



Case Study: Ahead of the Storm with Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union

Overview

Anticipating wide-scale calamity can certainly contribute to an uptick in anxiety, but it also helps people achieve positive outcomes in the aftermath of disaster. This was certainly the case for the team at Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union, as they endured the effects of Hurricane Michael this past year. It was predicted that the storm would make landfall within the Florida panhandle on Wednesday, October 10, 2018; subsequently, the staff of Panhandle Educators enacted their disaster preparedness plan on Tuesday, October 9, and locked the doors that evening with judicious hope of returning safely in the following days.

Greg Frith, President and CEO of Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union, which serves 13,503 members and has six branches in the Florida Panhandle, revealed in a one-on-one interview with PSCU, the details of his team's disaster plan. He shares his advice with others on how they can best prepare for the unthinkable, and states that the most crucial element to disaster

recovery is good vendor relationships. Special importance must be placed on the resources one has available for assistance when all critical operations are down. However, the first matter of business must remain on the well-being of employees.

Challenge

In the days leading up to the hurricane, it had been reported that Michael would be labeled a category 3 hurricane. By Floridians' standards, this is often considered manageable, and many within the Panhandle community did not evacuate. Challenges arose when the storm made landfall just five miles per hour short of a category 5 hurricane. Although Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union turned off their generators prior to leaving Tuesday with the optimism that they would return Thursday, they received notice that their servers went down around 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday. Additional challenges presented themselves through the lack of electricity, limited communications, impassable roadways and the potential for looting.

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Frith and team needed to rely on their business continuity plan (BCP) and resourcefulness to get the doors to their credit union opened as soon as possible. Beyond hospitals, police stations and fire stations, community members look to their financial institutions as a source of provision in disaster. As payment processing capabilities are often hindered in such circumstances, cash becomes crucial, requests for loans tend to increase, and members' credit and debit card needs may become more specialized.

Solution

As an initial matter of business, Frith wanted to ensure the safety of his team. He states that it is important to know: Who among your employees is evacuating? Is the contact information of all employees readily available to key credit union leaders? Who is assigned the role of business continuity planning? One of the best first-steps a credit union can take in planning for an emergency is identifying staff members that may have experience in such areas and letting them develop a system for storm-day operations. It's important, however, not to forget about the "human factor" of employee wellness in the midst of contingency planning. Members aren't the only ones that require reminders about their value in times of disaster; employees do as well. The best way to show employees that you care is to communicate expectations clearly and support them in their personal decisions to put their safety, and that of their family, first. Flexible scheduling, extra time off and even a few company-paid supplies

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go a long way in employee loyalty. For Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union, a special point of pride, post-storm, was the fact that they had zero layoffs, and all employees returned to work securely to continue serving their community.

As for successful storm outcome, resourcefulness and good vendor relations were keys for Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union. PSCU was one of several partners who stepped in to assist the credit union when their operations were down. It is a standard procedure for PSCU Service Executives to contact credit unions in the wake of disaster to help and extend aid. Despite the loss of electricity, a determined PSCU Service Executive was able to reach an employee of Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union through social media, and offer emergency services. Almost immediately, that message was passed along to Frith, who contacted PSCU, and was able to successfully establish a "skip payment" credit card loan option for his members for the months of October through December.

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PSCU worked swiftly on the credit union's behalf to complete reports, establish skip payment options and print messages on the last statement cycle of the year, advising members that normal minimum payments would resume in January 2019. While a few fraud scenarios surfaced in the days following the hurricane, the credit union's Service Executive worked closely with the PSCU fraud team to resolve any issues on Panhandle Educators' behalf. "It was an excellent example of teamwork and good partnership," said Frith of PSCU's service in October 2018.

Outcome:

There's a certain inequity to disaster that holds all people responsible for a certain level of preparedness. Frith's team at Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union was resourceful, implementing outside-the-box solutions to overcome the lack of electricity and communications, and to ensure employees' safety. The overarching message to credit unions is to be prepared, as the community will look to you to help regain a sense of normalcy in dire situations. Whether it's increased demand for cold, hard cash, or the distribution of supportive messaging, it's imperative your credit union has a well-practiced plan for weathering a storm, as well as a good partnership with resources that can serve members on your behalf. The most important observation

from Panhandle Educators Federal Credit Union is that far too many financial institutions are operating too close to the margins. We now conduct business in an era of standardized disaster, with credit unions sprawling across what are now, effectively, floodplains, wildfire zones and hurricane territories. And while there's certainly no sport in natural calamity, there are some strategies that can help abridge distress at both the credit union and member level.

PSCU is Here to Help

Your credit union's contact center is the beating heart of your organization but forces outside your control can place it under attack. Whether your doors are open for business or closed due to an unforeseen crisis, the member experience is always of utmost importance, and uninterrupted operations is crucial.

PSCU's Total Member Care (TMC) contact center provides seamless service with proactive, educated agents that deliver a highly-personalized experience, but that's just the beginning of how PSCU can help your credit union meet its challenges and maximize its potential.

For further discussions, including a no-cost analysis of your current contact center situation, call PSCU at 844.367.7728 and select Option 1.