

I have been out of the country the last week. Watching CNN, reading websites and my email, trying to keep up with the disaster that was escalating in the Gulf Coast. While I was gone, I had responded to an email request for any extra merchandise that Mavs might have for those staying in Dallas hotels and we sent boxes full of merchandise to help.

I got back last night, and while switching between Fox News, MSNBC and CNN, I tried to read the FEMA, Red Cross and Salvation Army websites to get a feel for where I could contribute in addition to writing a check.

After reading story after story about evacuees and their needs, I put together my own personal clothing drive where I collected mostly business attire, shirts, shoes, ties, pants, 75 pct of which was brand new. All told there was probably 50k dollars worth of clothing that I piled into the back of a truck.

I had my assistant try calling the Red Cross and Salvation Army, but there was no answer from their local offices. I thought that was curious. Not even an answering machine message directing me to a website. So I located a website that listed various assistance programs going on, including local collection points. So I took off for the collection spot at Texas Stadium.

It was just me. Low key. Trying to help. No media. Just trying to do the right thing. I got to Texas Stadium and waited as cars inched toward the parking lot entrance.

As I sat there, I watched as probably 90 pct of the many cars in front of me were not entering, but instead were driving away. As I got close enough, I could see hand written signs saying "We are not accepting any clothes or household items". I got to the front of the line. The volunteer confirmed just that. No clothes.

Undeterred, I drove off to the Salvation Army collection point not far away.

The line of cars was far shorter, but the same scenario, almost every car was pulling forward, doing a U Turn and driving off. This time I asked the volunteer if there were any sites that were collecting clothes. Nope. Not a single one.

Was I too late?

When I got back home I immediately jumped to the web and started looking through the

[Red Cross](#),

[FEMA](#) and [Salvation](#)

[Army](#)

sites. There it was. Red Cross and the Salvation Army both said the same line (FEMA didn't have a reference I could find). **We don't accept in kind donations or physical items.** The cost to store and distribute these items is prohibitive. Although the Salvation Army did say that we should still continue to donate clothing, bric a brac and furniture to the Salvation Army for their ongoing programs. I guess their ongoing programs were backlogged as well.

It's my fault for not reading and confirming what they were looking for. But what about all the other people that were driving away from the collection points? Was it their fault too? Or was what we had a failure to communicate?

Count me among those who think that among the mistakes made along the way was the horrible use of the media and internet by the aid organizations.

As I write this, Fox News is repeating a tape of volunteers delivering canned goods and other items to evacuees. Right now Fox News is live showing DVDs that have been sent. Items that both the Red Cross and Salvation Army say you should not bring or send or deliver.

Should the Red Cross and Salvation Army among other organizations expect that everyone with a desire to help will read through their websites to confirm what and where to send items? Or should they have anticipated that Americans, with our propensity to help those in need, would try to help in the only way they are able? That they at best would glance at their organization home pages.

The Red Cross, rather than showing Rev. Jesse Jackson offers words of encouragement and Good to be Safe, a survivor tale as the top two items, and pictures that take up valuable real estate on their homepage, shouldn't they highlight actions items? How to give and get help? And leave the wonderful success stories for the linked pages? The Salvation Army homepage did the same thing.

Beyond the website, shouldn't there have been a coordinated effort through the media to educate all of us on how to help?

I know it's easy to criticize and find mistakes. I know that in a situation like this, perfection is never ever the outcome. However, given the resources that are required and will be required to help all of the unfortunate people who have lost so much. Isn't it reasonable to think that many people will rush to offer "in kind" donations and that our biggest aid organizations should ask the media to educate us why they can not accept such donations and direct us to those organizations that can accept them or be very clear that only money can be accepted.

I am curious if there was a coordinated media effort among aid organizations, or was it every one for itself. A battle for donations? I don't have the answer.

Again, it's so easy to Monday morning quarterback. I don't think anyone really expected the devastation and loss of life that occurred. Yet all of this could happen again. All of this will happen again, if not in the Gulf Coast, somewhere in our country. Nature has a way of matching coincidence and crisis.

Maybe it's not my place to make suggestions. Maybe they have thought all these things through, they exist and I just haven't found them or I missed them. But then again, maybe this may help.

FEMA needs to realize that we are a media-centric culture. We look for information wherever we can find it. The wider spread the communication, the more people will receive it and the more assistance, of the type that is needed, can be offered. I can only speculate, but based on what I saw today, which I'm sure was repeated in cities around the country, but millions, if not tens of millions of dollars in timely support was lost because people, including me, were uninformed.

Once there is time available, whether it's weeks, months or years, FEMA needs to organize a disaster information network of websites, phone numbers, text messages, ping numbers and media outlets. When FEMA declares an emergency, then every DMA impacted, or that could be a source of aid, the network would kick in.

Jeff Jarvis does a great job in his [blog](#) encouraging a coordinated effort on the web to help those impacted by a disaster find information. What I detail below is geared towards getting information in different ways to those who need it.

1. I would set up a Common Short Code wireless number. Common Short Codes are the short phone numbers you see advertised for things like voting on American Idol that allow you to text message the number and get a response and reply to it. Why should this be done? Because text messages would reduce the inevitable stress on the wireless phone system and would increase the ability of people who are under duress and have their cellphones or PDAs to send and receive information. That information could then be parsed and posted or reported whether through a website or delivered per the instructions of the text message. (ie, please call 214-555-2345 and let them know I am at this location)

Update Sept 6th

Per a WSJ article today, a former FCC Task Force Member is quoted as saying that cellular companies should encourage their users to use text messaging and phone email. That a 12 line email or text message takes as much bandwidth as only 1 second of voice. In fact text messaging was one of the few ways many could make any contact last week.

2. Rather than distributing a banner ad that encourages people to donate money, the banner ad should be rich media and contain options and information in addition to a link to a website. In addition to the banner, FEMA.gov should also offer javascript and a Konfabulator type widget that offers a scroll/crawl of information as well as an RSS feeds that websites can add that show ongoing updates about how to help, where to help and current information about the event.

3. Just as we have Amber Alerts that are shared among media, FEMA should have the ability to distribute information through local stations AND through media outlets, such as cable and satellite news networks, that are part of their network that allow FEMA to distribute a short video alert, in a format similar to an Amber Alert, and also to feed a crawl that the networks incorporate into their ever-present crawls they all use now.

4. New technology allows the [caller-ring tones](#) to be customized. It's not widely available yet, nor is it available on all networks, but it will be. I'm sure if FEMA asked the carriers to add it to emergency numbers, it will happen sooner.

Calls to traditional emergency numbers should include proactive information in the ring. Rather than hearing our traditional telephone ring, particularly at times when there may not be an answer, if and when the technology is up to the task (I'm sure the wireless carriers can answer this), a message needs to be recorded, and changed to reflect the status of the event as often as necessary.

I know there are many other things that could be suggested, but I think these things could improve the communications that are critical to increasing the prevention, survival, recovery and support that are critical in times of crisis.

I know I'm putting myself out there to be criticized. That's the way it goes. That's what this blog is for, to share experiences and ideas. The comments are there so you can share your response and educate me.