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Grenada: The other Ivanised island

The Spice Isle's experiences could offer Cayman some insights

By Alan Markoff
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It is easy to forget that the Cayman Islands weren't the only place ravaged by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004. In fact, Cayman wasn't even the first place to feel the brunt of Ivan the Terrible.

On 7 September, four days before tropical storm force winds were first felt on Grand Cayman, the island of Granada was taking a direct hit from Ivan.

Although not as strong or large as when it passed Grand Cayman, Ivan was still a major Category 3 hurricane packing 120 mph winds when the eye passed over Grenada. The storm killed 39 people and damaged or destroyed 90 per cent of the Spice Isle's homes, causing an estimated US$1.1 billion of damage.

Benedict Peters, the national disaster coordinator for Grenada's National Disaster Management Agency, spoke about the lessons his country learned from the Hurricane Ivan experience during the National Hurricane Conference in Orlando, Florida earlier this year.

Grenada, Peters explained, lies on the southern edge of the Atlantic Basin hurricane belt, in what is considered "the 2 per cent zone".

Like the Cayman Islands, it had been a long time since a hurricane had significantly impacted Grenada. Grenadians had to think back almost 50 years, to 1955 and Category 3 Hurricane Janet, to recall a major storm.

Like the Cayman Islands. Grenada was not prepared for Hurricane Ivan in September 2004, and like Cayman, Grenada learned many lessons from the harrowing experience. Peters, who joined the National Disaster Management Agency in 2009, wants to make sure they don't forget those lessons, and that the people of Grenada act on them.

Mr. Peters

Remembering

As Grenada learned, in an active hurricane era, being in the '2 per cent zone' in no guarantee tropical cyclones will steer clear. Grenadians were reminded of this again less than one year after Ivan, when Category 2 Hurricane Emily passed close by, causing additional damage – although nothing quite as bad as Ivan.

Although it could be a long time before Grenada is impacted again by a hurricane, Peters wants his country to be ready if it happens.

"We need to keep future generations informed of previous disasters," he said. "We don't want to let the experiences of Hurricane Ivan die; we have to find a way to keep it alive."

Peters noted that in the 50 years after Hurricane Janet, people tended to forget the lessons learned.

"After Janet, houses were built to withstand certain kinds of conditions, but after some time, people wanted to build houses that looked good," he said.

Roofs were a primary example of compromises in strength made for aesthetic purposes, Peters noted.

Ivan, however, reminded people of the risks of hurricanes.

"The roofs built after Ivan very much resemble roofs built after Janet," he said.

An important goal of Grenada's National Disaster Management Agency is make sure the country's residents are aware of hurricane risks and that they prepare accordingly, Peters said.

"We want a national population who understands and participates in risk reduction processes," he said.

Weighing the risks

Hurricane Ivan caused 200 per cent of Grenada's GDP in damage. More than five years later, there are still government buildings, including the Parliament Building and the Governor General's Residence, that haven't been restored.

"One event can wipe out a small island economy," he said.

Grenada learned that hurricanes posed further risks beyond wind, waves and flooding. A wild looting spree ensued after Ivan, costing businesses million of dollars.

"It's important to know the hazards, know your vulnerability to those hazards, and what to do to reduce the vulnerability," Peters said.

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Disaster-proofing your website and data

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When disaster strikes the last point of contact and source of information that a business has for customers, clients, investors, employees, suppliers and other stakeholders is often its website. Before, during and after a hurricane for example a company's web-presence will be the first port of call for business partners and customers for any news updates.

"In a disaster it is really important to have a website, because it enables you to be constantly in touch with your customers," says Kartik Mehta, head of web development at Netclues.

The website is the ideal instrument to fill communication gaps and reassure anybody who might be involved with the affected business. Especially financial services companies must provide piece of mind to their international investors and business partners and inform all stakeholders of the situation as well as any new developments.

"The updates are very important. People need to know what is happening with the company. And at that point in time the Internet is the most important tool because people use it all the time. This applies even more to the overseas market because when people are investing on Island they will need to know," says Mehta.

During Hurricane Ivan some businesses lost clients because they were unable to get in touch with the company or receive information on what was going on, he says.

