

Surviving Sandy

Distributors and manufacturers go above and beyond to support their communities in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

by Susan Bloom & Carol Katarsky



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On Oct. 28-29, Hurricane Sandy made an indelible mark on the East Coast—affecting tens of millions of people in at least eight states. By the time the storm passed and Sandy had dissipated, the nearly 1,000-mile-wide “Frankenstorm” had done an estimated \$50 billion in damage to homes, communities, and businesses. On these pages, a number of distributors and manufacturers recount their personal and professional experiences helping to support their communities during and after Hurricane Sandy and offer lessons learned on disaster management following this unprecedented superstorm.

AC ELECTRICAL SUPPLIES

“We lost power at all four of our Long Island locations,” said Joe Lardaro, vice president of sales for AC Electrical Supplies, Syosset, N.Y. “At our Smithtown branch, we lost power for four days and worked with an office generator and flashlights. Our Syosset office lost power for weeks and suffered damage to the roof; a strong smell of gas also forced the closure of our gas line.”

Committed to providing service to a beleaguered community, all employees who could get into work were asked to come in as early as possible, “but with so many downed trees, road closures, and traffic lights out, only a few could make it in,” Lardaro said. “We decided to stay open until 10 p.m. to assist those

customers needing generators, generator accessories, and service equipment.”

Among other relief efforts provided, “we sold the 20A and 30A twist-lock plugs required to run the generators, which the big box stores didn’t have,” Lardaro said. “We were trying to assist as many homeowners as possible, particularly because electrical code is specific and dealing with electrical home panels can be dangerous.”

While AC Electrical has a disaster management plan in place, Lardaro said that Sandy made its execution difficult. “It’s hard to implement your plan when all power and cell phones go down, there’s limited roadway access, and there’s no gas,” he explained. “Facebook and other social media

helped us get the message out to those who had power or cell phone service. Our plan was to make sure we had well-lit and safe counter space available to those who were coming in, and we put all storm-related items at the counters, including batteries, flashlights, etc.

“The key to this storm or any severe weather event is proactivity,” he continued. “We increased our purchase orders for generators, miscellaneous generator plugs and wire, and service products such as meter pans and panels, because homeowners can’t restore their power without these items. Unfortunately, the storm was so damaging that all nearby bridges and tunnels were closed—and here on Long Island we’re at the mercy of bridges and tunnels to ship and receive material.”

FACILITY SOLUTIONS GROUP

Despite the fact that “much of our once-beautiful coast line was wiped out and entire communities—including those of some of our very own employees—lost everything,” Facility Solutions Group’s (FSG) Ricky Tripodo, branch manager of the Austin, Texas-based firm’s Lyndbrook, N.Y., location, said that spirits remained high among his team and the feeling of strength and unity was never greater.

A major player in the relief and recovery efforts in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, most of FSG’s manpower and resources were reallocated toward the provision of backup generation for area school districts, hotels, municipal complexes, and even FEMA headquarters in Garden City, Long Island, following the storm.

“Once the storm hit, communication was the biggest challenge—we had no phones, Internet, or cell phone reception,” Tripodo said. “In many parts of Long Island, however, texting capability was available, so we began texting with everyone, organizing whomever could come into the office, and trying to account for and assist our employees.” He noted that two employees lived on the barrier island of Long Beach, where the storm surge caused the ocean to

meet the bay. "Both of their residences had completely flooded and we couldn't account for them for four days, but eventually and thankfully we learned that they were okay," he said.

The near-immediate dispatch of a support staffer through FSG's Texas headquarters was key, as he became a communications hub for the company. "The diesel fuel he brought with him was also critical because gas shortages almost left us stranded," Tripodo said.

Meanwhile, according to Leon Mowadia Jr., New York City branch manager, "Thanks to our VoIP system, all calls were immediately redirected to our Texas office, which made things seamless from the customer side, and we had a generator at our Perth Amboy, N.J., location, so we were able to operate and rent standby generators to customers and gas stations."

"Having a plan in place at the company and branch level is imperative,"

Tripodo confirmed. "It's crucial to be prepared with resources like water, food, batteries, first aid supplies, and a full tank of gas on the premises. It's also important to have a plan for all employees to call into a central location so everyone can be accounted for," he said.

G&G ELECTRIC

G&G Electric in Manhattan was in the center of some of the worst damage from Sandy, thanks to a last-minute change in the storm track. Because the company didn't expect significant damage or outages, it took only the standard preparations it would for any normal weather event. After the storm, as the devastation around the city and lengthy, wide-

spread power outages came to light, company officials realized they'd need to act quickly to get up and running and help its customers do the same.

