



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own company, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for the city and county of San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in the development of effective solutions to crisis planning.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)  
783 45<sup>th</sup> Ave  
San Francisco, CA 94121  
415.221.2562  
415.520.5218  
LCanton@LucienCanton.com  
WWW.LucienCanton.com

## Practical Emergency Preparedness

### *Four Strategies for Effective Preparedness*

September is Emergency Preparedness Month in the United States, a time when we do our best to convince the public that preparedness is something that they should be doing. Most of our media information will be based on the standard three point message developed by the Red Cross:

1. Get a kit
2. Make a plan
3. Be informed

This is a good message in that it is simple, easy to understand, and covers the basics.

The problem, however, is that while a number of studies show that overall preparedness is increasing in the United States, somewhere around 40 to 45% of our citizens have done nothing to prepare. Maybe it's time we revisited how we're asking people to prepare.

While the basic message is sound, I believe we have encouraged the view that preparedness is an end in itself. In other words, we have made it something outside, rather than a component of, daily life. We have not

encouraged citizens to internalize preparedness.

### **Reality**

Part of the problem is that we tend to base our preparedness advice on ideal conditions. We assume that a person has the resources to prepare. The reality is that with unemployment holding at about 9.6% (as of August 2010) and between 12 and 17% below the poverty line at any given time many families do not have the resources to set aside separate supplies for possible emergencies. Consequently, our message to prepare emergency kits does not resonate with much of the public.

Another area where we have not kept pace is in understanding how complex people's lives have become. We talk of family emergency plans but we don't consider the mobile nature of many families nor do we consider how families actually communicate. For example, our emphasis on an out-of-state contact was based on old telephone technology and may well have been replaced or at least supplemented by the tweet, "IM OK".

And speaking of social media, as I mentioned in [last month's whitepaper](#), people's expectations as to how they will obtain help and information in disaster have changed significantly. We also have examples of "just in time" emergency training delivered via social media.

This disconnection from what people are actually doing and the realities of daily life distorts our message and creates a certain amount of cognitive dissonance with the public. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling you get when you try to hold conflicting ideas simultaneously. It occurs when we say one thing but encourage a conflicting action.

Let's look at a few examples.

## Water

One area where we create the greatest cognitive dissonance for the public is around the issue of water. We recommend one gallon per person per day for three days but then we encourage the purchase of disaster supply kits that allow about half a quart of water a day. So which is it?

Before we consider how much water is really needed, let's consider the simple issue of weight. A gallon of water weighs 8.35 pounds. This means that the weight of water we are recommending is around 25 lbs. Remember that this is before considering the weight of food and other supplies.

So how much water is really needed? While the answer depends on a number of factors, such as exertion and temperature, the generally accepted rule is that the average person needs at least two quarts of water per day, which works out to a more manageable 12.5 lbs for three days.

## Food

"Three days worth of food": ever wonder what that looks like? Several years ago I served as the subject matter expert for a preparedness video for the developmentally disabled community and was asked this question. We needed a good visual to communicate the idea to our target audience. Unfortunately, there was nothing available in the emergency management community that would help someone put together their emergency food supply.

Instead, our disaster supplies kits include rations designed for lifeboat use that provide about 1200 calories per day. This is about half of the minimum daily amount needed (women need 1500-2000 calories per day, men about 2000 to 2500). This is not surprising when you understand that these rations were designed to sustain life under sedentary rather than disaster conditions.

We finally solved the problem by hiring a nutritionist to help us develop a list of requirements (Table 1).

Food Group	Males (2400 cal/day)	Females (2000 cal/day)
Water	Two Quarts	Two Quarts
Protein	Six Ounces or equivalent	Five Ounces or equivalent
Grains	Eight Servings	Six Servings
Fruits & Vegetables	Five Cups	4.5 Cups
Milk	Three Cups	Three Cups
Extra Calories	363	267

Table 1 Daily Nutrition Requirements

She then used this list of requirements to purchase readily available items at a local super market. From that we were able to produce the display shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Three day supply of food and water

## Supplies

Just what do you need in your disaster supplies kit? Judging from the many and varied lists available from many official sources, no one really knows. We suggest kits that can be transported in backpacks but then add enough items that you'd be hard pressed to get everything into a rolling garbage can.

Part of the problem is that we have not defined a workable methodology for disaster supplies. We tend to focus on "the kit" as a single item rather than acknowledging that there are several levels of resources we'll need:

1. Things that you need to have on you at all times: e.g. identification, small flashlight, etc.
2. The "grab and go" bag that includes only absolute essentials
3. Supplies that you will need if you remain at home or your workplace

Once we grasp the idea that there are multiple levels operating in a disaster, we can make some realistic recommendations as to the *capacity* a person needs. For example, if it is safe to stay in my home, the tools I need for emergency repairs should be available – I don't have to buy a new set and put it in my kit.

We see similar confusion when we talk about first aid kits. I have yet to see a first aid kit that would be of any real use in a disaster. Most of the ones I've seen are the "feel good" types that include a few adhesive compresses and some aspirin – not what one needs when dealing with the types of injuries we typically see in a disaster. Compare this to the first aid kit that the German government requires in each vehicle: no adhesive compresses or aspirin, just heavy bandages.

Again, I'm not sure we're being clear on our expectations. We can agree that a first aid kit is necessary but we can't seem to agree on its contents. We can do better.

## Developing a New Strategy

Effective preparedness cannot be something external to daily life. Instead, we have to convince the public to internalize preparedness, to make it part of how they lead their lives. Unfortunately, we've tried to do this using scare tactics: prepare or die.

As our research shows, this doesn't work. The first reason is psychological: people don't believe a disaster will happen to them or that it won't be that bad if it does. Secondly, despite what the media would have us think, the actual incidence of disasters is relatively low – people know that the odds of bad things happening to them are actually fairly low.

Instead, we need to focus on daily occurrences rather than the once in a lifetime event. Here are some strategies for doing that:

### 1. Forget the “kit”.

Understand that I’m not against disaster kits per se nor do I think it’s a waste of time to develop one if you have the resources to do so.

However, I believe that by emphasizing kits that require money and/or effort we have lost sight of the fact that what we are trying to do is increase an individual’s *capacity* to respond to crisis. It’s too easy to use the excuse, “I can’t afford one.” Our focus should be on pointing how you can use daily capacity in a crisis and how preparedness activities can add value to your daily activities.

### 2. Develop Tools to Enhance Capacity

Currently our brochures and websites focus on disaster supplies kits and their contents. However, one of the most effective tools I’ve seen was a disaster supplies calendar developed by Chevron that helped you to build your kit over time. We need tools like these that are more sensitive to family budgets rather than endlessly revised lists of supplies.

### 3. Develop Realistic Examples

Having a nutritionist work with me to develop a visual image of a three day food supply was an eye opener. She was able to define what was required and then translate this into recognizable supermarket products that resonated with our audience. Providing realistic and specific guidance allows the public to better internalize our preparedness message.

### 4. Rethink How We Provide Information

Social media offers us some interesting mechanisms for connecting with the public in times of crisis. We’re already seeing applications that access real time weather monitoring and breaking information. We have apps that provide detailed first aid treatment information. We need to think about how this medium can be leveraged to increase an individual’s capacity to respond.

There is no question that we are making headway in making the United States better prepared. But one always wonders if this is a product of the attention generated by large disasters over the past few years rather than a lasting change. To change people’s mindsets, we need to adapt our message to make it more relevant. We need to focus on building resiliency through increasing individual capacity for disaster survival. 