

Lessons from the Great Flood of '08

On Thursday June 12th, my third-generation family business – Frohwein Office Plus – evacuated its 23,000 square foot building with just 10 hours notice. It's all a blur now, but here are some of the lessons I learned:

>There's not as much time as you think.

At about 2 p.m. we were told that we had no more than 48 hours before most of the Coralville strip would be flooded. We ended up having about 10 hours.

>You can't have too many trucks

I started calling every moving company in the phone book that Thursday afternoon, and Randy Stannard at Stannard Trucking answered his phone. He had a semi available but couldn't find anyone to drive it so he brought it over himself, helped us load it and dropped it off at our temporary warehouse. He never sent a bill, and neither did Phil Gibson at the U-Haul in Coralville, who provided two big box trucks well after normal business hours that day. These are the type of people you want to go out of your way to do business with.

>You have more friends than you think

Once it became obvious that time was short, people came out of nowhere to help. Boyfriends of daughters, bosses of employee's spouses, fiancées of wife's coworkers, fraternity brothers of sons, and even total strangers who happened to be driving by in a Cadillac Escalade stopped to see if they could help (we loaded them up).

>There's no substitute for muscle

After 8 hours of loading furniture and supplies into every conceivable conveyance, there were still several large fire files weighing almost half a ton each yet to be loaded onto waiting trucks. I was exhausted and ready to leave them behind when two burly fraternity guys put their shoulders into them and slid them up the ramp into a truck. Not to mention my two nieces – both amateur boxing champions – who were “manhandling” furniture that would have given me a hernia.

>Sometimes the world seems against you

We loaded most of the office furniture in a torrential downpour, accented by nearby lightning strikes. About the time we started to feel like we were making real progress, the lights and power went out leaving us in total darkness.

>Sometimes LuAnn seems against you

I had the foresight to have LuAnn bring our unused portable generator from home that we had bought last winter. We unboxed it and I looked around and asked her, "Did you bring the gasoline?" Her face paled. She said, "No, but I did have to move two gas cans in our garage out of the way to get to the generator." It turns out that six cars shining headlights into showroom windows provide a lot of light.

>Things I used to think were important, aren't.

When it became obvious that we weren't going to have time to save everything, we had to decide what to let drown and what to get into the trucks. There were some tough decisions made, trading some expensive furniture for racks of catalogs and samples that we needed to continue doing business. Some things I'd been hanging on to for years were abandoned without a second thought.

>Water is heavy

Between the inventory we couldn't save, 25 years of accumulated junk, and ripped out drywall and insulation, post-flood we carted off 12 tons of metal to the recycling center and 90 tons (!) of waterlogged refuse to the landfill. All of our paper products and wood or laminate furniture absorbed water like sponges. We had to throw out half a dozen metal file cabinets for no reason other than the paper inside the drawers expanded from the water and blew out the welds on the drawers.

>If your brother-in-law owns a front-end loader, stay in his good graces.

You never know when you might need 102 tons of soggy trash shoved out of your warehouse loading dock doors.

>Maybe we should have flood insurance

Businesses that locate in a flood plain are required to purchase flood insurance to secure a bank loan. Since we own our building, we had the luxury of choosing whether or not to purchase any. We were dry in the '93 Flood of the Century, so we understandably chose poorly. Evidently we're in a different century now.

>You find out a lot about people (and yourself) in an emergency
People I didn't expect to be there until the bitter end, were. It made me recall with regret a couple of times in the past when I could and should have gone out of my way to help people in distress, but for whatever lame reason did not.

>Iowa is not New Orleans

Perhaps it's selective media coverage, but I didn't see any TV images of Iowans seemingly doing nothing to help themselves as they waited to be rescued. Of course, New Orleans was a worse disaster by far (with a lot of city infrastructure missing), but you have to be proud of the way Iowans worked tirelessly for themselves and others to deal with the flood and its aftermath. Endless thanks to everyone who helped out!