POWERING COMMUNICATION DURING OUTAGES

MARCH 2024

Amanda Coleman
COMMUNICATION

BACKGROUND

The potential risk of power outages is as relevant today as it was in November 2022 when the first guidance document on communication during blackouts was published.

This report aims to bring together some practical advice for communication teams and those planning to manage power outages. The approach will be affected by external factors such as weather conditions and the extent of the outage.

PR and communication teams have become reliant upon technology to deliver messages. There are assumptions that the smartphone will always be there ready to be used and giving immediate access to information.

But global uncertainty, extreme weather conditions, and potential threats have made it essential to plan how to communicate when there is no power, and to be ready if that situation extends for days or even weeks.

If there is no power how will you communicate with employees? How will you share vital updates? How will you understand what is happening? How can we all protect and support the vulnerable?

This guide aims to give some advice to those considering communicating when there is no power and how to plan and prepare now. If you need more help and advice, get in touch with Amanda Coleman at amanda@amandacolemancomms.co.uk

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

A national power outage has become a strategic risk for organisations and businesses in the UK. It is already a risk for many countries around the world who experience outages which may be linked to weather conditions or network capabilities. There is also the possibility of a power outage on a local or national basis caused by other factors including cyber-attack, terrorist activity or even solar flares.

The 2023 National Risk Register for the UK details the possible scenarios where there is a loss of power, energy and telecommunication. As remote as some of these situations may feel, there remains a possibility that at some point, locally or nationally, there could be a power outage. The impact it would have is more significant now than in previous years when technology was not so central to everyday lives.

Organisations need to ensure that plans are in place to ensure business continuity but also consider how they can support local or national efforts to help people affected by outages. For example, how can they share information with their staff not just about the work-related actions but also what responding agencies are publicising to help people stay safe during power outages.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

During any loss of power those who are affected will need urgent support. They need to understand what to do and how to protect themselves, their families and friends, and their property. This is particularly important when those people are vulnerable and need support to ensure they are kept safe.

The priority must always be actions that preserve and protect lives. Power outages are a crisis that threatens security and safety. Being ready to respond to any power outage is critical. People need to know how to prepare, and have a plan that they put in place when something happens. This can build individual and community resilience by ensuring people are prepared.

If organisations are involved in informing people about the steps to take, and about how they are responding, it can help to build trust. This is particularly critical for public services who need to provide warnings about what actions people need to take and where they can receive updates and the latest information. Having channels of communication that are not based in technology is essential to the response.

PLANNING FOR BUSINESSES

All businesses need to prepare for a power outage and how it will impact not only on their operations but also on their ability to communicate. The seven steps below will support the development of a plan and focus on managing the risks and identifying the potential areas of impact.

1. KNOW YOUR RISKS

Outline the risks and challenges your organisation would face with a local and national power outage. What would be the impact if you had urgent orders to supply or actions? How would it affect the business in winter and in summer?

2. IMPACT ON PEOPLE

Understand the impact that the outage would have on people both within the organisation and the wider community. Be clear how severe the impact could be and identify systems and activities that require immediate support/replacement.

3. FIND THE BUSINESS CRITICAL ELEMENTS

Identify the impact that the loss of power will have on business systems and processes and which of those are critical – some of this information may already be available in business continuity plans.

4. IDENTIFY ALTERNATIVES

Consider the alternative actions that can be taken if power is not available. What else could be used? How can technology be replaced? Are paper based systems practical?

5. DEVELOP A COMMS PLAN

Develop a communication plan with messaging and details of the systems and channels that could be used. Understand how you will communicate with remotely based staff and how to do it at speed. The more details that are included the easier it will be to test and prepare.

6. DISCUSS THE PLANS

Start the conversation with staff, stakeholders, local people, customers, and others about how to be prepared.

7. REVISE PLANS

Revise the business continuity plan and any other relevant plans as feedback or more information becomes available.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

It is possible that any early warning systems that are in place could be compromised by the loss of power. This appears to have happened in a number of cases where the loss of power has led to warnings not being received, as well as people being unclear how to access information when they are not online. This is a huge risk for responding organisations.

Start by understanding how your early warning system operates and the extent of the impact that the loss of power would have on it.

Consider alternative delivery mechanisms for immediate warnings, actions, and providing further information. Look at the channels that will be available without power.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Many of the communication channels that are relied upon to share information will not be available during a power outage. People may not be able to access social media, the internet, TV and radio updates, or even be able to use mobile phones. It is important to identify systems of communication that you can use without having access to power.

