



Interlake Mecalux team members pack relief kits to be dispersed in disaster areas around the U.S.

ALAN: Wired for Relief

National non-profit weaponizes supply chain pros against disaster

Kathy Fulton, the director of operations for the American Logistics Aid Network (ALAN), a not-for-profit organization that plays matchmaker between supply chain professionals and relief agencies in times of emergency, looks exhausted. She should. She's been working harder than almost anyone else involved in this year's ProMat. By the afternoon of the expo's third day, most showcase booths have little more in them than bored customer service reps reciting the same spiel they perfected over



“ Everybody can do something with disaster relief. ”

the previous two days. Fulton, by contrast, never finds the time for boredom as she and her staff busy themselves by putting ProMat attendees to work packing relief kits to be shipped to areas of need.

“The packing project is a little off the radar for us,” Fulton said in a conversation several weeks after the tradeshow. “[ProMat] is not specifically aimed at disaster relief and so it was really all about education. Everybody can do something with disaster relief. The better prepared we are to respond and coordinate disaster relief in a community, the better that community will be at getting the economic engine humming again.” Six years before Interlake Mecalux volunteers packed boxes for ALAN, Jock Menzies, a member of the Concept Supply Chain Management Professionals and Red

Cross volunteer at the time, traveled to an eviscerated post-Katrina New Orleans to present a case that validated the need for the involvement of the supply chain industry in relief efforts there. Enough people were in attendance during his presentation and his case was compelling enough that it formed a groundswell of support that soon developed organically into what ALAN is today.

Though the network is growing, plenty members of the supply chain industry still couldn't tell you what exactly the American Logistics Aid Network is today. Menzies, now the president of ALAN, separates his organization from relief agencies such as Habitat for Humanity or the Salvation Army, pointing out that his organization assists those groups by

finding solutions to problems that arise in the relief process. “If you're the Red Cross, you know what you have in your emergency toolkit,” Menzies said. “It's after those groups get on the ground that they find a need beyond what they've got on the shelf. That's when we try to reach out to the [logistics] community.” Essentially, when a disaster strikes, coordinators at ALAN project, what relief efforts will be necessary and relay the information to designated point men and women within the network. From there, ALAN waits – an excruciating wait at times – until the relief groups like the Red Cross can get on the ground and articulate what it is they actually need.


But ALAN isn't just an organization that looks for ladders and bandages



when the Red Cross is too swamped to do it themselves. It is one of the few organizations always preparing for disaster by wiring existing networks and tapping into groups or regions in which ALAN doesn't have a strong presence. Businesses have day-to-day operations that make it impossible to know how to engage a relief effort should one be necessary. The challenge, according to Fulton, is that relief agencies and governments have a hard time assimilating volunteers quickly. ALAN's goal in sustaining its viability is to network with businesses all over the nation (and by extension, the globe) so that if disaster strikes, ALAN has a big enough posse that assistance can be enacted immediately. Think of a volunteer firefighter brigade that stretches across all 50 states and has the capability to mobilize to assist governmental agencies intelligently and efficiently.

Back on the ProMat floor, Menzies and Fulton shake hands with Interlake Mecalux employees as they each write a brief message to the recipients of the relief

rations that are included in the packed kits. This was supposed to be ALAN's offseason. It's too early for hurricanes or floods; tornados aren't scheduled for another couple months, but with the three-headed devastation in Japan, the season began early. The organization fell in the lap of Interlake Mecalux at Chicago's ProMat and made a connection because of it. Certainly, it wasn't the first such connection. ALAN has expanded its network wide enough to include companies that either work globally or are international themselves. Indeed, the network is more equipped than ever to handle whatever and wherever disaster strikes next.

"People choose to engage with whatever outfit is in their backyard or in the market they sell to," Menzies said about ALAN's philosophy on the best way to expand the organization's reach. "Our model is to engage with other business groups instead of trying to colonize the world." 

LOST IN THE FLOOD: When disasters erupt, like those resulting in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, ALAN's main function is to coordinate ways in which backup relief materials will be sent to on-site relief organizations.

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