"We were looking at a long power outage," explained Larry Heimrath, chairman and owner. "It ended up being five days. We had a precious 5,700W generator we used with some low-power CFLs to light the counter and warehouse. Joe Fusco, our president, jumped into action Tuesday morning ordering extra

inventory like load circuit breakers and wire that we knew customers would be looking for and somehow got it delivered overnight."

G&G itself wasn't flooded but nearby areas were, crippling large portions of

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the transit system and leaving many employees unable to get to work. The company had to send out trucks to pick them up and bring them home at the end of the day. Many of those same employees had sustained significant damage to their own homes or had family members who had. "It's really hard to communicate how difficult that time was," Heimrath said.

Although those first few days were rough going, the company heard no complaints—in fact, Heimrath said that customers were grateful the company was even open, especially once G&G started providing one extra, unexpected service: a top-off from its generator for passersby who needed to recharge their phones. "So many people had no access to power for such a long time and having a powered-up phone really became a lifeline for them," said Heimrath.

NASSOR ELECTRIC

Nassor Electric in Moonachie, N.J., faced one particularly unusual problem after the storm. In addition to a power outage that lasted over a week, a failed pump caused the building to take several inches of water—and the parking lot ended up full of dead fish from when the nearby Hackensack River flooded the majority of the town.

"We didn't get our power back until Nov. 7, the phones weren't back until the 8th, and a few of our computers were fried from the water," explained Joe Stellato, sales and marketing. "It was pretty hard to do business. Fortunately, all of our inventory is on raised pallets, so we didn't lose that."

Stellato explained that employees set up three small generators to keep a few lights on and ran a 4G hotspot off an iPad until the company's Internet access was back up. "It wasn't always pretty—we had guys pulling inventory in the warehouse using flashlights—but we got back to business right away," Stellato noted.

The company, which serves primarily OEM and industrial markets, had stocked up in advance of the storm on wire, 30A plugs, and transformers—

almost all of which flew off the shelves after the storm. Stellato noted things are mostly back to normal now, although company leaders are planning a review of its emergency plans. "Our goal is just to make sure that we can get up and running again as quickly as possible next time and do it smoothly," he said.

RAB LIGHTING

At RAB Lighting in Northvale, N.J., "Our facility lost power for more than a week and both our primary and secondary Internet circuits were down, impairing connection to our 40 rep agencies and 30 warehouses," said CEO Ross Barna. "We have an emergency preparedness plan in place, but we never expected that both our regular and backup systems would go down. We had backup generators on the premises that ran on diesel and we received fuel deliveries, but we were concerned about our employees, many of whom live in the hard-hit areas."

Prior to the storm, RAB had built an email text messaging alert system hosted out of a secure facility in Chicago that enabled management to speak with all employees simultaneously. "Once we were able to contact everyone, we could assess the damage and start getting people to the office," Barna said. "We began shipping again two days later.

"To address our huge backlog of orders around the country, we worked two shifts and used a cobbled-together network of our employees' personal cell phones to answer calls and take orders because phone and Internet service was down," Barna continued. "Everyone also had issues related to the gasoline shortages, so we let employees go out in shifts to get gas for their cars and generators."

In addition to helping those distributors whose operations were shut down due to Sandy by shipping direct to their customers in certain areas, "It came to our attention that the New Jersey Coast Guard was in need of donations, so we immediately sent a standing light set to the National Guard Training Center in Sea Girt, N.J., and also extended the of-

SUPPORTING RELIEF EFFORTS

It's often in the worst of circumstances that the best is brought out in many. Here are just a few companies that offered a helping hand in the wake of Hurricane Sandy:

- **Atlanta Light Bulbs**, Tucker, Ga., donated \$2,500 to benefit the disaster relief efforts for the victims of Hurricane Sandy. The donation, funded by a portion of November AtlantaLightBulb.com online sales, will go to support the American Red Cross's efforts over the past month to provide food, water, shelter, relief supplies, healthcare, and other assistance to those affected by the storm.

- **Engineered Products Company** (EPCO; engproducts.com) shipped 11 pallets of its Contractor Grade Temporary CordLights to provide lighting for reconstruction efforts in areas hit by Hurricane Sandy. Valued at more than \$40,000, the donated product was sent to the Salvation Army for distribution where needed most along the East Coast.

- **Honeywell's First Responder Products Business** (honeywellfirstresponder.com) provided more than \$600,000 in donated personal protective equipment gear that was distributed via the Nassau County Office of Emergency Management in Long Island to first responder teams in affected areas in New York and New Jersey.

