

# IN CASE OF EMERGENCY Part I – Even with limited staff, what you need to know to be prepared

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Imagine the worst. You’ve cut your news staff and most of your programming is syndicated or voice-tracked. Then an earthquake strikes, a record breaking blizzard or snowstorm hits, there’s a fast moving tornado, fire, flood, toxic spill, or a crazed gunman active at a local school, and you’re not prepared? What do you do? This has actually happened in several markets. Stations have failed the public in their time of need. And, without advance preparation, it could be your city, your station, and your listeners, next time.

In today’s economy, with recent consolidations and a technological shift, many stations have cut their news staffs. Some stations have done away local news and news entirely. If your station uses mostly network or satellite-delivered or even voice-tracked local programming, there may be times where there is no one at your radio station at all. So what can you do when the big live news event happens?

I’ve put together a virtual panel of experts and combined them with my experience to give you a discussion of solutions from a variety of perspectives, along with some practical answers to the question: What do you do when you need to be at your best, or at least not at your worst, when disaster strikes. How do you respond when there is news so important that the lives, well being or safety of your audience is at stake?

In this three part series you’ll learn how to make that plan. Even without a news staff you’ll find out:

1. How to prepare and train your present staff to function in different emergency situations
2. How to pull in emergency “reporters” when you need them most
3. What you need to have on hand when disaster strikes.

But first, you may remember the “wakeup” for broadcasting, that came on January 18th, 2002 at 1:40 in the morning. It was a frigid night in Minot, North Dakota, when disaster struck.

Here's what happened, as described by Eric Magnuson in The Nation:

"A freight train, barreling through the town, went off the tracks, causing freight cars to scatter along the rails like a loose pack of cards. Five tank cars carrying anhydrous ammonia ruptured, filling the area with a poisonous gas cloud. But a public warning over radio wasn't broadcast for nearly ninety minutes. One person died, and more than 300 were injured in the incident. Jennifer Johnson lived two blocks away from the derailment, she heard the crash, then watched the ammonia cloud roll toward her house. She searched in vain for information on what had happened. The phone lines were out so she couldn't call 911, she told the Bismarck Tribune. "The only thing on the radio was music--no one was telling us what happened or what to do." She tuned the dial through every station in town, but after an hour without hearing an announcement, she gave up and turned the radio off. She said: "We didn't know what the chemical would do to us."

What happened in Minot reflected what was to become a nationwide problem: Media consolidation, left many radio stations nearly empty at night. At the time of the accident, Clear Channel owned six of Minot's eight stations, including the designated emergency announcement station, but only one person was there during the accident and did not respond to local authorities' calls because phone lines were jammed by residents calling in. The authorities tried activating the radio's Emergency Alert System to notify the public about what to do, which can be done without station personnel, but the EAS failed. Authorities had to pull out a phonebook and call local Clear Channel employees at their homes to tell them to broadcast an emergency message."

Broadcasters took note, vowing not to let the same thing happen again. But it can, and it has.

Of course the best solution would be to bring back reporting and news coverage. But, if that can't happen, then what? In this article you'll find practical ways to do the best you can with the staff you've got, a little creativity and pulling together during a crisis. By way of full disclosure, I began my career as a news journalist, and worked hard later as a news director, then a Program Director. Now as a consultant, it's my job to make the news departments of my stations the crown jewels of the enterprise. I find it personally painful to see how we've cut news, putting at risk our ability to react quickly, confidently, comprehensively and reliably to an emergency in the communities we serve.

I'm not the only one who feels this way. Many of the program directors and managers I work for would be only too happy to restore full service news departments to their stations, but they don't have that option.

So we're now faced with the unpleasant reality that in a less than ideal economy, you must find a way to serve your city, and have plans in place for the day your community needs critical information.

Alan Eisenson, Program Director of Clear Channel Cluster of stations in Sacramento, including newsleader KFBK lives with the reality of a news staff that's a lot smaller than it used to be. Still, he's prepared. "Because," says Eisenson, "even if you have a skeletal news staff, when events happen, and calls start pouring into the station, the receptionist or board op or webmaster is overwhelmed, and the GM yells "Do something!", you have to have a plan."

