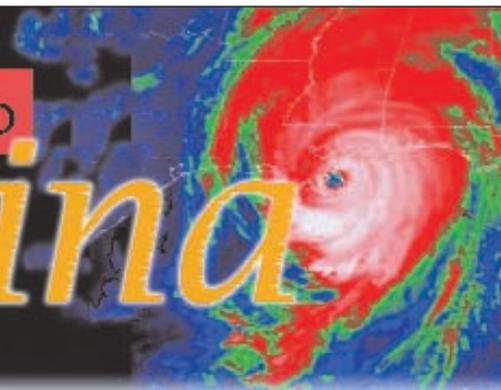


Distributors Respond to

Katrina



Distributors large and small – some victims of the storm themselves – were working at press time to cope with the effects of Hurricane Katrina.

Large companies shifted operations away from distribution centers in affected areas. Smaller companies faced more fundamental challenges, such as whether or not to relocate, and how to survive, given the loss of a substantial portion of their customer base.

All struggled to track down their employees and cope with failed communication and transportation systems. And all were striving to help meet the medical needs of thousands of people who were on the move.

The relief effort actually began before the storm hit the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29. Owens & Minor, Cardinal Health and others implemented disaster plans, which included supplying customers with products to help them operate through an extended emergency.

Restoring power

Immediately after the storm, Cardinal Health worked to restore power to its Hammond, La., medical-surgical distribution center, which services New Orleans. Meanwhile, the company shifted operations to facilities in Texas, Tennessee, Georgia and Florida. (Ten days after the storm hit, the military was using the Hammond facility as a staging area for a large medical logistics unit.)

The company was working with government agencies to support temporary medical and triage facilities, and was assisting the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to set up six 250-bed emergency medical centers. In addition, it was supplying two medical Naval ships – the *Comfort* and the *Mercy*. As of Sep. 8, Cardinal Health was supporting more than

20 hospitals that were treating hurricane victims. “We have been able to make dozens of deliveries to hospitals that can receive orders, thanks in part to police and National Guard escorts,” said company spokeswoman Donna Gaidamak.

Owens & Minor’s New Orleans facility near the city’s airport escaped major damage, said Vice President of Operations Ken Russell. Soon after the storm, the company worked to restore a satellite-feed backup communication system. Customer service was relocated to Houston, Birmingham and Jacksonville, Fla.

In the days following the storm, a key challenge facing Owens & Minor was figuring out which hospitals were operational, not to mention finding out what supplies they needed. The company’s drivers found themselves shuttling all types of goods, including generators. They even delivered supplies on behalf of their competitors – a not uncommon occurrence in the wake of the storm.

Employees from one New Orleans hospital – escorted by the National Guard – were able to pick up supplies at the company’s distribution center. And with help from the purchasing group MedAssets, Owens & Minor was able to stay in touch with Ochsner Foundation Hospital to monitor its needs.

Meanwhile, the company’s facility in Jackson, Miss., remained up and running – with the help of a generator – in the days following the storm. The biggest challenge was helping employees find gas for their cars.

Like Owens & Minor, St. Louis-based MMS – A Medical Supply Company found itself distributing unusual items, including generators, ready-to-eat meals, flashlights and batteries, said Marketing Coordinator Jennifer Nichols. Drivers transported blood for the American Red Cross, and medication and drugs for AmerisourceBergen. MMS also pooled

services with lab supplier Fisher Scientific.

Though it didn’t suffer any storm damage, the company’s warehouse in Baton Rouge lost power and telephone service in the storm. Due to road damage and the crush of demands brought on by the storm, employees (under the direction of warehouse manager Eric Kelly) stayed day and night in the Baton Rouge facility. He and other MMS managers worked with the purchasing group Amerinet and LSU Health Sciences Center Director of Administration and Support Services Joy Barnett in Baton Rouge to coordinate the distribution of supplies to affected areas.

As did all the distributors with whom *Repertoire* spoke, MMS credited manufacturers for their support. Some waived freight charges and drop-ship fees, some donated supplies and all worked to expedite orders.

Meanwhile, Melville, NY-based Henry Schein Inc. reported that by Sep. 4, it had assembled more than 6 tons of medical and dental supplies for shipment to the affected areas. The company worked with federal and state authorities to supply first-aid items and vaccines for medical workers and storm victims. The company opened a toll-free relief hotline (800-999-9729) for physicians, dentists and veterinarians.

Independents respond

In the northern part of Louisiana, a special-needs hospital was set up for evacuees in the basketball coliseum at the University of Louisiana in Monroe. “That was the first call I got,” said Roy Arthur, president of Luffey’s Medical in Monroe.

Soon, the Monroe Civic Center housed roughly 4,000 people. Products in high demand included handwashing products, pre-moistened washcloths, glucometer strips, gloves, thermometers and blood pressure cuffs. By Sep. 6, so many people had come to Monroe that the

city's chief of police asked Luffey's to secure green and red wristbands to help authorities distinguish between volunteers and evacuees, said Arthur. Many nursing home patients were transferred to Monroe. Orders for adult briefs doubled in some cases.

Respiratory and anesthesia distributor Medical Specialties sustained relatively little physical damage to its New Orleans facility. Owner Duke Johns reported that the building's overhead door had been blown out, but that he and friends were able to hang it and then back a truck in to secure the building. Of even greater concern to Johns in the days following the storm was the safety of his employees. Because of communication difficulties, it was not until Sep. 6 that he was able to ascertain that all were safe.

Despite the prospect of losing a substantial portion of his customer base, Johns decided to keep his business in New Orleans. "I had an offer [to rent] a building in Baton Rouge, but I thought of all the logistics," he said. "If I'm out of business even two months, and I can go

back to my old business where everything is, and where I can get more people into that area, then that's the desirable way. I can stand a two-month hit

Though perspective was still hard to come by 10 days after the storm, some things seemed clear to Johns. First and foremost was the importance of setting up a system to allow companies to track their people in the event of a catastrophe. (Not only were the New Orleans land lines down, but so too was Johns' cell phone with the "504" area code.)

Sylmar, Calif.-based Tri-anim Health Services saw a huge increase in the demand for supplies in the affected areas and Houston, where many evacuees were transported, according to Corporate Operations Manager Jennifer Beatty. The company saw a spike in demand for regulators for oxygen bottles, due to electrical outages.

"We are fielding calls from hospitals that are heartbreaking," she said. "Customers are breaking down in tears on the phone." As of press time, neither UPS nor FedEx was providing service into the affected areas. "We have

instructed our callers to contact their local law enforcement."

National Distribution & Contacting Inc. immediately extended all payment terms for its members in affected areas, said Senior Vice President Scott Tubandt. In some cases, Nashville, Tenn.-based NDC drop-shipped orders directly to some of its members' customers, and donated approximately \$30,000 worth of supplies, including personal bathing products, disinfectants, wound care products and emergency medical response items. NDC said it would continue to make cash and in-kind donations in the weeks and months to come.

Finally, HIDA Vice President of Member Relations Colleen Stern spent time at the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington helping coordinate replenishment of supplies to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and federal shelters. Stern said she was helping create a database to help match distributors' inventory with the needs of the various agencies. **CE**



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