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Lessons Learned From A Major Disaster

By Sophie Braccini



Fire at Sam Clar Furniture in Concord on Nov. 26, 2015 Photo courtesy Confire

Seeing one's business go up in smoke can be a terrible blow, but that is exactly what happened to Moraga resident John Schwartz and his family on Thanksgiving night last November when fire broke out at Sam Clar Furniture in Concord. Fortunately, Schwartz was well prepared and insured, so a long-term catastrophe was avoided and Sam Clar is now moving seamlessly into 2016.

This was not the first time fire has struck the Schwartz family. Sam Clar offices located in Oakland caught fire 40 years ago, after Schwartz's father, Jeff Schwartz, took over the business from his father. The business was originally started in 1939 by Jeff Schwartz's grandfather. "The lessons learned back then and that had been ingrained in me saved us the second time around," said John Schwartz.

On that Thanksgiving night, as dessert was about to be served, Schwartz got a phone call from one of his employees telling him there was a fire in their Concord offices. "I immediately jumped in my car and reached the freeway, hoping that it would just be a small fire outside the structure," he said. But as he approached his exit on 680, Schwartz saw the heavy plumes of dark smoke blocking the sky: not good.

The Concord firefighters were already at work, with two fire trucks on site. "The building was 20,000 square feet, divided into three sections," explained Schwartz. "At the center was the warehouse that was full of merchandise ready to ship, the showroom on one side, and the corporate offices on the other side." The fire started and was contained in the middle section; two firewalls insulated the other two sections.

"I got in touch with the fire captain," said Schwartz, "and asked him how fast I could get our computers, which are the brains of the company." Sam Clar designs, procures, installs and services office furniture around the world. Ten percent of the sales come from the showroom, 90 percent from contracts with clients. The information system is at its core, and even if the company had outside backups, Schwartz knew that getting his servers would insure the smoothest possible recovery.

"In the meantime, my family, parents, children, siblings and employees had been checking the local TV news stations and had seen the images that were quite impactful. Everyone came to help," said Schwartz. Once the firefighters gave him the OK, Schwartz got into his office with his older son, his director of operations, and two firefighters, and they started removing the business servers. "It's a good thing that the computers were installed in towers that set them off the floor," he said, "because by the time we got in, there was already six inches of water in the office." All of his corporate documents were stored in fire files. Schwartz, his family and employees left by 11 p.m. "The fire was contained by then," he said. "The roof caved in around 1 a.m. Luckily, no one was hurt." The entire building was uninhabitable due to the smoke and water damage.

The next morning, Schwartz met with his managers and the information technology and phone

providers. The servers were transferred to the IT consultant, Endsight, to run the system through their office, which, coupled with phone lines, got Sam Clar back in business, though in a reduced capacity. "We were able to have the emails running on Saturday and to take some business calls on Monday," he said. Schwartz found a place to rent at 2500 Visso Lane in Concord. By Dec. 10, less than one month after the fire, the business and all the 28 employees were back working at 85 percent capacity, mostly from home at first. The warehouse reopened on Dec. 15.

"There were a few steps that were critical," explained Schwartz. "First, I learned from my father that when the insurance broker comes to walk you through the coverage, you pay attention (and make sure) that everything is accurate." The insurance company he works with, Uniguard, offers a policy that covers everything, including business interruption coverage tied to the current level of what the business is, lost profits, getting into new spaces, rebuilding, and potential business loss. "I also hired a public adjuster to negotiate with the insurance companies, a process that can last six to eight months."

As far as emotional stress is concerned, Schwartz believes that he was able to keep calm through it all because he focused on the practical aspects of going through the crisis, and not on the years of personal and family history that were lost. He acknowledges that there was a shock, for his wife Julianne who works for the company, his sons, his parents Edy and Jeff Schwartz, and the employees.

"The silver lining of the fire is that we have the opportunity to redesign our operations, to rethink everything from the ground up," said Schwartz. "We will probably increase our use of shared documents and have our information system off the premises." He added that it has been gratifying and humbling to see the people he works with, including employees, clients and suppliers, stepping up and dealing with relatively large adversity.

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From left: John Schwartz in his home office, with sons Trent and Ethan Photo Sophie Braccini

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