Some suggested alternative channels:

- Sharing information with a network of community representatives/leaders or groups so that they can share with the local community. This would mean sharing messages using vehicles, bicycles or runners. Speak to your local cycling and running clubs about how you could work with them to support the urgent sharing of messages.
- Use a mobile loudspeaker system to go through communities, sharing messages.
- Conduct a leaflet drop in areas affected using staff, or community groups. Have basic information prepared and ready to use as printers may be unavailable.
- Create printed material that can be placed in key locations to provide updates. Or have whiteboards that can be positioned and updated by your network of information sharers.
- Provide information on traditional channels including the media and social media as people may have some battery life in the initial hours after the power cut started.
- Consider using Raynet – Radio Amateurs Emergency Network – to help with the dissemination of messages (Find out more at www.raynet-uk.net).
- Use frontline staff who may not be involved in the emergency response to the outage to go door-to-door or to connect with those community groups and individuals who have agreed to share information.
- Consider where people may congregate for information, such as supermarkets, community halls and other venues and know how information can be placed at those locations.

ADVICE FOR THE PUBLIC

Being prepared and thinking through how a loss of power would impact on you, your family, friends and neighbours can ease the pressure when something happens. Spending a few minutes preparing a plan and putting an emergency pack in place will mean you can quickly react and keep yourself and your family safe.

Consider the following:

Have a wind-up radio that could be used to receive updates.

Keep phones and laptop batteries charged to extend their use.

Understand where you need to go to get information and updates.

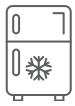
Have warm clothing, blankets, medicines and other items ready to access easily.

Consider if you have any medical equipment that may be affected and speak to your doctor about what you can do.

Keep essential paperwork, such as insurance documentation, together in a secure location.

Identify those around you who may need support including any elderly neighbours, families with young children and plan how you will share information with them without phones or power.

Ensure that you have planned for how to look after any pets during a power outage. Consider if there are any special requirements and review how you will be able to provide care. Speak to your vet for advice.



The Foods Standards Agency recommend storing food in fridges at temperatures below 8 degrees during a power cut. Food that requires refrigeration should be used within four hours. In cold weather food could be stored outside in a tamper proof container out of sunlight and away from animals. Refer to the FSA website for more information.

PR AND COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

If you are not sure where to start with the communication planning for a power outage, the checklist below should help make sure you are crisis ready.

- ✔ Map who will be affected critically, seriously or in a limited way by a loss of power.
- ✔ Have you developed key messages? Are these based on what people need to know not just what you want to tell them?
- ✔ Have a power outage communication plan detailing messaging, channels and actions.
- ✔ Identify the key locations where you may need to position staff to help with the dissemination of messages.
- ✔ Has a briefing system been put in place to ensure that messages can be shared quickly?
- ✔ Do staff know what role they need to undertake to support the response? What internal messages have been provided?
- ✔ Identify what staff will be available to support the communication response.
- ✔ Can you share messages from a number of agencies to maximise the available channels?
- ✔ Has long term support been planned or put in place?

NEXT STEPS

- Identify the communication channels that would be available during a power outage.
- Detail the key groups and individuals that can support the development of the new/replacement channels.
- Arrange local meetings to discuss how people could support and how the situation could be activated.
- Agree the roles and actions that are needed to make available the channels and methods to share messages in an emergency.
- Develop a communication plan.
- Keep updated with any local or national developments that could improve or amend the approach that is documented.
- Test your communication plan. This can be done in a tabletop exercise or a crisis simulation.

CONTACT DETAILS

AMANDA COLEMAN

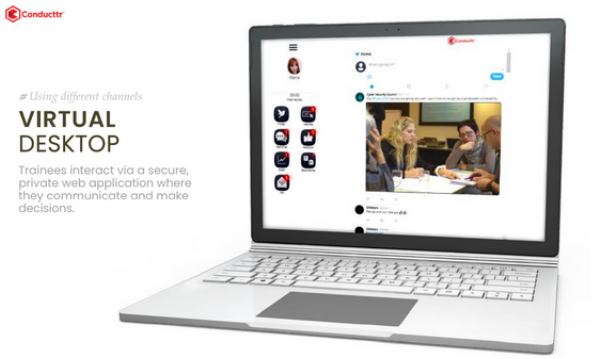
AMANDA COLEMAN
DIRECTOR

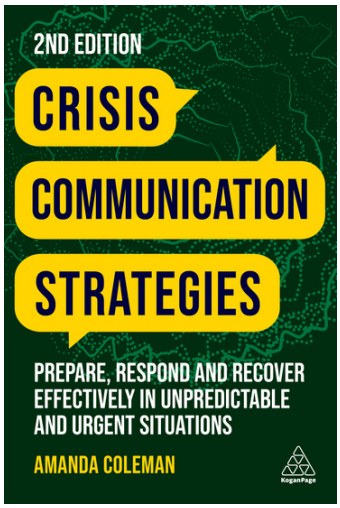
AMANDA COLEMAN COMMUNICATION LTD

07910 946627
amanda@amandacolemancomms.co.uk
office@amandacolemancomms.co.uk

www.amandacolemancomms.co.uk

Licensed to use Conducttr software





Check website for the 2024 crisis communication training dates.

Check out the Under Pressure newsletter.