Many tourism businesses were disrupted by flooding and coastal surges this year. *Ruth-Ellen Davis* looks at how businesses coped with the deluge and gives tips for business resilience.

It was a devastating start to the year for many businesses, with an exceptional run of winter storms battering the coastline and putting chunks of England quite literally under water. Months later, many are still drying out and trying to rebuild their trade.

But while dramatic scenes of waterlogged towns and countryside alike provoked a national outpouring of sympathy and support for those affected, the public perception that businesses were closed and parts of the country were no-go areas put about 10% of consumers off from taking trips to affected areas – arguably creating more damage than the floods themselves.

The clear message from proprietors, tourist attractions and tourist authorities is that preparing your business for severe weather conditions is not just a case of practical flood action. A strong online and media presence is essential – especially when public perception is not quite in line with the reality on the ground.

One popular tourist attraction that felt the full force of the coastal storms was Blue Reef Aquarium in Newquay. “We had our first flood in the first weekend of January,” says General Manager Steve Matchett. “It flooded through the aquarium’s entrance area and smashed out the window frame and bottom panels. Outside, the storms ripped off the building’s drain pipes and guttering.”

Though it was only closed for a total of eight days, Steve says the building’s bruised exterior and the damaged promenade nearby continue to put off potential visitors. “We’re currently...”

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**Top five ways to prepare for intense weather**

1. Find out if you are in a flood risk area and register with Floodline Warnings Direct: call 0845 988 1188.

2. Identify actions to climate-proof your business against flooding, heatwave, drought and coastal change at [www.climateprepared.com](http://www.climateprepared.com).

3. Make a flood action plan, including a list of key items such as computers and artwork that will need to be protected.

4. Make sure your insurance covers flood damage, business interruption and lost revenue. Sources of advice include the National Flood Forum [www.floodforum.org.uk](http://www.floodforum.org.uk). The British Insurance Brokers’ Association has a Find a Broker Helpline on 0870 950 1790.

5. Learn how to use sandbags and store things like plastic sheeting, wooden boards and nails. Ensure that toilets and drains are fitted with non-return valves.
A wet beginning

On paper, a flood-hit winter doesn’t sound like the best time to launch a new company, but Andy Benham at South Devon Wine Tours found invaluable business advice when he attended one of the VisitEngland flood workshops.

“We went along as a new business and received good-quality free advice. It really helped us get the business off the ground,” he says. Particular highlights of the seminar for Andy included networking and sharing experiences and tips with other businesses in the area, and information on how to use online marketing effectively.

“Online marketing makes it so much easier to set up a very small, very tightly targeted business,” he explains.

“As well as helping us to improve our online marketing through things such as Google AdWords and the structure of our website, we learnt about the benefits of having a regular presence on social media, setting up a Google+ page to engage with potential customers and optimising our position in search engine results.

“We came away thinking, wow, someone is actually taking the time and effort to look after a fledging local business and really giving us a bit of a break.”

That sinking feeling

While images of flood-hit England continued to dominate the headlines in January and February, the experience for some was of no one coming to their area, with communities in the South West in particular feeling cut off from the rest of the country.

“It was as if someone had pulled the plug on the phones,” said Tony Smyth of Sonachan House in Paignton, Devon. “We were not flooded in the slightest, but had weeks and weeks of it being utterly dead because people were assuming there was no way to get to the South West. From the images hitting the headlines, such as the swinging train line along the sea wall at Dawlish, they thought it was inaccessible – which was completely wrong.”

Another well-reported scene from this year’s flooding was the waterlogged Somerset Levels. John Turner, Chief Executive Officer at Somerset Tourism Association, explains that while there was severe flooding in part of Somerset, the area has really suffered from the focused media coverage, and a huge communal effort is under way to communicate the real state of affairs there.

“Yes, 40 square miles of Somerset was under water. But Somerset actually equates to 1,600 square miles,” he explains. “Some of the pictures were incredibly dramatic. Everyone I spoke to thought it must be a disaster zone here, which was just not the case at all. All the businesses that were closed are now open, which is great. But actually 90% – even 99% – of businesses were open at the time.”

