

50 Emergency Uses for Your Camera Phone

by Paul Purcell

In an emergency you'll not only need to provide and receive help, but after the event is over, you'll face the prospect of return, repair, and rebuilding. Central to all these activities is communication and documentation. Everything in our society carries a heaping helping of red tape, and disasters are no different. Below are 50 of the many ways one simple tool, in this case the camera phone, can be used in an emergency to help you document, record, and relay some of your more important pieces of information.

Granted, any camera could be used for some of the things listed below, but the phonecam carries a distinct advantage with it. It can immediately transmit the pictures it takes. If you don't have a phonecam, that's okay. Go with what you have, or with what you can afford. Disposable film cameras and digital cameras are acceptable, and microcassette recorders that will let you record information verbally are useful as well.

However, the phonecam rules, so let's look at ways yours can be used in an emergency. The following are excerpts from our book "Disaster Prep 101" found at www.disasterprep101.com.

1. Last minute child ID. Whenever the family might be separated, take a series of last-minute pictures of all family members, especially the kids, and also the pets. You might need this to reunite the family later.
2. Draw a map, shoot it, send it. Trying to send or receive directions to or from a certain location and voice directions just aren't cutting it? Draw a map on paper, take a picture, and send.
3. Injury photos to the doctor. Suppose you're in a situation where you can't get to help and they can't get to you, and someone's sick or injured. If there are visible signs or symptoms, your phonecam can relay these to medical personnel who can walk you through whatever treatment is possible where you are.
4. Damage documentation for insurance. In mass catastrophes, it'll be days or longer before even the first insurance adjusters get there to file claims on your behalf. Photo all the damage you can in case some of it gets repaired or cleaned up before your agent arrives.
5. Report suspicious activity. Are you part of a neighborhood watch group? If you see suspicious activity, you can upload pictures of suspects and the situation to the Police immediately.
6. "Here's the landmark I'm near." In an emergency, gathering with the family at a "rendezvous point" is one of the most critical steps you'll take. If you don't have a fixed meeting place, you can send pictures of where and what you're near so the others can find you. This also works well if you're lost and/or injured in the wilderness and you need to relay pictures of landmarks so Search and Rescue teams can find you.
7. "Meet us at this landmark." If you have a fixed rendezvous point and you want to relay the info to others, send a pic you already have on file, so others will know where to meet. Take these file photos while compiling your family emergency plan.
8. Photo shopping list. If you're about to stock your pantry in anticipation of an emergency, such as if you're planning on sheltering-in-place during a hurricane, take a picture of your pantry as a quick way to list things you need from the store.
9. Driving directions. If you're trying to tell others where a certain location is, such as an emergency shelter, you can send them a picture by picture set of driving directions. This is another good thing to create while putting your family reaction plan together.
10. "Meet this person." Let's say your family had to evacuate, and they know the address they're supposed to head to, but not everyone has met the family emergency contact person. Send them a picture of the person they're supposed to meet, or you can send your contact person some pictures of the people heading their way.
11. Last minute property inventory. Just as you'd photo the family in anticipation of an emergency, you should do the same with your property. If you're about to evacuate, snap some quick shots of your property to include any new purchases not included in your last full home inventory, and to show the current condition of your property in general.
12. "Adventure" journal. Who says every potential disaster situation has to be a total disaster? One way to look at it is as an adventure. Take some pictures to record what you do, the places you go during evacuation, people you meet along the way, etc.

13. Situational severity. In a large-scale emergency, first responders will be spread thin and overworked. They might not have anyone to send to get you out of a partly-flooded neighborhood, or to help put out a tiny grass fire. However, the situation might actually be worse than they understand, and you might need some serious help. Sending a picture of just how bad the situation is might help.

14. Quick text messaging. Time is critical in an emergency and so are communications. You might not have enough time to punch in a text message, and the lines might not be open long enough for a conversation. If that's the case, write a note on paper, take a picture, and send that.

15. Minor traffic mishap documentation. If you have a minor fender-bender while evacuating, and there are no injuries and no one's car needs to be towed, most jurisdictions will tell you to "swap info and move along." If that's the case (always call 911 to ask and make sure), take photos of the vehicular damage, people involved, witnesses at the scene (and their car tag numbers), and if your phone has video, take video of others involved in the accident to show their injuries (or lack thereof).

