9/11, Disasters and the Art of the EMOC

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the most horrific attack ever to take place on American soil -- the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. There is no doubt this event greatly changed American life -- as anyone who has traveled by air since that date can detail, with great annoyance. Yet the events of that date also opened a new area of specialization for many audiovisual professionals -- designing and installing Emergency Management Operations Centers, or EMOCs.

Prior to 9/11, EMOCs were a fairly rare bird in the world of integration for most. Sure, government agencies and specific large public companies had such places, but they weren't necessarily on every bidder's list. It was a once in a blue moon type of thing. That was the case in the spring of 2001, when the state of Maryland put a bid out for an AV company to design and install a state-of-the-art operations center for MEMA, the Maryland Emergency Management Agency. At the time, my husband and I were part of a small integration firm located just 15 minutes from MEMA headquarters, so when I saw the RFP on the State Procurement page, I figured, "Well, why not?" We designed a system that met all the needs of the RFP, yet also remained upgradable and flexible to meet future needs. And, amazingly enough in this integrator-heavy region, we were the low bidder.

Of course, things are never that easy for a Little Fish integrator. One of our larger competitors (who, shockingly enough, was in the second-place spot on the bid run-down) protested the award saying a small firm like ours couldn't handle a project that size. Now, as all you little integrators out there know, there is a comfortable size range for projects, and this one was on the upper end of our comfort zone, but there was no reason we couldn't do the job. The protest was balderdash, but government being government, the protest process had to play out. The end-of-July deadline for completion came and went and we were still not officially awarded the job. In mid-July, a 60-car CSX Transportation train derailed in a through-tunnel under Howard Street in downtown Baltimore. The accident spilled the freight, causing a chemical fire that raged below ground for most of six days. The accident, known today as the Howard Street Tunnel Fire, disrupted rail traffic along the East Coast, slowed Internet traffic due to destruction of communication cables in the tunnel system, and virtually shut down the entire city for days -- with some areas not resuming normal street traffic for weeks.

In and of itself, handling this major incident with obsolete EMOC technology would have hurried the procurement process along, but then, just weeks after the derailment, 9/11 occurred. Like the rest of the nation, our office was paralyzed by the events of that horrible Tuesday. We spent the day at the office, glued to the television, shocked by what was unfolding in front of us and worrying about friends and colleagues in NYC and DC. I personally had a moment of panic hearing about a plane going down in rural Western PA, eventually learning that it happened in Shanksville -- less than an hour from where I grew up and where my family remained. The world stopped on that day and work was the last thing on our minds.

On Wednesday, Sept. 12, first thing in the morning we got a call from MEMA. The gist of the call was, "F*** the protest. We need this EMOC done NOW." For some reason, the governor wasn't happy sitting in a command center while a major incident occurred in his own backyard, while huddling around a 20" TV with his advisors. And so we spent the remainder of that week working -- ordering equipment with expedited deliveries, scheduling technicians, beginning the pre-wire and learning first-hand all the challenges and idiosyncrasies involved in designing and installing a critical response EMOC.

While the MEMA upgrade was planned prior to the attacks -- and thank heavens, because we had a solid, fully-functional system already designed and ready to go! -- many EMOC plans, upgrades and decisions come about due to reactive decision making following a tragedy. How often, over the last 10 years, have we encountered new procedures or rules at the airport that came about as a knee-jerk reaction to a specific incident? The same can be said about technology decisions. The time to plan for an upgrade or a new build for EMOCs is before they are needed. True, budgets aren't often as readily available beforehand, but it is far better in the long run to make informed decisions when you aren't in an adrenaline-fueled reaction mode in the heat of the crisis.

Criticize them as you may, but the Federal Emergency Management Agency understands this point. Over the past decade, they've had a dedicated crew of technology experts in charge of keeping their EMOCs and briefing rooms equipped as well as possible. These guys also plan out contingency plans for times of emergency, and they draw up expansion and upgrade blue prints well in advance of those happening. That way, when the budgets are available and they get the, "OK, go" from above, they can proceed right with the bidding and installing without messing about with design delays.

In 2007, our small integration firm bid on an RFQ from FEMA to provide all the AV for their new press room being built at FEMA headquarters in DC. Our experience with MEMA paid off, and we won the job. Shortly after completion, southern California was hit by a series of severe wildfires that burned over 500,000 acres and forced the evacuation of over 1 million residents. While many question FEMA's response to the incident (*cough* fakepressconference *cough*), one thing is sure. The FEMA EMOCs and newly-completed press room all functioned flawlessly and provided the emergency response officials with timely information and communication with those on the ground in the affected region. As far as technology goes, FEMA was proactive and prepared for these fires and subsequent disasters, rather than running around during and after the fact, trying to get up to speed.

Which, really, is the point of this whole thing -- the time to prepare for emergencies is when you don't have any. Since 9/11, Homeland Security and the federal government have doled out billions of dollars in emergency preparedness grants to law enforcement agencies, fire and medical emergency responders, National Guard units and more. This money is used for personnel training, vital field equipment (trucks, safety apparatus, specialized rescue equipment) and, of course, building and maintaining EMOCs and virtual EOCs. Just as these agencies and groups need to plan now for emergencies yet to come, it behooves today's audiovisual integrators to get familiar with the work required to design, install and maintain an EMOC. An entire vertical market has emerged in this area over the past 10 years and it is a foolish commercial integrator who ignores that fact -- particularly if they are located in or near a major city such as New York and Washington, DC.

In the past couple months, my state has been shaken by an earthquake and then hit with a fairly significant hurricane. During the coverage of these events, I saw our MEMA EMOC on the news, handling the unfolding events with ease. I saw Janet Napolitano holding a press conference from our FEMA Press Room in the run-up to the storm's landfall. In both cases, I had some anxiety over the events unfolding, but I also had a sense of pride that I'd made a difference in our being prepared for these events -- even if it was "just AV." In today's world, we are far more than "just AV" and every person in our industry should stay aware of that fact and work accordingly. You never know what your work may help prevent or remediate. To paraphrase the Boy Scouts, "Just be prepared."

To read up on the topic of EMOCs, emergency preparedness and business continuity, visit DavisLogic's Comprehensive Emergency Management site at http://www.davislogic.com/index.htm or visit the US Department of Homeland Security's Preparedness, Response, Recovery pages at http://www.dhs.gov/files/prepresprecovery.shtm

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