Rising from the rubble

In the wake of recent natural disasters, four IABC members describe the events and their aftermath.

The early part of this year was marked by a torrent of natural disasters in the Asia/Pacific region: floods in Queensland, Australia; a devastating earthquake in New Zealand; and a massive earthquake and tsunami followed by nuclear crisis in Japan. Four IABC members lived through those disasters, and they share their experiences and the lessons they learned.

How did the crisis affect you personally?

Kaz Amemiya, IABC/Japan: Since Tokyo is located 200 miles away from the epicenter and 150 miles from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, the city escaped the physical devastation of the 11 March earthquake. Yet the enormous jolt left me in shock for a long while. Right after the earthquake, all public transportation went down. It took me more than five hours on foot to get to my office. All the streets were jammed with vehicles.

In the month following, every basic necessity that we had taken for granted—from water, power and logistics to transportation—fell short, threatening our sense of security and safety. Moreover, the aftermath of the earthquake has impacted business—in my case, some projects got canceled or postponed—and I have been very concerned that this overall sentiment of self-restraint in business could slow down the economy.

Gerald Raymond, IABC/South Island, New Zealand: The 22 February earthquake caused major damage to buildings and infrastructure around Christchurch. Power and water were out for days, public transport stopped for several days, roads and bridges were severely damaged, and the phone and cell-phone network was either out or unreliable.

When the earthquake struck, I was sitting at my desk on the top floor of a three-story office building. All I remember is that I was suddenly thrown from side to side, my computer monitor fell over, and I dived under my
When the shaking ended—around 25 seconds later—the floor monitor yelled for everyone to evacuate the building immediately.

Our home was damaged. We did what we could to clean up, but after a couple of days with no power, water or toilets, we went to stay with friends on the other side of the city. Power was restored after about a week, and water after about two weeks. It took a month before essential repairs were completed and we were able to move back in.

Stress was an issue for many people following the earthquake. Ongoing aftershocks affected sleep, as did uncertainty over homes and jobs, and the realization that it could be months or years before life would return to normal.

Was your company affected? If so, what was its response?

Hirofumi Shimodaira, IABC/Japan: Kao Corp., where I work, a toiletry products manufacturer, supplies a variety of daily necessities. The earthquake had an effect on our production and distribution activities, but we hurried to recover those functions and made it the top priority to fulfill our responsibility to supply products to the tsunami-hit region and neighboring areas. We have been carrying out measures in accordance with our business contingency plan. In addition, we have made donations and offered products that the disaster-stricken areas need via government agencies and NGOs [non-governmental organizations].

Gerald Raymond: Environment Canterbury Regional Council’s office buildings in Christchurch were evacuated at the time of the earthquake and have been off-limits ever since, apart from two brief, supervised recovery missions. Employees had only what they took with them when they evacuated the buildings.

Council directors realized quickly that our buildings would be out of action for at least several months and began looking for new offices. They moved quickly and found viable options within a week, and began planning the huge logistical and IT work program to rehouse employees across five or six locations.

Essential services for Environment Canterbury were run from offices outside of Christchurch, while a number of employees were able to work remotely. A month after the earthquake, new offices had been set up for around 200 people, while the remaining employees expected to be accommodated by early May.

Paula Lammey, IABC/Queensland, Australia: My company, Ausenco, is headquartered in South Brisbane. Floodwaters went into our basement and came within half a meter of flooding our ground-floor level. It was very much a team effort of our leadership team and key functions such as facilities and communication. Our primary focus was on:

- **Ensuring** all the company’s Brisbane people were safe and well.
- **Keeping** our clients informed and updated.
- **Trying** to continue business as usual as much as possible, to ensure we could meet client deadlines.
- **Protecting**, cleaning, recovering and then reinstating our office.

I am particularly proud of our approach with our people during this time. We sent them home early when floodwaters were starting to rise; we kept them informed at least once a day with emails from the CEO; we called and accounted for every single person based in Brisbane (more than 600); we created a register of people willing to provide help and accommodation to anyone affected; we provided remote IT support so people could work from home if possible; we kept the rest of our organization informed via email and our intranet (we have around 1,900 people who are based in 19 other countries); and we provided hands-on and financial support for the handful of people whose homes were partially or completely damaged by the floodwaters.

We also held a town hall meeting on the Monday of the week after the flood, in which our...
CEO spoke about our response, our appreciation of everyone’s efforts and commitment, and the need to get back to business as usual. At that point every person spoke to their manager to determine whether they would work from home, in our temporarily relocated office or at a client site for the week. This was very well received.

**What did you learn from the crisis, personally and professionally?**

**Kaz Amemiya:** This crisis made me relearn the positive and negative influence of media and communication. For about the first two weeks after the disaster, almost all channels except for cable television broadcast nothing but news and commentaries. The unending coverage from the devastated region and the nuclear power plant only fueled people’s fears and anxiety. My concentration level and decision-making capability dropped. I have gotten a lot better since then, but I think that many, including myself, simply felt low and exhausted.

