

# Master the **DISASTER**

## Preparedness vital to surviving workplace crises

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Most independent retailers understandably don't want to think about the "what-ifs"—the horrible things that could happen in a 24-7 business that serves the public, such as robberies, murders and gas-related explosions. But if not properly prepared for, such incidents could cause a business' downfall.

When disasters do happen in the workplace, store owners don't have to deal with the repercussions by themselves. Bruce T. Blythe, chief executive officer of Atlanta-based Crisis Management International, has made a career of helping businesses recover from tragedies including the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina, as well as numerous workplace shootings, scandals and corporate air crashes.

Blythe, author of the 2002 book "Blindsided: A Manager's Guide to Catastrophic Incidents in the Workplace" (right), sat down with *CSP Independent* to answer questions about how small-business owners can prepare

for—and respond to—work-related crises.

**Why are crisis-management plans necessary, even for small-business owners?**

I'll make crisis management as simple as I can: You identify the impacted stakeholders, meaning customers, employees, distributors, suppliers, media or whoever has some stake in the game here, and you ask, "What are

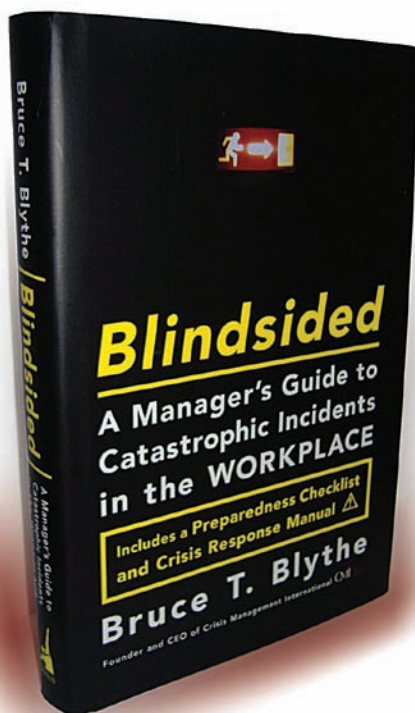
their needs and concerns?" There's a way to handle the crisis, and that is dealing with the people involved. If there's an IT system down and no one uses it, it doesn't matter. That's not a crisis.

I don't care if you've got 10 employees or 1,000—there needs to be a plan in place to address their needs when something bad happens.

**What are the different facets to consider when a crisis arises?**

There are two arenas of crisis: The first is the human side. If a crisis happens, be prepared to come across in a caring manner, accept responsibility, communicate transparently and handle the crisis with honesty and ethical integrity. We all have a backup system of, "Oh my God," and we numb up and it seems unreal. Some people get disorganized. There are all kinds of things in a backup style that people tend to adopt. One is "analysis paralysis," where you can't make a decision because your brain won't let you process what's happening. If you haven't thought about things ahead of time, you're going to get overwhelmed.

The second area is business or oper-



ational continuity. What if we lose a critical facility or any core function of the organization—something where we couldn't function without it, such as one supplier for a critical seller? Say it turns out a core supplier relies on a factory out of China and suddenly they can't supply it anymore. What happens is, it may affect lots of places. And if you're not prepared, other competitors are going to seize those alternative suppliers. Meanwhile, you're looking around and you're Johnny Come Lately. Not getting caught in that is what business continuity is about.

## What are the risks of not being prepared?

If somebody is killed in the workplace, OSHA gets involved, attorneys get involved, the media gets involved—and none of them are your friends. . . . They'll be asking, "Can we blame the business owner for negligence?" OSHA says you must provide a safe environment for employees. Plaintiff attorneys might come back with hindsight bias; it's really easy to say, "You did this, but you should have done *this*."

Bad things are happening more often, from manmade issues to environmental crises like tornados and hurricanes, so we've got a real problem. Workplace violence has been the fastest-growing crisis; it grew 45% last year. Certainly in the retail industry, that's something that's a real concern for employers and employees.

There's an expectation that you, as a business owner, no matter how big or how small, are prepared to handle these



Photo by Ron Wurzer

**GET READY** Small-business owners need external resources to draw upon, such as local law enforcement, an outside attorney or even a special consultant, when navigating a crisis, according to crisis-management expert Bruce T. Blythe.

things when they occur. You may not have shareholders in a small business, but there is a responsibility to any customers, any employees and any visitors on site when bad things happen.

## Small-business owners have a finite amount of time and resources. Where should they start?

If you're one person, you need to have external resources to draw upon: maybe local law enforcement, maybe an outside attorney, maybe a mental-health official, maybe a crisis consultant like myself. They have been there before. Maybe you can have other experts who have specific areas of expertise, such as if you had a foodborne illness caused by something sold in your store. Maybe you have someone to help you deal with the media. The point is that you identify them now; you won't have to pay them money now, but you check in every six months to make sure they're still there when you need them.

If I'm a small business, one of the places to start is [www.ready.gov/business](http://www.ready.gov/business). It's a little overwhelming. But [for] somebody who's interested in having a place to start, it's free.

## Is crisis management on the radar of most small-business owners, or do they see it as unnecessary?

In small businesses, most of them are not prepared. They are more focused on making payroll. Small businesses are out there trying to make a buck and stay afloat. I don't want to sound like Chicken Little and say the sky is falling, but you're relying on luck if you're not prepared. Are you willing to bet

your business on luck? The single greatest correlate in crisis recovery is preparedness. The time to think about a crisis is not after it happened.

You need a system for crisis preparedness. It's like taking a CPR course once in your life and saying you're ready. It's like exercising; you can exercise, but it needs to be on an ongoing basis. It is so easy for it to be put on the back burner. Someone needs to be a champion. A study done at New York University with small businesses asked small-business owners, "Why are you not crisis-prepared?" The single reason was, "We didn't know what to do." Basically, you put a small budget to it and you ask, "What can we do to be crisis-prepared?"

Nobody's immune, especially a small organization. Many small businesses go out of business when there's a crisis. They don't have the resources that a General Electric does. The overwhelming majority of people focus on growing the business and making payroll, but they don't prepare [ahead of time for crises], so they're playing the game of crossing their fingers and saying, "We sure hope nothing bad happens." ■