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Powering up facility contingency plans

By MARK B. CAVALLARO

It is inconvenient and expensive losing power for 30 minutes let alone hours. However, the blackout of Aug. 14 showed us that extended power outages are possible and businesses must be prepared for future occurrences.

Power outages are not an option in today's business with the high costs for employee safety, security, information technology, perishable inventory, and the need for increased productivity and round-the-clock customer services.

In dealing with businesses across the United States one common theme we encounter when we start working with a facility is that the loss of power was usually an afterthought. I have found that most companies implement a power outage contingency plan, and justify the investment in backup generation, only when they have experienced a loss of electric power first hand and have realized substantial financial losses. Businesses need to be more proactive and address a potential loss of power by having a company specific, well-thought-out, organized and communicated backup power contingency plan. Below are a few helpful hints on what to include in a plan, prior to losing power:

☛ Evaluate business operations and, with co-workers, identify scenarios for when the emergency plan should "kick in." Also, compile a list of items and systems that the business cannot do without during a power outage.

☛ Obtain an adequately sized generator to support the identified vital systems in the event of an outage. An example of such a system is the air conditioning system, which will protect the safety of employees, customers, perishable inventory and computer networks during hot weather.

The misconception about backup power systems and generators is that the power from the generator is available instantaneously upon failure of utility power, through an automatic transfer switch. The power transfer and starting of the generator will typically take 10 to 30 seconds. This allows time for the generator to start and stabilize, so a loss of power can occur during the power transfer if an uninterrupted power supply (UPS) explained below, is not available.

☛ Determine if the business can withstand a 10 to 30-second power interruption (as mentioned above). If not, a UPS will be required to maintain power to the critical loads during the transfer of power to starting of the generator.

Types of UPS's vary but, the most common UPS is a battery-based device that basically uses power from batteries to provide power to the critical load, during the power transfer to generator and starting of the generator.

☛ It is optimal to have some type of back-up generator on hand at the facility. However, if it is not an available option, a UPS can be used only if it has been obtained with enough battery life to support equipment until all equipment can be powered down in an organized fashion.

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Ⓢ For other battery-based equipment and systems such as security systems, exit signs and emergency lighting, the battery life typically lasts up to 90 minutes, if not supported by a generator. These units include small batteries integral to the equipment.

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