

After Hurricane Florence Made Landfall, These Brands Quietly Helped the Relief Effort

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By Robert Klara

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The Anheuser-Busch brewery in Cartersville, Ga., is a sprawling, 900,000 square-foot facility whose fermentation tanks turn out enough beer to fill 250 trucks a day. Opened in 1993, the plant produces everything from Michelob to King Cobra Light to, of course, Budweiser. But as Hurricane Florence set its sights on the Carolinas last week, the Cartersville brewery halted its normal operations to package up something that had nothing to do with hops and barley —specifically, it was water.

As the hurricane swept through the southern U.S. over the weekend, displacing tens of thousands of people and reaping some of the estimated \$17-\$22 billion worth of damage that experts predict the storm will do, aid organizations mobilized to furnish those affected with basic supplies in an effort that is still ongoing. Among those supplies: 300,000 cans of fresh water, trucked into North and South Carolina courtesy of Anheuser-Busch.

“Because of our logistical capabilities and our production capabilities,” said the company’s vp of community affairs Bill Bradley, “it’s relatively easy and efficient for us to put water in cans and ship them quickly to affected areas.”



Anheuser-Busch is not alone in these efforts. While charities like the Red Cross and agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) tend to get all of the media attention when a natural disaster strikes, it's frequently consumer brands and retailers who actually supply the needed items, often with little recognition.

"We couldn't do what we do without the help of these companies that donate so much and distribute it to the people who need it most," said Jessica Blake, spokesperson for Convoy of Hope, a faith-based nonprofit whose programs include disaster response.

"We do other fundraising," Blake continued, "and we have people give donations—but these in-kind [corporate] donations really make a huge difference."

From its Springfield, Mo. headquarters, Convoy sent a literal convoy of trucks filled with foodstuffs and other supplies to a staging area in the city of Wilmington on the North Carolina coast. While Blake did not want to spotlight the contributions of one company over another, Convoy of Hope's partners on Florence relief include Home Depot, Kellogg's, Campbell Soup Company (whose portfolio includes baby and toddler food brand Plum Organics) and Hormel.

Fortunately for displaced Carolina residents, the same scale that allows these companies to dominate their respective trade areas also puts them in a position to muster goods where they're most needed. As of Sunday, for example, Walmart estimated that it had shipped 950,000 packs of batteries, 39,000 mops and 1.3 million breakfast bars, among many other items.

In addition to deploying relief supplies through Convoy of Hope, Home Depot activated its Disaster Response Command Center in Atlanta, where the company's supply and merchandising teams move selected inventory (plastic sheeting, duct tape, first-aid kits and so on) to stores where the demand will be greatest.

Meanwhile, last week Tide's Loads of Hope program prepared two of its mobile-laundry trucks as part of a response team assembled by Matthew 25: Ministries. The custom-built trucks carry industrial-grade washers and dryers donated by Whirlpool and can turn out 300 loads of laundry a day. P&G developed the trucks in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when it became clear that people displaced from their homes not only had few if any changes of clothes, but no way to keep those clothes clean.



FEMA has been mobilizing for natural disasters since its 1979 creation by the Carter Administration, and while the agency does hand out supplies from its own stock, it relies heavily on donations from the private sector, as a 2011 posting written in the wake of Hurricane Irene made plain: "The private sector has been preparing right alongside us to help minimize possible impacts and line up coordinated response and recovery efforts," the agency said, citing companies including Best Buy, Walgreens, Safeway, Wegmans and Macy's for

their contributions.

Among the many brands on which FEMA relies, the most unlikely would have to be Waffle House. Though the Norcross, Georgia-based chain doesn't send pecan waffles to disaster sites, it does perform a service that's far more valuable, called the Waffle House Matrix.

In 2012, FEMA's then-chief administrator Craig Fugate—drawing from his days as the chief of Florida's Department of Energy Management—began using Waffle Houses as a measure of how severely a given area had been affected by a natural disaster, using a color-coded system to map out areas in greatest need. So, for example, if an area's Waffle Houses were open and doing business as usual, that region would be given an index color of green (and, hence, not requiring much attention.) But if a given Waffle Houses were only able to serve part of its menu—or was closed completely—its surrounding neighborhood would become a yellow or red zone, respectively, and FEMA would focus its efforts there.

Fugate based his reasoning on the historical fact that only severe weather will force a Waffle House—a warhorse of 24/7 operation—to close its doors. And with 2,100 restaurants spread across 25 states, most of them in the southeast, Waffle House's unit distribution made for a surprisingly accurate measuring tool of conditions on the ground.

"They have a corporate philosophy that if there is a hurricane or a storm, they try and get their stores open," Fugate said in a 2012 interview. "It don't matter [sic] if they don't have power, it don't matter [sic] if you don't have gas. They have procedures that if they can get a generator in there, they'll get going. They'll make coffee with bottled water."

Though Fugate left his post with FEMA at the start of the Trump Administration, the agency still uses the model he developed.

If most ordinary Americans aren't aware of the oft-herculean efforts that some companies made to deploy supplies to disaster regions, it might be because companies aren't always comfortable tooting their own horns about these efforts. For brands, disaster-relief constitutes something of a doubled-edged sword, affording the opportunity for great publicity on the one hand, and the risk of accusations of opportunism on the other.

According to brand expert Denise Lee Yohn, author of Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies, these corporations have good reason to proceed with caution.

"Brands risk two issues when jumping on the disaster relief bandwagon," Yohn said. "The first is that, while their efforts may be very valuable to and appreciated by those who are affected, they may seem like ambulance-chasing or 'good-washing' if the companies promote their efforts to others or generate good will from them. The other problem is that their efforts might not stand out or be unique to the brand, so brands risk not producing any real benefit for their brand or business."

“Most customers want to see companies do good,” Yohn added, “but people are skeptical these days and are turned off by companies that chest-pound too much.”

That might be why Anheuser-Busch, whose disaster-assistance experience dates all the way back to the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906, only recently began to talk about what the company does to help people displaced by natural disasters. Until three years ago, Bradley said, “we really have relied more on others to talk about it.” The increasing influence of social-media conversation, he explained, led to a decision to open up a bit more.

“We, like any other organization, are keenly aware of our reputation and our affinity,” Bradley said. “We really have a great history of helping local communities ... so this is something we’re not shy of talking about. [But] it’s all in the proper context. The fact that we shut down our brewery to can drinking water so we can have it available to provide our friends and neighbors in need certainly speaks volumes about the values of our company. We’re proud of that, and humbled to do our part.”



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