Rain, rain... go away

With a grant from Somerset County Council to help them on their way, John and his team have been going, as he says, “back to basics” with their marketing strategy, making sure they are targeting the right demographic and offering the right kind of package for their customers.

“We’re still not out of the woods yet,” says John. “A lot of smaller bed and breakfasts and hotels that don’t have the elasticity in their funds and their budgets like some of the larger attractions are currently reliant on repeat visits and discounting heavily. And that’s tough. It’s a precarious time at the moment.”

For any business affected by the flooding, John’s main piece of advice is to engage with the media. “You don’t need to spend a
Flood defences

Someone who knows only too well what it’s like to recover from severe flooding is Edward Sinclair at Croft Guest House in Cockermouth, Cumbria. At the end of 2009 he was put out of business for ten months when torrential rainfall caused widespread floods across Cumbria, with Cockermouth one of the worst hit areas.

“We weren’t expecting it to be as bad as it was,” he explains. “We had 4.5 feet of water flood our guest house on the Thursday. We lost everything on the ground floor. Then, on the Sunday, part of the main road in front of us disappeared and went down the street, and all we could see was pipes. We were told we had to leave the property in case of an explosion.”

After receiving financial and practical help from the local chamber of commerce, Edward and his wife were able to install flood gates on their doors and had a new website made. Cockermouth itself has since had more than £4m spent on flood defences and the river has been dredged, which Edward says has made a huge difference.

“Every time there is heavy rain, we head down there to take a look and it’s still flowing freely. Very reassuring!”

A big success story in terms of getting the message out there was the Open for Business campaign that ran in the South West. One element of this came about when Twitter users started using the hashtag #openforbusiness. Maureen McAllister who oversees the @SouthWestUK Twitter account, started retweeting them and the response was phenomenal.

“It soon became absolutely massive. I was retweeting from 7am until 10pm,” she explains. “It gave a route for people affected by the flooding to communicate with a wider audience. It didn’t matter who they were. They could tweet with that hashtag and it would get retweeted to our thousands of followers, as well as via the many destination Twitter accounts.”

The Chartered Institute of PR soon got in touch and several PR agencies offered some of their time to help manage the load. Even celebrities got involved, with names like Alan Davies, Richard Osman and Kirstie Alley all retweeting that the South West was open for business. “It backed up all of the hard work we were doing,” says Maureen.

“Some of the pictures were incredibly dramatic. Everyone I spoke to thought it must be a disaster zone here”
work the different destinations were doing and really kept the message going,” says Maureen.

**Flooding support**
Flood-affected tourism businesses across the country were supported by a £2m government support package. It included Spot on England – a multi-platform campaign aimed at boosting spring trade by promoting great value offers across 39 destinations and organisations – as well as an extensive free online resource detailing how to respond to extreme weather.

It also included face-to-face help for businesses at the VisitEngland flood support workshops. These free sessions offered specialist advice to those in need.

The sessions, which ran in areas across the country, aimed to equip businesses with all the tools necessary to effectively recover from any current flood damage, to prepare for future severe weather conditions, and to build up important skills for promoting their businesses and communicating with prospective customers.

After his lack of custom, Tony from Sonachan House found the course helpful in boosting his online presence. “We are certainly using social media more effectively since attending the workshop with VisitEngland and have seen a definite rise in people who are interested in what’s going on down this way. Things are finally looking up.”

Again, the key advice he learned is to get your message out there. “One big thing we got from the seminar was the power of working together as an area to try to get over the negative press. Tell people you are there, and tell people there is still plenty happening.”

“**We were not flooded in the slightest, but had weeks and weeks of it being utterly dead**”

Tony Smyth

> Tell customers if and how long you may have to close and your cancellation policy. If you are open, give transport information and let customers rebook if they can’t reach you.

Work with other local businesses to share tips and advice and develop a common response for your area.

Take photographs of all the damage to help insurance companies assess your claim.


Let people know when you’re back in business through your website, social media, local press and word of mouth.