Jerry Bell, Managing Editor of KOA Radio News in Denver, has been a newsman for nearly 30 years, Lee

Harris of 1010 WINS, also a former radio station owner and Eisenson all agree that one of the most important things you can do is to “form a partnership with your local TV News Station.”

A plan to partner with TV is not something you should leave until you need each other. Nurturing a relationship that’s mutually beneficial should start now, if it hasn’t already. One of the goals should be to set up your station so that your local TV news team can send its audio feed directly over your airwaves, to your entire air chain, including your music stations.

As you can’t predict whose transmitter will still be functioning in certain types of emergencies, Eisenson suggests, “Arrange in advance for any stations in your cluster or area that have news staffs to record reports for stations that don’t. Have them sent over by WAN, or any other method you can get onto your airwaves. You may need to use any or all of your frequencies to disseminate life saving information.” Offer the same courtesy to your local TV partner. **And it’s vital that you teach your staff, from the all night automation supervisor to the front desk receptionist: HOW TO FLIP THAT SWITCH TO HALT YOUR AUTOMATION OR A SHOW IN PROGRESS to go live, or change over to a live feed from your TV partner.**

That’s not all you’ll need to teach your day to day operations folks. Everyone in your building can learn to handle an emergency news situation should one arise. Just as you train for a fire drill, practice a news drill with everyone in your company, so you’ll have “all hands on deck” when you need them.

#### **VALERIE GELLER’S EMERGENCY PREP POINTS TO COVER WITH ALL STAFF:**

- How to maintain credibility in order to collect, gather and verify that information is correct before it goes to air.
- How to get in touch with local authorities on the scene who can give you credible information.
- What is the right time and place for listener calls?
- What role should Twitter™ and other social media play in disaster or major event coverage?

#### **The first rule for your staff should be the “Hippocratic Oath” as taken by all physicians:**

“Do no harm.” Credibility and correct information is vital. If someone calls and tells you it is safe to go into a building where a shooting took place, but it turns out one of the gunmen is still inside, you may have made the situation worse. If you broadcast the wrong information, such as reporting on the death, or injury of a person who is neither dead and injured, you cause unnecessary pain and suffering their families. And there are legal issues. This is why extra caution should be used when giving names of people affected by a disaster before they have been officially confirmed.

The staff you train should be reminded that what’s most important is to keep your community safe and informed. As managers, you also need to be clear about what you can and cannot expect from your non-broadcast staff. While it may be reasonable to expect a professional reporter to get up in the middle of the night and come in to the station when a big story breaks, it may not be reasonable or safe to ask the same thing of your sales or traffic staff.

That said, you may be surprised to find hidden and useful experience with talent you may have hiding right under your nose. As KOA Managing Editor Jerry Bell points out, “You may be surprised to find that people on your sales staff may have had past on-air experience. It’s helpful to identify who they are and make them some of your go-to people in an emergency.”



Rita Rich, President of Rita Rich Media Services, has worked in national newsrooms and produced The Jim Bohannon Show. She now consults and trains media representatives, including staff at the American Red Cross. Rita says you can train just about most anyone on staff to give accurate information in a crisis. “With proper preparation,” she says, “anyone can do it..... I hate to give away a deep, dark secret: It’s not exactly rocket science or nuclear physics.”

“If you can turn on a mic, and speak clearly, you can be on the air and parcel out useful information,” Rich says, adding, “Most staff... have some writing experience and, especially in a crisis, [are] able to use their natural curiosity about what is happening. Remember...protect the identities of innocent people, victims and the property of others. When questioning people, you don't want to broadcast to thieves and vandals where [they] are vulnerable. Individuals shouldn't be made inadvertent targets to those with devious motives.... The problem with springing people into motion in a high-adrenaline situation is that in their hurry to get information on the air, they forget what it is to make sound decisions as they start chasing stories and make amateur mistakes.”

What this means in practice is that you’ll need to make sure that EVERY member of your staff understands that although he or she will be expected to get the names of people they talk to and, where possible, the locations of emergency situations, the audience, in most cases, does not need, nor should they be told, that, for example, “According to next door neighbor Jessie Langmoor, the Hopkins family is still on their six month trip to Europe. They have no idea that a tanker truck exploded on their private property, just a mile away from their luxurious country house at 222 Farm Drive in rural Tucker County....All local residents are being told to remain indoors until authorities can confirm that the air is safe to breathe.”

