

## Fighting Fire With Fire

*By Carrie Ellis, Editor, Chem.Info*

It's the phone call nobody wants to receive, but it's exactly what Steve Quandt, executive vice president of Columbus Chemical Industries, was faced with when parts of the facility literally went up in flames.

"It was a scary night," says Quandt of the series of explosions and blaze that broke out at the chemical distributor's Columbus, WI facility around 8 p.m. this May 11. "We have a lot of inventory; there were well over 1,000 chemicals involved in that fire. Those of us who work here thought we'd lost it all."

### **Disaster Recovery**

Columbus Chemical initially began as a reagent chemical packaging company by the high school-aged Sheard brothers, one of whom, Richard Sheard, is still involved as president and chairman of the board. This company evolved over the years from packaging chemicals for children's chemistry sets to what it is today—a family-owned chemical distribution company that serves as a cornerstone for a small midwestern community.



From an outside perspective, a fire in a chemical distribution center sounds like something of a death sentence for a small business no matter its legacy: How would a company recover physical assets, customer relationships, and perhaps most importantly, the trust of the community? According to Quandt, much of this recovery was guided by a bundle of papers that he calls the disaster recovery plan—one of those preventive measures in which true value isn't fully understood until it becomes necessary. In large part, it was this plan that allowed the plant to be back up and running within 12 days of the fire.

"The disaster recovery plan deals with all kinds of disasters. The fire was at the top

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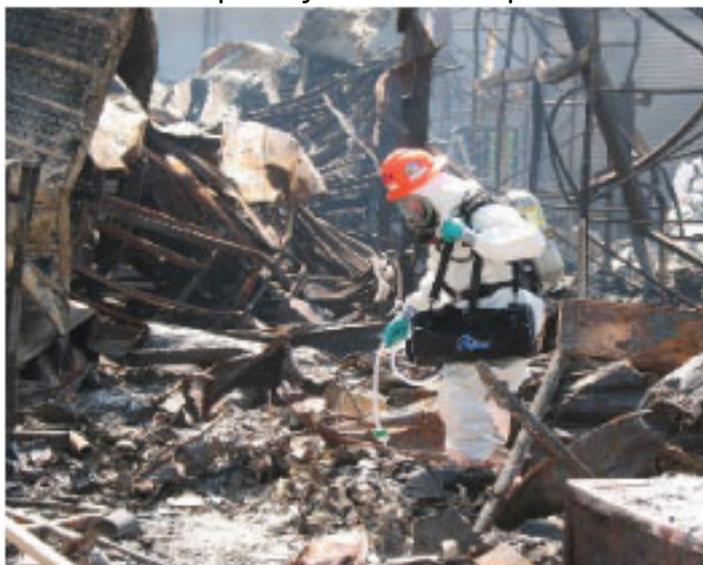
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of the list, but also: What happens if you have a tornado, or a big spill, or lose power for a significant period of time?” Quandt asks. “It covers all of those ‘what ifs’ in great detail—to the point where it explains whom you call, what you say and how you deal with the issue.”

In addition to knowing whom to call, Columbus knew what to do once the calls were made. “The right people were on the scene: our people, and the state and federal response squads. They were on site during the fire, actually doing runoff and air monitoring in addition to what the EPA was doing,” he says. “When we demonstrated that the equipment we were using to measure the impact on the environment was equal to, and in some cases, more sophisticated than what they were using, they had complete faith that we could handle the issue.” This, among other steps, would serve as a critical factor in allowing the company to expediently return to its own facility.

### Alliance With NACD

While Quandt would stress the disaster recovery plan as imperative to survival, there were other preventive efforts that helped the company best address the disaster and quickly resurrect operations.



One, says Quandt, is the company’s affiliation with the National Association of Chemical Distributors (NACD), an organization for which Quandt served as chairman from 2005 to 2006. Columbus Chemical joined NACD nearly 20 years ago in order to “learn about the industry and responsibilities we had as a chemical distributor,” says Quandt. Around that time, the NACD was also developing a program called the responsible distribution process, without which Quandt says, “We wouldn’t be in business today.”

The responsible distribution process is a health, safety and environmental initiative designed much like Responsible Care—the chemical industry’s global voluntary initiative under which companies, through national associations, work together to continuously improve health, safety and environmental performance, and communicate with stakeholders about their products and processes—except the responsible distribution process targets chemical distributors vs. manufacturers.

