LOGISTICS LEADER LYNN FRITZ SEeks TO IMPROVE DISASTER RESPONSE

When Lynn Fritz, former chairman and CEO of Fritz Companies and current head of the San Francisco-based Fritz Institute, first began considering how to bring best-practice logistics to global humanitarian efforts, he thought the task would mostly involve borrowing tools and ideas from the commercial arena. Now, he believes that solving the challenges faced by humanitarian operations may eventually result in groundbreaking solutions that traditional businesses will follow.

The reason, he says, is that in emergency situations "the definition of the need is not determined, the description and the amount of goods is not known in advance, and the existing infrastructure would have been damaged and/or seriously impeded." In addition, he says, "large amounts of unsolicited donated products oftentimes are received." Even if the material does not match the immediate need, it still must be processed and a place found to store it. "As we continue to research logistics operations in these situations, I'm sure we will come up with some innovative solutions," he says.

Already Fritz Institute has sponsored development of a web-based logistics software tool designed specifically for the disaster-relief delivery chain. It is being tested by the Geneva-based International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. "Through that work, we are beginning to collaborate with relief logistics professionals to create benchmarks and metrics that would allow for an understanding of supply-chain performance capabilities and expectations across the different organizations," he says.

Since selling his company to United Parcel Service in 2001, humanitarian logistics has been Fritz's job and his passion. He has devoted the resources of Fritz Institute to the issue and contributed well over $4m of his own money to support research, software development and international conferences.

"Logistics is the very heart of relief efforts, but budgets for technology, training, operational and logistics infrastructure are often impacted, creating a shortage of tools and other resources at headquarters and in the field at the time of disasters," he says.

Relief organizations also have a great need to develop and retain institutional knowledge. In addition to providing operational solutions, one of the key goals of Fritz Institute is to provide specialized professional education and training to leaders in humanitarian relief, as well as research, analysis and workshops to improve response. One such effort is being tackled in partnership with Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM), a part of its foreign service school. Fritz Institute has helped ISIM create a new curriculum on the management of complex emergencies and a training program for continuing education for humanitarian professionals that will launch this summer. In addition to training, Fritz says, workshops and other conferences will provide an environment in which humanitarian professionals can form networks and establish the foundation for future cooperation.

The Institute also is sponsoring academic research and exploring ways to effectively bring private sector expertise, resources and solutions to bear on disaster-relief efforts. Logistics professionals could help train their humanitarian counterparts in the latest logistics technologies and processes, Fritz says. "Likewise, they could be trained to be available for emergencies for stints of three weeks at a time."

Before a field visit to Africa, "I wasn't clear what the opportunities were for private sector involvement," Fritz says. "What I learned is that there is much opportunity to train and do some different things in the field based on innovations and practices from the commercial arena. It is critically important to provide support to NGOs and governments at the local, field level to create sustainable enhancements in the relief delivery process."

More information on the work of the Fritz Institute is available at www.fritz institute.org.