All they need to know is: “A tanker truck carrying agricultural chemicals has exploded on Farm Drive in rural Tucker County. Fire and safety officials have advised all residents of Tucker County to remain indoors until advised that it is safe to go outside. We will keep you informed.” And, of course, again, they need to know how to interrupt regular programming and turn on a microphone. This may seem obvious, but a “Board Op 101” training seminar should be part of basic employment orientation if you have a very small operation, where there may not be a professionally trained engineer, news, or air personality available in an emergency.

Rita Rich offers this checklist of what your staff will need: First, she suggests, assemble a book of contacts and e-mail addresses, complete with telephone numbers to call should your computers go down. And include

the following:

- County Emergency Operations Center [if you have one].
  - Local Sheriff's Department/Police Department.
  - State police troopers' barracks numbers.
  - Fire and Rescue media relations/public affairs office direct and cell numbers.
  - Gather home or cell phone numbers of public information officers for after hours calls.
1. Make certain your staff knows what a news or press release is. Don't assume the person in the building will know. (Also include emergency contact numbers for Public Information Officers, or PIO's, of high profile locations such as airports, seaports, power plants and utilities.)
  2. Make sure you have the department of homeland security numbers as well. Many jurisdictions now have, or are in the midst of, organizing a local office of homeland security.
  3. Contacts for your local Red Cross Chapters, and their emergency operations centers.[Often there are other first responder citizen support groups to list as well, such as the Salvation Army or local shelters for people and even animals. There may be people unwilling to evacuate in a crisis if they fear for their pets.] Keep in mind that emergency volunteers are a good source of leads for stories, however, **MOST WILL NOT BE AUTHORIZED TO SPEAK "On the Record."**
  4. Local weather service personnel--or, the weather information services that your station or group ownership has contracted with.
  5. Local hospital emergency room numbers and hospital media relations/public affairs personnel, to find out about injured or dead being transported from a scene.
- While Twitter, instant messaging, and other forms of social media [such as YouTube], can be useful, Rich warns the information must be verifiable.

Jerry Bell also recommends that you keep a "how to" guide in your studio for emergencies. Here's his advice for how it should work:

"Have a plan. Keep it in a red binder marked 'Emergency' in your studio. You can also put it on a computer, but what happens when the power goes out? Also, you can tear pages out of a binder if you need to. A lot of stations already have a printout and/or a computer file of emergency contact phone numbers including cell numbers of fire fighters and police, FBI and FEMA. But it's useless unless everyone in the BUILDING knows HOW to get hold of it. Copies of the emergency plan should also be in the General Manager's office and the Program Director's Office.

Jerry Bell's suggestions for what goes into the "Red Binder:"

- 1) Emergency numbers and contacts.- (in a place where everyone can find it!)
- Take the time to compile a list of contacts for people with police, fire, hospital, utility companies and homeland security. Get more than office numbers. You need cell phone numbers, email and twitter contacts. **It will take a little time to get an initial list. But once you have one, you call test call every six months to make sure the numbers are current. Make sure you have numbers of people who**

## **are designated to go on the air.**

2) A map of where staffers live and numbers where they can be reached 24/7.

Know where your staff lives. Whoever is closest to an event can head toward the scene. Since they work for you, you can trust their information. They can also explain local landmarks and help place where everything is taking place. They may even know people who live nearby.

3) Guidelines for interviews. Before I list them, let me say that I believe that managers should manage and stay off the air. In a disaster situation management is critical. Listeners should hear voices they are used to. Your regular DJ or talk host can handle the air work. A manager needs to listen to what's going out over the air and make decisions that guide the coverage.

### **JERRY BELL INTERVIEW GUIDELINES FOR CRISIS COVERAGE**

- Stay calm. Take notes and limit speculation.
- When talking to public, ask what can they see, hear or smell. Does the caller have any expertise to comment on a particular aspect of what is taking place? If someone tells you what they think or believe, remember too say you'll check it out with authorities. Do not accept it as fact.
- Check with emergency professionals on a continuous basis. Ask them about observations from callers. Take notes. Repeat, frequently what you have been told. Scene set every ten minutes. "Here's what we know right now..."
- Put yourself in the place of someone who lives nearby. What would you want to know? That's what to ask.
- If possible, have someone screen calls. If that's not possible, put your B.S detector on. Hoax calls are a possibility. My experience is that young teens and adults in their 20's are the most likely hoaxers.