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The difference, says Quandt, is that a producer may make 10 or 20 chemicals, whereas a distributor the likes of Columbus Chemical would be contending with in-house chemicals that number in the thousands. This creates an entirely different set of variables when dealing with a disaster situation of this magnitude. The company was in the first class of graduates of the program after its inception in 1991, and hasn't looked back, instead keeping its focus ahead.

### Earning Back Trust

Another major issue with which the responsible distribution process was able to assist Columbus Chemical was in its relationship with the surrounding community, and how best to manage fears and expectations related to the proximity of a chemical facility. "Your neighbors don't want you there. They don't want you on their roads, their highways, their waterways; they don't want you in their air. You have to earn your right. The only way you're going to earn your right to operate is through something like the responsible distribution process, in which you are third-party audited," Quandt declares.

"Somebody else comes in and says that you're a responsible party. We've done that for 15 years. When you have an incident like we had, you lose control. The first responders take it immediately. They decide who goes where and when. I didn't get anywhere near this facility until day seven.

"The general public has an absolute fear of chemicals; they don't have an appreciation for them, and they think of them as terrible. The reality is that without chemicals, what we enjoy today—clean drinking water, for example—we wouldn't have. How do you tell people that you need chlorine in the drinking water when they also know that inhaling it can kill you? As far as chemical education, the industry has tried and failed many times. It's a really tough battle, but we'll keep trying."

### Continuous Improvement

Lastly, the responsible distribution process has been an integral part of Columbus Chemical's continuous improvement process. "It demands that you do things better than you did yesterday. One of the tenets regarding waste is that the goal is zero. I don't know that you ever get there, but if you can reduce it significantly, it would have an immediate payback to the business, as well as our neighbors and environment. We do that in terms of productivity: We measure in terms of sales dollars per labor hour. It's a good measure for our business, and we continually increase it."

In addition to relying on the NACD for process improvement guidance, the distributor has also been involved with the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership (WMEP), the statewide arm of the national program tailored toward helping American manufacturers improve efficiencies and control costs. (For more details, see sidebar on the right.) WMEP assisted the company with ISO certification, while the company also dabbled in one-piece flow and 5S initiatives. The primary goal, however, is to retain the consistent purity of its products. "We filter, dilute, blend—just maintaining purity levels is no small task." Quandt says much of this comes back to managing an equipment profile that is sophisticated yet simple.

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For Quandt, alliance with industry organizations has become an invaluable way to improve: "I just don't know how small businesses survive without that networking opportunity."

### Facing Forward

So despite a scary spring, Quandt says that Columbus Chemical Industries is eyeing the future rather than the past. "We have communicated [our goals] very clearly to our employees; we have a precise three-year plan. We develop operating budgets that are extremely detailed that support the plan. We've got it all laid out; everybody has individual operating plans that are reviewed quarterly. Everybody knows what we have to do and when we have to get it done, and they're rewarded for that."

Other changes for the distributor include expansion—taking the existing warehouse capacity of 1,500 pallets and essentially doubling it. "We're going to have fire suppression in that warehouse and in this facility," asserts Quandt. "The improvement is that we wouldn't have an accident like we had. And we're going to have everything all in one building, so we'll be able to segregate product efficiently within the warehouse. It will be a huge improvement," an improvement of about 30,000 total square feet, that is.

Along the path to his position as executive vice president, has Quandt ever experienced something that he hadn't anticipated when working at Columbus Chemical Industries? He responds, "We had a big issue, something I wasn't prepared for. When you have a fire of this magnitude, there is a criminal investigation. When the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives came, they wanted our file servers. At first, I was offended but it's a standard operating procedure. They said, 'We'll have them back to you tomorrow,' but how do you believe them? You need to know this type of stuff ahead of time, and it makes things a lot easier for you and them if you understand that."

For an inherently precarious situation, Quandt's meticulous disaster recovery plan helped the company slog through the hazard technicalities and let the company concentrate on what matters most—ensuring both public and employee safety. Columbus Chemical did all of this while simultaneously working to get the facility to whir back to life to restore the productivity that is needed to purify the chemicals that support us in our daily lives.

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