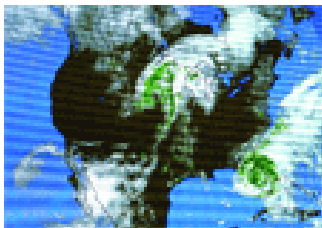


Weather Alert

2006 has come and gone without anything on the order of 2005's Hurricane Katrina or the South Asia tsunami eight months earlier.

by Paul Bubny



There were smaller-scale weather emergencies last year, and there have been others already this year.

Many corporate travel professionals aren't counting on their luck holding out much longer. Certainly a little wind, rain or fog can put a snag in corporate travel itineraries. But there's the potential for real havoc when Mother Nature turns really nasty.

Business continuity planning increasingly calls for travel-related crisis management, a trend that some suppliers say has picked up steam over the past 18 months.

In the past, says Mark Majewski, BCD Travel's senior vice president for strategic operations, backup plans for maintaining continuity usually were "limited to one office, and [an interruption of] no more than a day." Now, he says, his company's clients are interested in developing plans for "the short term, mid-term, long-term, and extended-term of more than a month — which probably never came up before Katrina." Eighty-three percent of respondents to BCD Travel's 2006 Annual Client Benchmark Survey reported the use of "a technology tool to track travelers." Fifty-three percent say these tools are global or multi-national in scope. "The key to a successful travel preparedness program is advance planning," advises the BCD and survey report. "If and when a crisis occurs, the company will be better positioned to avoid significant business disruption and protect the well-being of its employees by enacting an established plan."

As a result of increasing post-Katrina expectations, Majewski says, BCD has hired an officer to focus strictly on business continuity. Along with tracking the comings and goings of employees on the road and giving those employees a way out of trouble spots, Majewski says, BCD's clients are looking for "experts: consultants to help guide them through a difficult weekend."

Test Cases

Clients also want availability of that expertise not to be interrupted by weather or other considerations. "If there were a hurricane forecast to hit Jacksonville, we could move our Jacksonville office elsewhere and set it up in a matter of hours," he says. He's confident of the plan's efficacy. When a major fiber-optic communications line in the Raleigh/Durham, NC, area went out for more than 24 hours recently, "none of our clients ever noticed," thanks to redundancies that enabled BCD to redirect those calls.

BCD is far from the only travel services company that has stepped up its game in the past couple of years. "The recent super-disasters" — Katrina and the tsunami — "have increased everyone's awareness," says David Cameron, vice president of security services for the Americas at International SOS. "There's been a requirement for us to increase the depth of our services." Those services, he says, are intended to accomplish three functions:

- client awareness of the potential for trouble at specific destinations (whether due to political unrest or a tendency toward inclement weather);
- tracking employees' exposure to developing or real adverse conditions;
- response arrangements — e.g. getting the traveling employee to safe ground wherever he or she may be, especially when conditions call for full-blown evacuation.

Playing The Odds?

Private carriers can offer their clients a more efficient vehicle for evacuation or other emergency contingencies than their commercial counterparts, asserts Greg Raiff, CEO of **Private Jet Services (PJS)**. "We've been doing this for 19 years," he says, "and there isn't a crisis we haven't handled." PJS helps clients develop travel continuity plans, and Raiff says that since Katrina there's been a 200 to 250 percent increase in inquiries from corporate travel departments for these services.

Continuity plans not only call for getting outta Dodge, but also for providing accommodations to employees stranded by bad weather. "Since 9/11 and Katrina, corporate travel managers have focused on key issues such as traveler location at any point in time, alternative venue research, and to some extent contingency planning in terms of pre-negotiating price and availability in alternate locations," says LaDonna Martin, vice president of product management for Lanyon, which facilitates RFPs for corporations' hotel contracts.

She adds, however, that she's seen no change in clients' preparation levels so far this year.