4) Basic information about what to do for earthquakes, tornadoes, or terrorist events:

You can get great information from your State Office of Emergency services, weather service and Homeland Security. They have simple instructions about what to do in a variety of situations. Sometimes this simple information is the best information you can impart in an emergency.

5) Instructions about when to dump commercials.

6) You need street maps of your area and state. Invest in a good quality street map. It helps to pinpoint where something is taking place. If you have power, you can use a computer, Google maps is also great. Make sure you have a TV monitor in studio. If there is TV coverage it helps if your on-air person can see what is happening.

7) Create a mission statement for what you want your station to do during a disaster.

If there's a disaster, what do you expect? Spell out expectations. Then provide a framework for decision making. First order of business is to get a General Manager or Program Director involved ASAP.

Someone needs to make the call about whether wall to wall coverage is needed or if periodic updates make more sense, Rita Rich offers a few more suggestions about how your staff, even an on air staff who are not "in the building" and are not necessarily trained news people, can swing into action to help the station cover an

emergency:

Her first suggestion “Get someone trained to turn on the microphone and who can read information.” Then decide who can be on the air, and who will be the producer making phone calls, pre-screening and prepping those you want to have live and on the air. This is where a team effort comes in. It’s nearly impossible for one person to do all of this. You will need help.

Rich continues, “If the emergency occurs in the middle of the night, your board operator, or even security guard, might have to be the one who opens the mic and gets the job done. I prefer a two person team: one to sift out information and callers who claim to be experts, or authorities, about a situation.” (Rich uses as an example of phony experts the long running phenomenon of Howard Stern listeners who begin a supposedly serious call and suddenly lunge into “pranking”.) Rich continues, “During a crisis, tabloid influences...are going to need to be tamed. Caller ID and a list of names of authorized public information officers or spokespersons can help you screen the goof-balls from your airwaves.” Jerry Bell agrees a screener is important if possible and warns, “In my experience it’s young people in their teens and those in their 20s make up most of the hoax callers.”

Howard B. Price, Director of Business Continuity and Crisis Management at ABC News, shares a trick he’s used to eliminate “prank calls” during live coverage. He suggests, “Try asking a ‘check’ question only a legitimate caller would be able to answer. For example, here in New York City, I’ll ask anyone claiming to be a cop if they know anyone in the 35th Precinct. There is no 35th precinct. So any answer they give other than that means they’re bogus.”

Alan Eisenson warns that even if you’re faced with a frantic public and a panicked manager, it’s almost never a good idea to simply start throwing callers on the air.” Eisenson adds that if your station does not normally use live phone calls, it’s still a good idea to make sure your phone system is wired so it can go live on-air, and that it has a delay.

Rita Rich recommends, “Develop a broadcast clock, and stick to it during the time of emergency.” She warns, “In emergency situations, regular time checks are important. For emergencies lasting days-- time, day, date, and even a year can help a person who is trapped inside a building because of snow, or collapse, stay connected to the outside world and reality.” Rich finds opportunity even in the midst of disaster, noting that having an emergency programming clock can, “provide opportunities for sponsorship or underwriting. Work with your station’s traffic department to flesh out the possibilities [for sponsoring time checks, weather reports, etc].”

“Providing standard formats will help your station fulfill its obligation to get on the air with breaking news,” Rich says, “even if an amateur needs to get the ball rolling, until professional air staff can take over. Provide the script so that an amateur can just fill in the blanks and get information out to the public. Script out what a person will say when a program is interrupted for an emergency. Script the questions a person should ask while screening a call for possible live broadcast.”

