

THE IN-STORE ADVANTAGE



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"Bravery is being the only one who knows you're afraid." » Franklin P. Jones

Riding the Storm Out

Having lived most of my life in South Louisiana and Houston, hurricanes are nothing new to me or my family.

Hurricanes and I go way back.

I was born one month before Hurricane Betsy all but destroyed my first hometown.

I've been told stories over the years by my parents about listening to updates on the radio as the storm neared, and what the following month with no electricity - and a newborn - was like.

Through dozens of storms over the decades, I've often thought of those stories and wondered what it was like to go through an intense storm without the modern communications, real-time radar, etc., that we have today.

All my parents had was a battery powered AM radio when Betsy struck.

Well, Hurricane Beryl recently gave me and a few million of my Houston neighbors an unwanted reminder of life before total connectivity.

As the storm approached in the predawn hours, power was cut off to millions of people.

An hour or so later, millions lost their cell phone service as well. Uh oh.

Ready to Respond?

While the unwanted visit of Hurricane Beryl reminded me of the general good in people, it has also reminded me of the problems created when companies are unprepared and/or tone deaf.

The company in this case is a massive operation, but their bad performance can be instructive to anyone.

The days following the storm have been a complete public relations nightmare for CenterPoint Energy.

Now, for the most part, reasonable customers understand the challenges of keeping and/or restoring power to the 4th largest city in America during and in the aftermath of a hurricane.

The fact that their "outage tracking map" had been down for almost two months and was not operational during this hurricane made them look unprepared and incompetent.

The fact that tens of thousands of customers then learned to download and use the Whataburger app to track areas with electricity is the kind of thing that will become incompetence folklore for years.

Being seemingly unprepared for what could only be considered foreseeable post-storm logistics and field management tasks didn't help.

We were figuratively and literally “in the dark” as the storm approached and went over us.

(Note to self: I need to buy a battery powered AM radio.)

When several neighbors were out assessing damage during the eye of the storm, I had to remind a few not to relax because I suspected the second act was on the way.

While not as technically strong as some past storms, Beryl was exceptionally destructive to the Houston area power grid.

In the aftermath, I’ve been reminded yet again that the worst of times bring out the best in people.

Sure, there are a pathetic few who look to prey on weakness, but by and large, there are more good people in the world who put their own comfort and safety aside to help others in need.

Those needs may range from physical assistance to food and water, to emotional support and even financial resources.

In the midst of brutal heat and discouraging outlooks of many days waiting to get the power back on, I’m steadily motivated by witnessing people at their best.

When you are presented with opportunities to help someone in need and actually take them, with no expectation of being paid back, you receive a personal experience that really can’t be bought.

If you know, you know.

The types of opportunities that surround you today to assist others may not be as visible.

But they’re there. Find them.

Yet, things got exponentially worse for their image as leaders began talking.

As poor preparation and ineptitude became suspected, company leaders dropped the ball at each public relations moment.

In one instance, the VP of operations was asked, in retrospect, if he would do anything differently with pre-storm preparations.

Stone-faced, he said that he wouldn’t. My jaw dropped.

There were ten different answers I thought of on the spot that could have conveyed empathy while also explaining that decisions are made with the best information at hand.

Of course you would change things!

But you do your best in the moment and continue to work tirelessly to make things right.

Time will tell how preventable their many apparent mistakes and acts of incompetence were.

But no company is without the risk of unexpected hits to their reputation, whether culpable or not.

I regularly remind leaders that customers form their most passionate and lasting feelings about you when problems arise – regardless of where the fault for those problems lies.

How you handle it matters most.

Your empathy, responsiveness, and ability to effectively communicate when things go wrong will define you.

How prepared is your team for your next storm?

"Compassion is not a virtue - it is a commitment. It's not something we have or don't have - it's something we choose to practice." » Brene Brown

Dave Martin, author of The In-Store Advantage, has become one of the most prolific writers in the banking industry. His keynote presentations, seminars, and podcasts have an authenticity and humor that brings teams of all sizes and seniority levels together.

For more info about having Dave or an FSI Consultant speak to your group, email Tina Coleman, tcoleman@SupermarketBank.com or call 800-992-4978.

Financial Supermarkets, Inc. • fsi@supermarketbank.com

383 Clarkesville Street • PO Box 1450 • Cornelia, GA 30531 • (800) 992-4978

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