Only because landlines may not be working, the Internet is not working and the hurricane shutters are down, a company's website should still be operational, if the business has implemented a functioning back-up plan.

"People need a back-up plan. A lot of companies have their servers locally for their website and we never encourage that because of the hurricane season," explains Mehta. "We always recommend, if it is very important for security purposes to have the server on Island, they can have a back-up server, for the disaster time, overseas."

As a result even if the local server goes down, the back-up server is live the next minute.

Even if the Internet is down locally, Netclues can enable its clients to access the website via cell phone. There are several ways for doing this. "You can just text us and we can convert those texts into content for your webpage," says Mehta. "We have a 24/7 support team, so we can always help." Alternatively website clients can always call Netclues with any news updates and these can then be uploaded within a few minutes.

In addition, Netclues also builds applications for cell phones to manage the website, an interesting point, notes Mehta, as Internet for the mobile proved more resilient and was not affected during Hurricane Ivan, whereas the landlines were down.

Twitter

Social media may also become important. "During a disaster Twitter can play a big role," states Mehta. It is something employees as well as customers can connect to and it can be updated with minimum effort with a text line of up to 160 characters.

Mehta explains that if a customer uploads a news update to the website, they can select to update their Facebook or Twitter account at the same time.

"That is a basic feature that everybody today needs and that's what we have come up with in the new version of the content management system that we designed." As such it is now a regular feature of websites.

Internal communication

During or after a disaster it is also important to stay in contact with staff. "Even within the company staff should be in touch with each other via some medium. It can be intranet, it can be via the web. They can have an employee portal, where they can log in and get information regarding each other, if they cannot get in touch. Those are some important things we can focus on," says Mehta.

Emails

If access to a server is physically impossible, for example after a fire, an earthquake or a flood, emails and contact books could also be inaccessible. Netclues deals with the danger of interrupted email access or lost data during a crisis, by putting adequate back-up systems in place not only for the website, but also for all kinds of other documents, including emails.

Hosting

Netclues, which has the majority of its operation in the US and India, provides hosting from servers in the US and back-up servers in India and Germany. "Emails are hosted on our server together with the website, so if you get a website you will also receive an email server."

For some business applications, Netclues may use Yahoo as well, depending on the customer's requirements. For financial institutions that work with exchange servers, Netclues can offer also a solution. "There are some back-ups that can be done by Microsoft and we can help with that," says Mehta.

Email campaign

In addition to emails, all types of other data such as customer data bases should also be backed up. If a customer has a good customer database, which most of the financial institutions and law firms have, Netclues can send an email campaign informing customers that everything is fine. This does not need to include a lot of information. Often a brief five line news update is enough.

"Such an email campaign can be very helpful during these times," says Mehta, "not only to let people know that the company is down, but also that somebody is taking care of it."

Backing up documents and data

Different customers will have varying requirements. Real estate customers for example may be concerned with losing their photos and need a back-up for these files. However, most companies will have sales documents, contracts, insurance documents, employee files and other data. Anything that can be stored on a computer can also be stored in a separate safe location, so that it can be recovered after a disaster. There are inexpensive online systems available that can integrate with a customer's offline platform, which backs up any data constantly.

"As soon as you update something on the website, it is synched to the front end and when it is synched to the front end, it is automatically backed up," explains Mehta.

Hurricane Ivan was in many ways an eye-opener for businesses. Netclues has a couple of clients that lost all their servers and thus all their emails, documents and data, he says. "And now we have a back-up system for them."

Customers don't approach Netclues with a potential hurricane or other disaster threat in mind, but it is always one of the questions that are raised, albeit not the first question.

It is vital to the have the necessary systems in place before a potential disaster and to make regular back-ups. This system should then be tested regularly to make sure that everything works perfectly.

"Every company has to test their systems and see how it will work during the disaster time when the server goes down and the IT person is not available to manage the site," says Mehta. "With us they don't need someone technical to handle the site."

Anybody who can use the Internet can upload content to the site. In addition Netclues' system comes with access rights so customers can give rights to different people, but the main admin will have to approve it. During a disaster however a business may decide to wipe these access rights and have various employees upload directly to the website.

"When we give a website to a customer, they are worry-free with us," says Mehta, "because we give them complete back-up and we have a team to manage it."

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