Rich suggests to make sure a non-professional broadcaster who may be pressed into duty does the following:

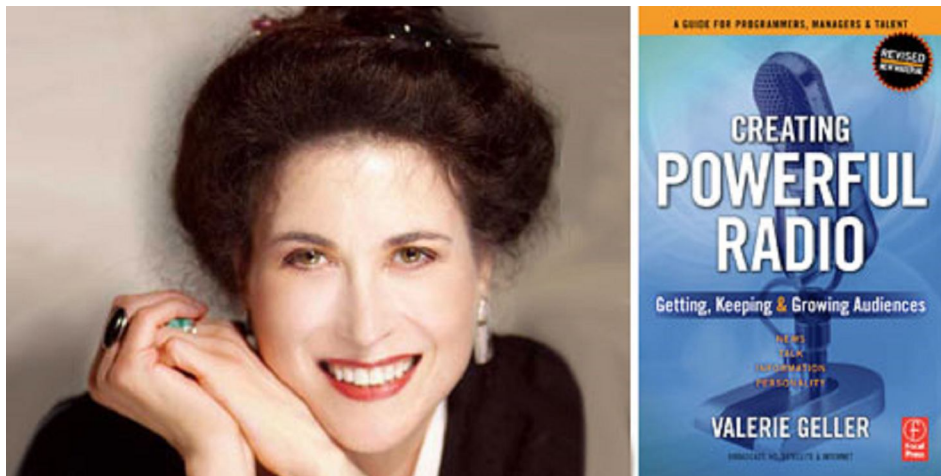
- Identify the name and title of the person either calling in or who is being called.
- Where are they located? Get the location of the incident or the person.

- What is the situation they want to report?
- When might an update on the situation become available?
- Find out (off air) the name and contact number of the person is, coming on duty next, who can continue to provide information for you.
- Arrange, if possible a time for an update

After the worst is over, you may still have work to do, and people may still expect information from you. Provide it, or tell them where to find it. Alan Eisenson points out that for ongoing emergencies, “If you voicetrack, make sure the talent (whether they're in the market or not) re-cut their tracks to reflect the breaking events.” You might also want to tell listeners where else they can go in your market, ideally within your cluster, for information that will help them follow the aftermath of an emergency. Another idea that has proved successful, Eisenson reminds us, is partnering with other radio stations in your market. That can work in times of dire crisis. One example is when Clear Channel and Entercom came together and pooled their resources to serve their community during Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

You may think you have no time for emergency training.....until there's an emergency.If your staff meetings can spare even ten minutes of time, that's time you can devote to reinforcing some of these strategies. It's time that will pay off well, on the day disaster strikes.

Tomorrow, in part 2 of RBR/TVBR's series "In Case of Emergency"  
Valerie Geller examines a case study of a little station that could, and DID in North Dakota....



-- Valerie Geller, president of Geller Media International [www.gellermedia.com](http://www.gellermedia.com) is a broadcast consultant and author of “Creating Powerful Radio – Getting, Keeping & Growing Audiences for News, Talk, Information & Personality” [www.creatingpowerfulradio.com](http://www.creatingpowerfulradio.com) now in a third printing. Her fourth book “Beyond Powerful Radio – A Communicator’s Handbook for the Internet Age’ is slated for a spring publication in 2011 from Focal Press. Geller’s work in 30 countries around the world for both TV and radio helps stations grow audiences through creating powerful content. A noted speaker, workshop and seminar leader, talent coach and trainer, Geller’s background prior to consulting includes years in talkradio (KTAR, KOA, WPLP) and work as a news reporter, anchor and news director. She has served on the AP board of directors. Geller’s also been PD of WABC in New York,was News Director of K101 in San Francisco and worked at KFI in Los

Angeles.

If you're planning to be in Las Vegas in April for the NAB, come say hi.

Geller will be presenting several workshops and sessions and speaking on panels at the NAB/RTDNA/BEA.

RBR-TVBR would also like to thank Howard B. Price, Turi Ryder, Lee Harris, Steve Jones, Scott Hennen, Mark Pfeifle, Alan Eisenson, Jerry Bell and Rita Rich and June Barnes for their help and contributions to this article. By way of full disclosure, Valerie says "Many who contributed to this article are also contributors to "Creating Powerful Radio – Getting, Keeping & Growing Audiences for News, Talk, Information & Personality." (Focal Press 2007) [www.creatingpowerfulradio.com](http://www.creatingpowerfulradio.com)

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