On the other hand, social media such as Twitter and Facebook proved themselves to be very reliable and useful in the aftermath’s confusion. They not only substituted for cellphones when reception practically died, but they also became the place to turn to, where third parties updated information faster and more frequently than mass media. (That, however, does not excuse the groundless rumors also spread through social media.) Moreover, social media revealed the cozy relationships between companies and mass media, and put the broadcast coverage under scrutiny; social media users live-streamed, tweeted, discussed and sometimes refuted the contents of press conferences.

These events also taught me that in the Japanese corporate world, the value of business communication is still underestimated, and there are too few opportunities to share stories and experiences. Such an unprecedented, nationwide crisis like the 11 March earthquake explicitly shows that companies and organizations must have distinct communication principles and guidelines. In a positive light, this crisis could trigger business communication professionals to finally take action.

**Hirofumi Shimodaira:** Personally, I’ve felt I’ve learned the strength of the well-built Japanese social system as well as the weakness that results from rigidity. I sincerely hope that this will be a turning point to actualize a sustainable society, and that we will be able to share the experience with the world.

**Gerald Raymond:** Being personally prepared for a disaster is very important, as in a major event it can take days or weeks for even basic services to be restored. This includes having basic items such as drinking water, torches [flashlights] and batteries, and a battery-operated radio for accessing information. Cellphone networks and the Internet cannot be relied on—particularly if the power network is down for a week or more and devices cannot be recharged.

For most people, their first priority following the earthquake was to ensure that family and friends were safe. Although people were stressed and upset, they also pulled together, and there was a huge volunteer effort from students and people from rural communities to help clean up Christchurch.

For Environment Canterbury, communication with employees was initially difficult, but managers made contact by...
text message, phone or email, and almost everyone was accounted for within a day or two. A daily update to all employees from the CEO began within two days of the earthquake. Updates were also posted on various emails, and Facebook pages were set up where employees could share information with each other. These were very effective in helping people connect and converse.

If you get a chance to train for emergency communications, I strongly recommend you take it.

Paula Lammey: I think everyone in our region learned that we are not immune to natural disasters. We also learned the incredible power of community spirit, in the willingness of so many thousands of people to help those who were affected. Armies of volunteers helped people they didn’t know in what was dirty, smelly, backbreaking and disheartening work. In a business sense, our leadership capabilities shone through, as did our 100 percent commitment to our values and our people. Personally, I was proud to play a key role in keeping our people informed and supporting some of our most affected personnel.

Willey receives Chairman’s Award
IABC Chair Shelley Bird, ABC, has selected Anna Marie Willey, ABC, as the recipient of this year’s Chairman’s Award. Willey accepted the award at the World Conference in June.

Each year, the IABC chair honors one or more members who have worked selflessly behind the scenes to enhance the association’s image, facilitate member development and benefit the communication profession.

An accredited business communicator, Willey is both director of communication and marketing at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, and the president of her own communication consulting business. In her 35 years of professional experience, she has evolved from entry-level to executive-level, and her work spans a local to international scope.

“I feel indebted and deeply honored to have been selected for this award from among, and by, colleagues, whom I respect deeply and who continue to work so keenly,” Willey said on learning of her selection. “For me, it symbolizes the network of contemporaries who unite together worldwide to bring a clearly focused vision for our profession.”

Read more about Willey as well as past winners at www.iabc.com/awards/chairaward.htm.

Looking back at IABC’s EuroComm conference
More than 100 communication professionals from across Europe and the Middle East gathered in Turin, Italy, in April for IABC’s 2011 EuroComm conference.

The stellar lineup of speakers included Stéphane Dujarric, director of news and media at the United Nations; Bent Sørensen, head of the communication department of the European Training Foundation; Aurélie Valtat, online communications manager at Eurocontrol; and Clare Woodcraft, U.K. deputy director at the Shell Foundation.

Visit http://europe.iabc.com to download speaker presentations, view photos and follow the Twitter activity from the conference.

You can also see SimplyTV’s coverage at http://bit.ly/bPNeYw. This special 45-minute program includes:

- Interviews with IABC President Julie Freeman, ABC, APR, and IABC Europe/Middle East Vice-Chair Michael Ambjorn.
- Insightful discussions about the effective use of social media during the Egyptian revolution.
- A look at crisis communication channels used by companies in the aftermath of the February earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand.
- How to develop a social media strategy, featuring an award-winning case study from the European Training Foundation.

Visit http://europe.iabc.com to download speaker presentations, view photos and follow the Twitter activity from the conference.

You can also see SimplyTV’s coverage at http://bit.ly/bPNeYw. This special 45-minute program includes:

- Interviews with IABC President Julie Freeman, ABC, APR, and IABC Europe/Middle East Vice-Chair Michael Ambjorn.
- Insightful discussions about the effective use of social media during the Egyptian revolution.
- A look at crisis communication channels used by companies in the aftermath of the February earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand.
- How to develop a social media strategy, featuring an award-winning case study from the European Training Foundation.

IABC, in partnership with Royal Roads University, will offer its fourth Executive Accreditation Seminar (EAS) in Victoria, British Columbia, on 5-10 November. The EAS is designed for senior-level communicators seeking the Accredited Business Communicator (ABC) designation. For details, visit www.iabc.com/abcEAS.htm.