnel** on hand for emergencies. Festival-goers may suffer from heat stroke (or hypothermia in a cold location), minor or major cuts, sunburn or food poisoning. It's a good idea to include in your rental items a tent that can be used to shelter people from

the sun or cold while receiving treatment for minor injuries. Discuss options and get advice from your local ambulance volunteer force or contracted service providers. Be sure to include the local hospital, emergency line and non-emergency police number in your list of contacts.

Demonstrations or Other Confrontations



Although it sounds far-fetched that you will ever run into this circumstance, you should be prepared for it to happen. An example of an event that could bring unwanted confrontations is a fashion show. Animal rights activists may demonstrate against the clothing designer who includes fur in the runway line-up.

If you are involved in planning an event that could have some controversy attached to it, you should have **uniformed security staff** on hand to handle the situation. If the event is a large conference of international leaders, you should make contact with local law enforcement officers.

Weather

Extreme weather happens and it frequently happens unexpectedly. If you are planning an event for a storm-prone area, you might want to investigate acquiring **insurance** that will compensate you and/or your client for any losses.

The Rehearsal

We are all familiar with rehearsals for social events, especially weddings. The rehearsal is a dry run-through of the agenda for the main event, and gives the participants a chance to work out logistical details and ask questions about procedures, protocol and programs. Rehearsals are just as important for business and professional events, and should include any **staff** working the event, key **committee members**, and, if possible, **speakers** and **presenters** or their

representatives.



During the rehearsal, you'll want to check the following:

- **Registration:** Once the lobby is filled with guests, will the registration table block the flow of traffic? Do you have all the supplies you need, like pens, staplers, extra name tags, etc.?
- **Staging:** Are there stairs leading up to the stage? Can the speakers maneuver them with ease? How about podium height? Sufficient microphone stands? Do the potted palm trees block the audience's view of the speaker's slides?
- **Timing:** How long does it take for the award recipient to reach the stage? (In a large, crowded room, this might take a good deal longer than you imagine.)
- **Food service:** Is there ample room for wait staff to negotiate the crowd? How about the flow in and out of the kitchen area?
- **Participants:** Do all the speakers and presenters have a detailed copy of the program? Do they know their cue? Where can they look for a cue from a staff person? If VIPs require dressing rooms, have you timed the walk to the stage?

These are just a few of the questions that will be answered once you do a rehearsal of your event. Take notes and make sure any last-minute details are ironed out before you hit the event for real.

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