16. Wallet backup. Just as you'd photograph family members and property, take pictures of your wallet's contents (or important documents) in order to record numbers, and show that cards actually are or were in your possession. Be very careful when storing or transmitting these pictures as the info is very sensitive and can be used for identity theft!

17. Inclement weather reporting. If you're the first one to see the funnel cloud, heavy hail, or a river starting to overflow, sending a picture in to the weather service or proper authorities is undeniable and rapid proof that severe weather or other emergency is occurring.

18. First Responder intel. The more first responders know about the true nature of a collapsed house, an auto accident, a fire in progress, or any other emergency, the more rapid and appropriate a reaction they can make.

19. Missing persons report. Send picture of picture. Let's say a family member goes missing. In addition to the last minute photos you took, you could also send a picture of a photograph you might have in your purse or wallet. This will save a lot of time for you and the authorities.

20. Relay property damage to or from neighbors. Suppose your neighborhood was heavily damaged in a disaster. Whoever goes home first, either you or your neighbors, could photograph neighborhood and home damage and relay the info to the other.

21. Help insurance adjusters find your property. After a devastating incident, street signs will be gone, house numbers won't be visible, etc. Take current pictures of landmarks or any kind of unique damage near or at your property. This will make it easier for your insurance adjuster to find you.

22. Copy the bulletin boards. If you're in an emergency shelter, and there's an info bulletin board, you might need a lot of the info posted, but not have time to write or anything to write with or on. Take a picture!

23. Bus, subway, or city map info. If you're anywhere you're not familiar with and you have any sort of posted map, take a picture of it to refer to later if you get lost.

24. Document your route. When traveling to a new area, and either others will be following later, or you want to be sure you can find your way back, be sure to take pictures along the way of landmarks at turns you make, forks in the road, etc.

25. Record medicines or food brand needs. If you have to relay information about your medications to a doctor, or if you have special dietary needs and need to send information regarding certain product or food brands to an outside person or service, then a picture really is worth a thousand words.

26. Remember parking spot locations. Don't trust your memory, trust a picture. Take a quick pic of where you left your vehicle either in a lot or in a parking deck.

27. Pic of engine problems for mechanic. Should you break down on the road and your vehicle shows outward signs of engine problems such as steam shooting from a certain hose, or liquids dripping from a place on the engine, send a pic to a mechanic who may be able to talk you through a quick fix to get you back on the road.

28. Business or service function and/or hours. Just as you'd photograph a map, you might want to copy posted business hours or listed service functions (and pricing) for later review and recall. This is also a good way to report price gouging on the road.

