



Risk Management

by Todd Seiders, CLSD

Ten steps to prepare your hotel for the next power outage

Another great article from *The Rooms Chronicle*®, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com

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As you all may have heard (or actually lived through), the entire San Diego area and parts of southern California experienced a massive power outage in early September. The power outage ran from south Orange County, to all of San Diego, and parts of Mexico and Arizona. The power was out for approximately eight hours for most locations.

Power outages are indeed disruptive to hotels, their employees and most certainly its guests. Obviously elevators, escalators, computers, televisions, lights, and refrigeration systems will stop working unless the hotel maintains an emergency power source from a generator. But even the largest generators can typically only support limited electrical service to a big hotel. Hence, it is critical that hotels prepare well in advance for a power outage, which could occur at the least opportune time. Attempting to round up emergency supplies, diesel fuel, and other support items after an outage has occurred will likely prove costly, futile, or both.

So take the time now to ask yourself, “How prepared is my hotel for a massive power outage?”

Here are ten steps to get you started on your emergency response plan for dealing with a large scale power outage:

1. *Dust off your Emergency Response Plan (ERP) and reintroduce it to your staff.* Review the “main” emergency sections such as earthquake, fire, power outage and fire alarms with your team. UPDATE your plans if your ERP is old! A three-ring binder containing updated response plans should be located in or near the manager’s office for each department in the hotel. It should be accessible 24-hours a day, or whenever employees from that department are scheduled to work. The binder should contain checklists of responsibilities for employees of that department to be completed for each specified emergency, as well as the location of all emergency supplies.
2. *Buy a case (or more) of light sticks today.* A case of light sticks costs less than \$50 and lasts for years. Once a light stick is activated, it will emit light for several hours. Do not use candles....ever....they start fires. Light sticks can be given to guests, and used throughout the hotels to illuminate hallways and stairwells. Keep all light sticks located in a central location, such as an emergency supply locker in Engineering.
3. *Buy some heavy duty flashlights and batteries for your staff to use during the blackout.* Your staff needs good quality and durable flashlights to manage the

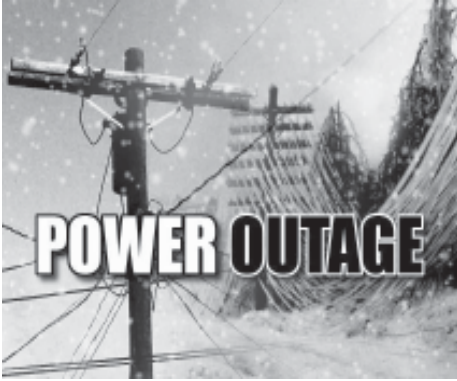


business. However, unlike light sticks, these need to be located in each department where they can be accessed immediately. Suggestion: Place the flashlight next to the Emergency Response Plan binder so you can read it when the lights go out! Engineering should inspect flashlights and binders on a monthly basis when they make their rounds to inspect fire extinguishers, fire hoses, and sprinkler heads.

Pictured below: This mobile box stored outside the Engineering department of the Renaissance Waverly Hotel in Atlanta contains flashlights, batteries, light sticks, and other necessary equipment in the event a power outage occurs.



4. *Make your emergency set of room keys today, for the next power outage.* Depending on what kind of room key system you have, you may be required to make up special room keys BEFORE the power goes out (and your ability to make keys). These are sometimes known as “failsafe” keys. While electronic door locks operate from batteries, the key coding machines at the front desk operate from AC electricity. Lose electricity and the hotel loses its ability to make room keys. Every hotel with electronic locks should maintain a set of pre-coded room keys that will automatically unlock a guestroom door even when power is lost. These keys are typically maintained in binders and must be kept locked up (but accessible to front desk personnel). If a hotel maintains three sets of “failsafe” keys for each guestroom, the hotel can continue to issue keys for a minimum of three days if power is lost. If a hotel does not prepare “failsafe” keys in advance, the only way to open a guestroom door is with a master key or emergency key. Your electronic lock manufacturer can provide step by step directions on creating “failsafe” keys.
5. *If your hotel has an emergency generator, create a list of the areas that will have power during a blackout.* Place this list in each ERP binder. This should include what business machines (key coding machine, property management system, call accounting system, etc.), what computers, and which elevators will work? Will your internal phone system work, and will your employee radios work? Which refrigeration systems and HVAC zones will be operational? Know ahead of time what electric sockets will be supported by the emergency generator.
6. *Revisit how to handle trapped guests in elevators.* You DO NOT want a houseman flipping switches and turning dials in the elevator equipment room! Contact your elevator maintenance company and have them train engineering personnel and MOD managers on how to handle a trapped guest in an elevator. Remember that warning bells for elevators must operate off of batteries or an AC source hooked to an emergency generator, otherwise trapped guests and employees will not be able to signal they are stuck and will panic.
7. *Will the hotel’s fire alarm system still work during a power outage?* Most fire alarm systems have battery back-up systems, but how long will that battery last? Do employees know how to implement a “fire watch” if the hotel’s fire safety system does not work?
8. *Does the F&B department have a plan to preserve refrigerated food from spoiling?* More than likely your hotel will have ice machines, but it may not have large ice chests to preserve your refrigerated food. Start talking about how to save your food and get ice chests now to have for the next emergency. The ice in your ice machines won’t last long, but is still available if you are going to need it. In the meantime, lock down all coolers and freezers so employees will not access them. Even opening a cooler door for 15 seconds will cause an increase in internal temperature in the refrigerator if the electricity is not working.
9. *Train key managers and engineering personnel how to “power down” the building if the power goes out.* Your building electrical system may get damaged once the power is restored, and “surge” back into your building. Best practices for most hotels is to turn off main power switches if there is a power outage, and then slowly turn them back on one at a time once the power is restored. A power surge can blow out fuses and trip circuit breakers if your building receives electricity all at once. Power surges can destroy circuit boards on electronic equipment such as computers, fire alarm panels, and any mechanical equipment with an electronic component. Check with your electric power company NOW for advice on “powering up” your building after a power outage.
10. *Make an employee cell phone list today.* During the recent outage we found out that TEXT MESSAGING was the only form of communication that was available, because the cell phone towers could only process so many verbal calls at once. Once the power goes out, everyone tries placing a call to someone...all at once. But even if you cannot make a voice call on your cell phone, a text message will still likely go out. However, many cell towers actually stopped working after several hours, and then no calls or text messages worked. Cell towers have a limited battery back-up system, which will start to fail if power is not reintroduced in



a few hours. Prepare for this reality and send out any text messages as soon as possible. Hotels can develop a master list of cell phone numbers to whom a text message can be sent when an emergency affects the hotel. But unless you keep your employee cell phone list updated, you will not be able to notify them.

While there are many other aspects to consider prior to a power outage, these were the major points and issues that were experienced during the recent loss of power in Southern California. Of course the most important thing any hotel manager can do is to PLAN NOW for tomorrow's power outage. Once electricity is lost, your ability to plan is lost and you must implement whatever response plan you have developed.

From the TRC archives:

The following related articles have been printed previously in *The Rooms Chronicle*[®] and are available on the TRC website at www.roomschronicle.com:

- “Develop an operations strategy to deal with the hotel’s next disaster” by Ray Ellis, Jr. Vol. 17, No. 3.
- “Backup generators are an indispensable tool for hotels and resorts” by Eric Johnson. Vol. 13, No. 6.
- “Lessons learned by hoteliers from the recent power outage” by Steven Siegel. Vol. 11, No. 4. ✧

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