



Bob Jensen... it's not a question of if a disaster will happen, but when.
Photo Michele Mossop

He's counting on disaster

Bob Jensen's company helps governments and businesses prepare for the catastrophe no one ever thinks will happen.

Story Julie Macken

The time to meet Bob Jensen is before the bomb detonates, the plane crashes, the building collapses or the train derails, because after that, he may not take your call.

Robert A. Jensen is president and CEO of Kenyon International Emergency Services. He and his company were called in after the Bali bombing, the attack on the World Trade Centre, the Oklahoma bombing, the bombing of United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, the Lockerbie disaster and the crash of a United States Air Force flight at Dubrovnik in 1996, to mention just a few.

Jensen also has the dubious distinction of seeing more mass fatality incidents than any other person alive today.

He's got some good news and some bad news for Australian business. The bad news is that,

"Australia is very much at risk for a mass fatality incident over the next few years. It's not a question of if, but when. And very few businesses are prepared for that."

But the good news is, "There are things you can do to manage the consequences in a humane and dignified way."

Kenyon is in the business of managing the unimaginable and cutting a path through chaos. With 30 full-time staff and just over 1000 contract staff, the company's brief is: recovery, identification, processing, and disposition of remains and personal effects; provision and co-ordination of telephone and crisis intervention support centres; provision of family and survivor assistance through an on-site family assistance centre; and provision of mental health services including urgent response services and grief/bereavement counselling.

And it all has to be done before the dust settles.

There is no doubt this is a growth business. With more than 200 clients, including most major airlines, governments and large multinationals, Kenyon, a private company established in Britain 75 years ago, is called out between four and five times a year to assist in mass fatalities.

When Jensen and his teams arrive at a disaster site, they are confronted by the same bewildered expression: "I never thought this would happen to me."

And that's the problem. "Australian business have fallen for two common mistakes," says Jensen. "They think it will never happen to them and, secondly, they assume someone else will fix it. They won't. There is not a government or company that can handle this kind of situation on

deal with grieving and bewildered families, many didn't even have phone lists.

With no awareness or training in this kind of incident, companies thought they were doing the right thing by sending employees into the morgues with grieving family members - a situation which served to widen the circle of trauma, according to Jensen.

In fact, the trauma of the attack was so great that many CEOs, normally able to make decisions

Kenyon is in the business of managing the unimaginable and cutting a path through chaos.

their own. It needs public/private co-operation."

Most companies are aware of the need for risk management, insurance, data protection and business continuity strategies. "This covers 99 per cent of their concerns," says Jensen. "It's the 1 per cent area of consequences that they fail to think about."

That failure was illuminated in horrific detail when New York's World Trade Centre was attacked. While a handful of affected companies did have strategies to

with far-reaching impacts, sat immobilised - unable to think or communicate.

"That lack of communication was translated as uncaring by many of the families," says Jensen. "Of course it wasn't that people didn't care. They didn't know what to do and they were paralysed by the trauma."

This is why companies should not wait for disaster to strike before developing strategies. Because by then there will be very little anyone can do.

"We work on a retainer basis says Jensen. "So before we're needed, we do the audits, the training and the planning. We teach people what to expect. That includes teaching senior management and CEOs how to manage and CEOs how to manage families affected, because that cannot be outsourced."

The cost can range from a few thousand dollars to \$40,000 to \$50,000, depending on what the company wants and the size of business. The teams include: forensic scientists (pathologist, odontologists, and anthropologists), mortuary technicians, latent print specialists, crime scene photographers, bereavement counsellors, administrators, management personnel and other professional staff.

Kenyon does not quote per calamity. In the pre-incident phase, Kenyon informs the client company about the cost of its people per day, and the cost will depend on how many parts of Kenyon's service are used.

About 1.5 per cent of Kenyon clients will use its services per year. That's for a major incident and does not include smaller incidents such as losing employee to war or a hostage crisis overseas.

While catastrophe can touch company, Jensen believes his service should be considered particularly by mining companies, hotel owners, operators of sports venues, and any company that employees overseas.

"All these companies should be considering how they manage consequences of a major incident like this," he says.

Just as boards are held responsible for decisions concerning insurance and risk management, Jensen believes managing the consequences of crisis is also a board responsibility. "Recent history full of examples of companies in countries being presented with major incidents like these.

"The question isn't who was struck, but how did they handle the humanitarian aspect of the calamity. That's what people judge companies on."

Not that Jensen agrees to work with every company that asks. "We don't accept some companies as clients," he says. "We've had companies contact us and basically say they have just had a building collapse and they want to get a bulldozer in and bury it. Then tell the families no or could be found."

"Obviously we wouldn't put our own employees through that kind of situation, let alone the families of those involved."

Howard's heart-felt compassion to victims' families earns praise

Two days after the bomb attacks in Bali, Kenyon was called in to assist the Australian government. While Jensen believes some mistakes were made, largely as a result of a lack of training in incident response, he has nothing but the highest of praise for the way Prime Minister John Howard conducted himself.

"There were over 25 nationalities affected by the bombings," he said. "I really admire the fact that the Australian government came in and didn't try to take over, as some other nationalities did. They offered

assistance, which is very different."

By the time Howard had arrived, Kenyon had set up a family assistance area, a place where families could come and wait, cry and rest.

"I saw Prime Minister Howard walk into that family area, take off his tie and talk at length to the families," Jensen said.

"He didn't have much information to give them, but he gave his time and heart-felt care. I greatly admire him for that."

But surely he would have expected nothing less? Not at all. "In contrast, I saw another

country's ambassador turn up surrounded by his security people," Jensen said. "When the families ran up to him to get help and information, his security people pushed them out of the way."

The two areas that did concern him and that he believes were easily avoidable with the right training, were the way some carers spoke to bereaved families and the fact that families were constantly seen walking through the morgues on their own.

"We recommend most families don't look through the morgue, for two reasons," Jensen said. "First,

because visual identifications are the most vulnerable system for identifying anyone. And secondly, in these circumstances the families may need to make two or three identifications of different parts, and they need to have that explained to them very early on."

While he concedes that people should be able to do what is right for them, he argues the better approach is for families "to wait at the hotel, to be given very regular updates on information, and to have people on hand who can explain the process to the families, and explain it in its entirety".

Because stress plays havoc with

people's sense of time, mental health workers need to know that 10 minutes can feel like an eternity for a parent waiting for their child to be found.

His other concern was heart-snippets of conversations where carers would tell family members "I know how you feel".

"That is the worst thing you say to someone in this situation," he said. "How can someone possibly know what that person feeling. I have been to more incidents of this kind than anyone else and I can tell you, I don't know how they would feel."

Julie Macken