29. Allowable child custodian. If you can't get to your kids who are at school or some other function, relay a picture of the person who is coming in your stead to pick them up. Send this picture to both the school or function, and to your child (if they have their own phonecam).
30. Relay info on injured or hospitalized people. You might be in a position to send pictures to people looking for loved ones or vice-versa.
31. Remember your hotel room. Whenever you get a hotel room, take a picture so you can find your way back. Photo not only the room number on the door, but the name of the motel and adjacent buildings for reference.
32. ID your evac gear. As with all your belongings, take a picture to prove ownership. One situation where this might come in handy is with petty theft in emergency shelters. It's actually a rare occurrence, but it's best to be ready to prove things are yours.
33. Photo scavenger hunt. If you've settled down a bit, say at your emergency shelter or temporary stopover, you'll need something to entertain the kids. Give them a short list of things they should take a picture of. First one to take all the listed pictures wins!
34. Identify the close-up. Another entertainment idea is to take a really close up picture of something while the kids aren't looking, and have them figure out what it is.
35. Document your whereabouts during civil unrest. Another remote possibility, but since these things do happen, it's best to be ready. Let's say you're in a location where looting is occurring, or rioting about to happen. You can either help the Police by secretly taking pictures of the perpetrators (not really recommended for safety reasons), or you can take pictures as you're leaving the area to document the fact that you weren't part of the trouble.
36. ID the rescue team. If a rescuer is picking up your child or pet, you want to photo the rescuer (and the child or pet) and the vehicle they used. Get their name tag in the picture as well as registration numbers on helicopters, vehicle tags numbers, or names of boats.
37. Document your cleanup efforts. It may be a while before your insurance adjuster can arrive. Take pictures of the damage as you found it, and steps you took during cleanup. Regarding insurance or recovery grants, NOTHING beats documentation!
38. Document your repair or cleanup expenditures. If you buy goods or supplies, rent equipment, or hire a service, in addition to keeping your receipts, be sure to photograph the goods acquired, the equipment being used, or the service being performed (also photo the people involved where possible).
39. Transmit property item pics to retrieval companies. Some scenarios will see you unable to return home. Some companies are trained and equipped to go into these areas to help people gather certain belongings. Having property photos stored on your phone will allow you to send pictures of specific property items you'd like retrieved.
40. Document location / status of fellow evacuees. Authorities will not only want to know who is injured, dead, or missing, but they'll want to know who is okay and where they are. Taking pictures of those you meet along with way whether it's during an evacuation, or of people at your emergency shelter, will help ID the living and well.
41. Bridge the language barrier. A picture is worth a thousand words. Ever try to find the restroom in a foreign country and you didn't know the proper phrase? Imagine how guests in our country would feel in emergency situations where they needed much more than a restroom and didn't know how to ask. Pictures would make that process a hundred times easier, whether you're trying to understand their needs, or relay yours to them.
42. Transmit road conditions. Let's say after a hurricane, you're one of the first families returning to a damaged area, and you're taking back roads. Authorities (or others following you later) might not have had a chance to check every avenue of return. If there's damage that needs to be reported, or no damage at all (which should also be reported), sending a picture can relay tons of information, especially if a roadway has received damage and road crews need to know what kind of damage and its extent.
43. Relay traffic conditions. If family or group members are separated, or heading in different directions, you might need to pass along traffic conditions or the info from traffic warning signs.
44. Crime scene evidence. Many times, people have returned from an evacuation to a home that was undamaged during the event, but later looted. Since the Police might not be able to show up right away, go ahead and take "crime scene" photos (for both Police and insurance) just as you'd photograph your property if it was damaged in the event.

45. Too much info on the screen to copy? Shoot it. Should the TV flash some pertinent information on the screen and you don't have time to write it down, or should you have a lot of text on a computer screen and you can't print it out, take a picture for later review.

46. Positive ID to or from your doctor and/or pharmacy. Medical needs are a very real probability during an emergency. Since you can't get to your doctor in person, and they might be phoning in a prescription to a pharmacy that doesn't know either of you, use your phone to verify your identity to your doctor, and your doctor can relay the picture to the pharmacy so they'll know who's coming to get the meds.

47. Emergency supply information. Suppose a developing emergency has caught you low on goods or gear and you send different people to different locations to help stock up. If supplies are low, these family members may need to send a picture of the types or brands of items available so you can make educated purchase decisions.

48. Picture file of "Last Minute List" items and shutdown. Though everyone should keep a "bugout kit" packed and ready to go, there will be items which cannot duplicated and/or packed in advance. In addition to creating a written "Last Minute List," create a photo file showing all the items you want to take with you (and their location) and things you should do to shut down and secure the house before leaving.

49. Evac atlas. Create your own "evac travel atlas" of emergency assets available along your probable evacuation routes. This might include lodging, ATM locations, hospital emergency rooms, etc. Travel the routes and take photos, or draw your own maps and shoot that.

50. Photo reaction plan for the reading disabled. If a family member suffers from any reading disability, such as Dyslexia, using photos is a must. Create a photo file that will relay your entire emergency plan without using text.

51. Since InfoQuest always does more than expected, here's a bonus idea. Your camera phone can relay pictures of structural damage to a structural engineer who can tell you how to shore up certain walls, where safe spots might be, where hidden dangers might be, etc., as your Search and Rescue team looks through a collapsed building for survivors.

These are just some of the many ways a camera phone can be used to help in an emergency. Take a look around at your family and your current threats, needs, and assets and look at ways you can put your phonecam to use. Better yet, look at the things you can do so that your phonecam isn't needed at all!

Copyright 2005 - 2007, Paul Purcell. About the author: Paul Purcell is an Atlanta-based security analyst and preparedness consultant with over twenty years risk management and preparedness experience. He's also the author of **Disaster Prep 101** found at www.disasterprep101.com, and he's a partner / advisor to 1-800-PREPARE found at www.1800PREPARE.com.

(Permission granted to reprint this article and share it with others provided all portions remain intact.)