

When Disaster Strikes, A Case Study

Background: A 2,500-person international conference took place in Atlanta in mid-April. Just as we were planning our departure, the eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano closed all major airspace in Europe.

The Problem: This conference is 25% Europeans and 40% graduate students, for whom being stranded poses financial and logistical stresses. Because the eruption occurred on the last day of the meeting, the travel delays were crippling for our European attendees. The conference does not have a written emergency plan.

The Solution: We had to create a communications plan on the fly, both to succinctly relay important information to the delegates as well as to assure them that help was available. The guiding principle was to push out accurate information early and often. Within just a few hours, we started to act:

- Immediately contacted the hotel to confirm the availability of rooms at the conference rate through the weekend.
- Emailed all registered delegates to advise them of the travel disruption.
- Set up a stranded traveler help desk to provide resources and moral support.
- Provided a roommate matching service, pairing empty beds with needy travelers.
- Posted real-time updates on Twitter using the conference hashtag. Circulated a new Twitter hashtag to allow stranded conference travelers to keep in touch with one another.
- Set up an information page on the conference website with continuously updated information and resources.

For attendees who would be stranded beyond the duration of the conference, we secured a meeting point at a local university. This space provided basic necessities such as meals and internet access, so attendees could communicate with home.

Though we did not have an emergency plan to follow, our delegates had accurate information while they scrambled to make plans because we responded quickly and concisely.



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you rarely do any of them well at all.

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