- **Leviton** (leviton.com) made a \$10,000 donation to the American Red Cross to support the Hurricane Sandy relief effort immediately following the storm. Leviton also rallied its workforce to assist those affected by the storm, organizing a hurricane relief fundraiser to collect necessary nonperishable supplies for hard-hit areas and offering employees carpooling and laundry/drycleaning services in an effort to support those

fer of any additional lights they required," Barna said.

UNITED ELECTRIC SUPPLY

As the storm approached, officials at United Electric Supply, headquartered in New Castle, Del., knew at least some of their facilities would be directly hit—but could only make an educated guess as to which facilities would experience which kinds of aftershocks.

"We were most concerned about our Vineland [NJ], Langhorne [PA], and Delaware locations," said Bob Crawford, COO. He noted that prior to the storm, the company brought in additional inventory, especially generators, cords, and batteries. They also worked additional hours and over the weekend prior to the storm so that customers could do their own stocking up. "We had a run on inventory, especially generators, both before the storm and immediately after. We sold 581 generators from Oct. 25—two days before the storm—to Nov. 15."

The company's Langhorne facility took the hardest hit, losing power for three days. Fortunately, the company had moved backup copies of vital files, computer equipment, and other mission-critical items to various remote locations as part of its disaster recovery preparations.

However, there was one unexpected blip: state restrictions, especially in Delaware, that limited driving to "emergency" travel, which wasn't always clearly defined. Crawford said that in anticipation of similar situations in the future, the company is working with state agencies to have its company vehicles exempted from such restrictions, in the belief that delivering generators and similar equipment in a crisis is a justifiable emergency measure.

WARSHAUER ELECTRIC

"I can only describe it as Armageddon; in my 26 years in this business I've never seen such mass destruction with so many entire towns wiped out across such a large area," recalled Jim Dunn, executive vice president of sales and

marketing for Warshauer Electric Supply in Tinton Falls, N.J. "We lost power for over two weeks [at company headquarters] but ran on full generator power until our utility power was restored. We had never stayed open 24/7 before, but we did at times during Sandy and the following weeks."

"We stayed open as needed, which was definitely all night at times, during and after the storm," added Sarah Barton, marketing coordinator, adding that the entire business operated without email or Internet access for more than two weeks. "Everything we needed to do to provide these necessary products and services was done via paper."

Barton noted that selling and servicing generators was the bulk of their efforts. "We sold generators faster than we could get them in the door for the days leading up to the storm through the following Friday and handled an enormous volume of generator service calls and had to pool resources from almost every department to manage them," she said.

According to Barton, the Warshauer team had to be resourceful to help support its members, at one point rummaging through the cleared-out shelves of one of the area's only operating supermarkets to provide food for employees the day after the storm, when normal business resumed.

"Throughout this whole experience, almost every person within our organization had to go outside of the normal scope of his or her job to help support the overflow of work," said Barton.

"I was really touched by the team effort of all of our people," added Dunn. "Through all of the craziness they all responded with unbelievably positive attitudes, despite the fact that many had been personally affected by the storm in some way." ■

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SUPPORTING RELIEF EFFORTS

with limited access to those services at home.

- **Satco** (satco.com) set up a hurricane fundraiser and collected \$25,000. The company established an initial donation of \$10,000 and collected \$5,000 from employee donations. Satco then matched \$2 for every \$1 contributed. The funds were distributed to three charities that serve the affected areas.

- **Southwire** (southwire.com). Members of Southwire's Project GIFT team distributed three tractor-trailer loads of water, nonperishable foods, cleaning supplies, and other items to residents in Neptune Township, N.J., on Nov. 9. Supplies included food, blankets, paper goods, bottled water, hygiene and baby items, pet food, and cleaning supplies. Southwire volunteers collected the items during a two-day drive in the company's hometown of Carrollton, Ga.

- **SMA** (sma-america.com) reached out to customers in the northeast to offer support and assist with the restoration of solar PV plants across the region. Some victims of the hurricane were also SMA customers that relied on solar for at least a portion of their power supply. Many of them saw their Sunny Central inverters damaged beyond repair. In such cases, SMA is providing those customers with commissioning of replacement Sunny Central inverters at no charge.

- **Summit Electric Supply**, Albuquerque, N.M., held a 10-day fundraising campaign that matched associate contributions to first responder organizations. Associates donated \$13,570 between the American Red Cross and Salvation Army from Oct. 31 through Nov. 9; with matching funds from Summit, the total donation amount to the organizations came to \$27,140. —S.B.