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Waffle House in the Eye of the Storm

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As summer storm season starts, the nation looks to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and FEMA looks to Waffle House. FEMA administrator Craig Fugate coined the "Waffle House Index" in 2011 after an F5 tornado devastated Joplin, Missouri. The two Joplin Waffle Houses remained operational. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted Fugate saying, "If you get there and the Waffle House is closed? That's really bad. That's where you go to work."



Waffle House Index is FEMA's unofficial measure of storm severity.

The Waffle House Index is a 3-color system to assess the damage to a Waffle House. Green is a fully operational Waffle House; yellow means the Waffle House has sustained some damage and is most likely operating on a generator and on a limited menu; red signifies the Waffle House is not operational.

Hurricanes and tornados mean economic and structural disaster, but Waffle House has a plan. Panos Kouvelis, a business-school professor at Washington University in St. Louis, ranked Waffle House as one of the top four companies for disaster response, with Wal-Mart Stores, Home Depot, and Lowe's.

The 24-7 restaurant's "show-up" motto gives them a competitive edge in the wake of a storm. The company has a "War Room" at their Georgia headquarters full of maps and radar. Following the storm, they send a crisis management team in a mobile command center to the site with generators and aid for the restaurant.

"Going back to work gets the community back to normal," says Pat Warner, vice president of communication, Waffle House. "We have our associates and customers there for us all the time; we need to be there for them too. When crisis hits, we have to work."

Warner attributes a lot of their post-storm success to preseason planning. Each associate receives a key fob with numbers and instructions.

"We have them check-in after the storm to make sure they are safe and see where they are needed," Warner explains. The company also communicates which restaurants are open through Twitter.

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“Staying open [in the wake of a storm] is not a money maker usually,” Warner says. “But our associates need to work.” The company strives to return the community to normalcy quickly and safely following a disaster. And they do it one hash brown order at a time.

“We just throw chaos at chaos until something sticks,” Warner says. He advocates for thinking step-by-step through your disaster plan. “You have a generator? Great! Do you have gas to keep the generator running for days?” The chain restaurant operates on a limited menu off of generator power. The Waffle House emergency playbook explains how to operate the restaurant post-storm and what to prepare if there is gas but no electricity, or a generator but no ice. After hurricane Irene, one Waffle House boiled water on the stove and poured it through the coffee machines.

As Warner explains: “We have a checklist on how to close, because we don’t know how to do it. That’s not part of our culture.”

By Kirsten Ballard

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