

# How electricity, technology dependent are you?



John Deans

I am hoping by the time you are reading this column on the weekend the power has been restored to at least half of our tortured neighbors in Houston and surrounding areas.

The storm was a rough one to those in beach areas and the damage costs are going to be record setting. Our hearts and prayers go out to those who were hit so hard.

Two and a half years ago I wrote a column on "Prepare for the Worst" and last weekend many of us implemented those preparations. Last year I installed a large propane-fueled generator to power our home in case of electrical loss.

Since then I have been testing it every Sunday after church, and good thing I did since it did not start the weekend before Hurricane Ike hit.

After a quick and free replacement of the battery that was under warranty we were up and running. That next weekend dur-

ing Ike our electricity went out around 9:30 a.m., so we fired up the generator and ran on it for the rest of the day. Bluebonnet had us back online before dinner.

During the period on the generator I did notice that my cheaper UPS battery backup units were rebooting due to the dirty power produced by the generator. To resolve that issue I removed the UPS units and replaced them with simple surge protectors.

The computers and network equipment ran fine on the non-conditioned power, but I am pretty sure it was rough on the power supplies in the computers.

Since we live out in the sticks and my nearest neighbor that was on that same power line was out of view, I did not know when the line power was restored. I did not want to swap back and forth from generator to line and back if it was still dead, so I figured out a way to check it.

That neighbor was not home so I called his landline phone every hour until his answering

machine finally picked up the call after the power came back on. After that I shutdown my generator and cut back over to Bluebonnet juice.

After that episode I will be contracting my electrician to install a small red indicator light on my incoming Bluebonnet power so next time I can glance out to the switch box on the utility pole to know if the line power has been restored.

Since most of Houston lost power before Ike even made landfall the problems began early on. For those who did not have a generator ready to go (the vast majority of them — even my extended family and relatives), communications was one of the first significant challenges.

They did not know when and where exactly the storm was going to hit, how bad the wind and surge was, and how long the outage was going to be. Since I had continuous power, satellite TV with local Houston channels, my laptop with working Internet access, and a radio near me, I was their information conduit to the outside world.

Since their landlines failed and battery power to cellular phones would become precious, I immediately started text messaging my Houston-based family and friends with critical news and information. With my iPhone I was able to setup a single distribution address list so one message could quickly go out to all at once without having

to retype the same message to each recipient.

So for the next two days solid I watched the Houston news and send short text message broadcasts to them with information like flood levels, CPE (Center Point Energy) power outage rates, PODs (points of distribution) for food and water and now gasoline availabilities. Their responses kept us up to date on their status and well being.

Luckily most of them did have car charger adapters to recharge their cell phones and since we limited our communications to short text messages rather than lengthy voice conversations the battery life lasted much longer.

Just before the storm I sent out a mass e-mail to all my clients to shut down and unplug their computers from all copper cables (power, Ethernet, USB, etc.) and store them away from windows and off the floor.

The post-Ike Sunday and Monday went pretty well with only a few issues of mis-plugged network, phone and USB cables to be worked out.

The biggest and the easiest reconnection client site was a local bank. This went so smooth because my client spent hours pre-labeling every single wire on both ends along with their appropriate ports before she disconnected the servers and network gear in the main computer room.

All we had to do was reconnect cable 1 to port 1, port 2 to

cable 2 and so on. Due to this meticulous cable plant documentation the start up after Ike went flawlessly. Thank you, Marlyn at Bank of Brenham!

The real problems came with remote or corporate offices still without power in Somerville, Navasota, or Houston. I was able to set up remote access via Remote Desktop or LogMeIn.com for one client which gave them remote control over spare or existing desktop computers here from their cellular connected laptops. Those cellular enabled laptops can be very handy during disaster recovery projects.

For the big problems to the north and east of us the availability of generators along with their connections and integrations became another challenge. In Somerville, a client obtained a 25 KVA generator that provided power to the dark office

and called me to connect up the computers to it.

To avoid the same UPS on generator problems I had at my home office, we connected their computers directly to surge protectors to run correctly. The large UPS for the server ran fine on the generator.

They were back on line power as of Thursday so they got to send back that \$90 a day generator that kept them in business for those dark days.

Bottom line: Ike taught us many lessons, with an important one being how incredibly dependent our society is on electricity and technology.

Next week's column: Vista backups.

*John Deans of DeansConsulting.com is a Brenham area computer networking consultant who can be reached at 289-2233 or John@DeansConsulting.com for questions and comments.*