

# PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by Peter Smith and Sean Hoots

## Are You Ready?



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If the clean-up process in the wake of **Hurricane Katrina** is any indication, the key to tackling community emergencies is planning. Natural disasters will not wait for you to be prepared. As a voice in the community, your radio station should be at the ready to assist and inform in times of crisis. Earning the reputation as the most prepared and informative station will also ensure loyal listening.

To start, review the most common types of severe weather/emergencies your station faces. Think back to the ways other media outlets in your market handled the situation. Call local TV anchors or weatherpersons for interviews on how to prepare. Browse these sites for tips on emergency preparations: [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov), [www.disasterlinks.com](http://www.disasterlinks.com), [www.preparenow.org](http://www.preparenow.org), or find your State Office of Emergency Management at [www.fema.gov/fema/statedr.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/fema/statedr.shtm).

Consider how to approach unexpected emergencies like Hurricane Katrina or 9/11. What tools do you want standing by — News/weather feeds? Expert or contact interviews? TV/Cable monitor in the studio? Production sounders/alerts? List of general safety tips? A plan for blood/food/clothing donations? Donated merchandise to hand out to victims (bottles of water, blankets, etc.)? Make these preparations now, and review them annually and/or before every severe season.

Prepare a severe weather/emergency binder for the air studio. Layout your station's emergency policies. Include:

**1. Who should monitor for severe weather/emergencies and how?**

Internet? Wire? Weather radio? News/Talk sister station? TV monitor?

**2. Procedures for each category of severe weather/emergency.**

For simplicity, we recommend you set up four categories:

- **Potential Risk**  
Severe weather imminent/forecast, minor environmental hazards, building/school closing
- **Hazardous**  
Weather Watch or police/fire emergency (thunderstorms, excessive heat, major accidents, chemical spills, etc)
- **Severe**  
Weather Warning or major local emergency (blizzards, threatening fires, minor earthquake, flooding, etc)
- **Life Threatening**  
Life-threatening weather or national emergency (tornados, hurricanes, terrorist attack, etc)

**3. What actions should the jocks take for each severe category?**

Who should they call — the PD? GM? Engineer? Is there a

severe weather watch/warning script, safety tips, school/road closings or evacuation procedures they should read? Should certain production elements, promotional campaigns, spots or "insensitive" songs be pulled?

**4. When/How do air talents give out information?**

If severe weather is expected, talk about the storm and give a weather update into each stop set. During a Weather Warning or local emergency, an update between every song may be appropriate. If you've got severe weather/breaking news production (sounders, sweepers, beds, etc) make sure you indicate when/how to use it, and where to find the cuts in your computer system. Repeat, recycle and update continuously.

**5. How much information should your air staff give your listeners?**

It's usually better to err on the side of too much information, rather than not enough. Super-serve your listening metro by concentrating on your specific coverage area. Most importantly, make sure you *only report the facts*. Emphasize that your station has the most up-to-date weather information. Develop relationships with emergency personnel and groups like the Red Cross so you can quickly get information to pass along to your listeners.

**6. What should staff and jocks not on the air do?**

If they're in the building, they should stop by the air studio and ask if they can help (scan weather radio, gather information from emergency officials, update Web site, etc). If they're away from the station they can call in and give a report of what they see in their neighborhood. Set up standing hotel reservations for severe winter coverage to keep staff near the station.

**7. Details about your EAS system.**

Provide clear instructions on how to operate your system and/or broadcast alerts. If an EAS test is scheduled and the weather is threatening, or an emergency has occurred, list details/contact info on how to reschedule your test.

**8. Maps, contact numbers, & FEMA safety tips.**

Detailed local maps plus a standard US Atlas can come in handy during a crisis. Be sure to list contact information for: National and local weather centers; Sheriff's Office; Fire Chief; Department of Public Works; FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency); regional Military Communications Officer; water, gas, cable and energy companies. Recruit volun-

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teers from counties in your metro to provide on-location reports, and list their contact information. Browse FEMA's media section for more: [www.fema.org/about/media.shtm](http://www.fema.org/about/media.shtm). Print FEMA guidelines and safety tips for your studio binder.

Set guidelines for when to drop regular programming elements so there is no confusion during an emergency. Your main concern should be to provide all the information your listeners need. This may mean just dumping a song for weather updates/phone-ins. However, be prepared to stop a song to convey urgent information.

Keep an archive of public service shows that any station in your cluster may have done with FEMA or local rescue operations folks. Play the highlights as threatening situations become evident.

For life threatening weather or national emergencies – stop everything immediately. Have jocks calmly give information and air phone-in reports if available. Record :60 severe weather PSAs (safety tips/disaster relief) for your archive – jocks can use these breaks to organize their thoughts. Don't return to music or commercials until the immediate threat to your listeners is over.

Invite a local meteorologist to train your staff in emergency terminology, advise them how to anticipate emergencies, and tell them how/when the local media will likely react to various emergencies. Reserve some time to roll play different scenarios.

Discuss what to do if the jock/studio is in danger. In the worst-case scenario, have an escape route planned. Be prepared to pack up the station's hard drives and carry them to safety.

Work with your engineer to ensure you have adequate back-up capabilities: power (studio & transmitter sites), STL, transmitter, etc. Periodically check your generators to make sure they are running with enough gas on hand for several days.

Do you have "emergency" CDs with production cuts and a few dozen songs if your network goes down? Do you have an emergency CD with pre-recorded PSAs and helpful info that jocks can put on repeat?

Be sure to keep your Web site updated to reflect your on-air content, including up-to-the-minute reports, emergency contact information and links to local and federal support groups.

Are you prepared to help distribute aid, where appropriate, after an emergency? Make a plan with your local Red Cross or Salvation Army to recruit listeners as volunteers in an emergency. Assign a station vehicle to carry water, boxes of candy, blankets, etc. Team up with retailers willing to donate goods. On-air and online, tell your listeners how and where they can find help (or how they can help others).

Most of all care...care about how your station will sound during times of tragedy. Care about how the events will affect your announcers and, most importantly, your listeners. Catastrophes tend to leave many shaken and feeling vulnerable. Be a leader in your community when it comes to emergency preparation, so you can be a rock in times of crisis.

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