



## ***Perspective***

**AV Recovery After A Disaster**

**Lessons Learned Recovering From 9/11**

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## ***COVID19 hit the AV industry like a***

***sledgehammer*** – live events, office builds, employment, technology availability, and much, much more have all been affected. We will recover, but it will take time. We can likely learn something about the inevitable recovery if we look at one of the last times our industry had to recover from a disaster.

So, now twenty years after the worst terrorist attack on our country, I find myself reflecting on that fateful day in September and its aftermath – which impacted the AV industry greatly. Many in our industry were in New York City, D.C., or even Shanksville, PA on that tragic day. As a New York City resident, I not only live in the city but also work here. My recollections of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 are still vivid.

That morning colleagues were en-route from New Jersey for a meeting at the World Trade Center. Like many other clients, family, and friends, my cousin Steven was working on 84<sup>th</sup> floor of the South Tower. At our office (at Ace Audiovisual at the time) I was huddled with my colleagues. With every monitor in our office showing news coverage, I remember thinking this was our generation's Pearl Harbor. When the towers fell, the windows to our 3<sup>rd</sup> floor production offices were open. We not only saw the real time coverage of the horror but experienced the rumble and noise clearly from 40 blocks away.



NYC Emergency Operations Center  
7 WTC after the attacks on 9/11

Around noon that day, I headed out by SUV to get as far downtown as I could to aid in transporting people trying to get uptown. I was able to drive to just south of the Chelsea Piers, where the street was then blocked off. I saw a sea of humanity (like the images you likely have seen in news coverage) coming from the Brooklyn Bridge and offered transportation in this time of crisis. I found myself with a group of six strangers heading north towards Penn Station, The Port Authority Bus Station, and parts further north. Not without its physical challenges, the cell service was overwhelmed, making communication nearly impossible. I later found out my cousin Steven miraculously made it out of the South Tower through the stairwell. His firm, like many others, lost 61 souls that day.

It is hard not to naturally compare the parallels between the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the post-pandemic world. How did the AV industry recover from 9/11? What was its impact on business and the AV sector in general? What can we learn from the early 2000's and apply to our 2021?

### What Recovery Looked Like after 9/11:

Much of NYC was completely shut down after the World Trade Center was attacked. Corporate events stopped immediately and were cancelled for months. Initially, this impacted AV staging jobs for many rental firms with a high number of cancellations in what was the prime fall meetings season. Current AV design or integration work within the financial or corporate sector in lower Manhattan were shelved. Other priorities for these institutions became the focus, primarily business continuity. In many of those buildings or nearby offices, the prior reality did not exist anymore. The plans were either shelved or the buildings were completely closed for repairs and faced years of rebuilding (much like the Deutsche Bank NY Headquarters.)

Many would agree that its fundamentally good practice to always stay close to your clients in good times and particularly in bad times. At our firm, we did whatever we could to proactively reach out to our clients in their efforts to recover and rebuild. That took the shape of working and collaborating with their consultants, architects, and engineers to bring about immediate solutions to their

AV operations and facilities challenges. It also meant supporting the recovery efforts of the city agencies and larger communities. We donated and delivered hundreds of bull horns upon request to the FDNY, we volunteered at the ground-zero pile and supplied public address systems to the victims' families and memorial centers. These were tangible ways to contribute to our city and clients. *(This parallels how the AV Industry stepped-up immediately as the COVID crisis hit – with our industry making masks and shields, supplying food to healthcare centers, and doing whatever was possible to be a good member of our communities.)*

With so many physical offices gone after 9/11, their operations needed to continue in repurposed temporary facilities. That meant urgently setting up business critical, trading floors and space for an indeterminate amount of time in hotels and event centers. AV had a vital role in recreating entire conference/training environments, offices, and operations spaces.

At that time and in the months that followed, it was not uncommon for AV contractors to receive a call from a client or AV consultant asking, “*would it possible to?*” A strategic driver that emerged from those in the large financial and government sectors was to review their business continuity plans and most importantly refocus their corporate Real Estate strategy particularly with less concentration of their key headquarters buildings. Mission critical operations for these organizations could no longer be in just one location. A need to spread out and for redundancy took hold which opened opportunities to design multiple AV operations and command facilities for enterprise clients. *(As we look to the post-COVID recovery, the same business continuity analysis is now required. However, where post 9/11 focus was on a greater dispersal of offices, the post-COVID focus will be on how to sustain operations when 100% of employees are remote.)*

### Recovery Takes Time

From a major global event like 9/11 there certainly can be immediate requirements for goods and services, but if you follow the timelines of real estate development and construction it can take years or even decades to implement. Following the attacks of 9/11 there were projections published of less people traveling for business. There were also predictions for the instant proliferation of videoconferencing (VTC). Videoconferencing did grow but not quite that fast.

With Federal Air Marshals aboard and sometimes inconveniently visible, and an expanded U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA), business travelers did get back on planes relatively quickly. In the years that followed, VTC platform stability, performance, cost of a call and access to broadband platforms all evolved and improved. This created strong user awareness and more widespread adoption for the (long-term) growth of VTC.

### Post COVID19:

With clients across business sectors utilizing collaboration and conferencing platforms in their homes, indicators point to a continued audiovisual sector COVID-19 recovery as it relates to video/web conferencing. What eventually returns to the hybrid-modified corporate office for the AV sector will be clients who will likely reference what they had in their homes. This is presented in pronounced awareness of their likes and dislikes of the platforms. Some who utilize conferencing and are returning to the office have voiced their desire to be back in person and that they missed the characteristics of in-person engagements with eyeball-to-eyeball clarity. Clients will request the ability to see and control even more on a call/meeting. I believe the return to the office and meetings will bring with it expectations for improved video performance and increased intelligibility of the spoken word. Typical capabilities for a call offered to a participant *in* a meeting or office *conference* space will, most likely need to be developed to meet new expectations experienced during COVID.



New York City OEM - Headquarters

Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn

*Photo Courtesy - of Shen Milsom & Wilke*

As I discuss the current environment with clients and colleagues, another COVID-19 recovery requirement (that parallels the post 9/11 time) becomes obvious. Specifically, this is the need for increased AV enabled security monitoring, and command and control environments. This one portends *not* to be business sector-specific. It will likely include law enforcement, corporate enterprise, science, government, healthcare institutions, media, and higher education

facilities. It's also projected that AV recovery growth areas will continue in the transportation sector and in the planning and construction of distribution centers. This industrial warehouse sector is driving the planned "*construction of 342 million square feet of space nationwide across 1,040 properties,*" according to Celia Young of the Commercial Observer. And yes, Amazon **is** leading the pack.

Our industry closely tracks the global corporate market. That perspective was offered by Bob Sulentic, CEO at the world's largest real estate services provider, CBRE: *"Technology Supported Amenities will be essential in the new office experience"*. *"We look to a substantial return to the office in the second half of this year and with an overall occupancy projection of between 85 to 88% return over five years"*. Certain areas will return faster than others. For instance, the Dallas-Fort Worth market and major markets in the Midwest are currently seeing a faster return to the office. Clearly the ratio of 'return to office' employees to the 'remote and hybrid' employees is open for discussion and debate, with traditional real-estate related firms predicting an eventual nearly complete return and technology firms more quickly embracing a hybrid model. Time will tell.

Unlike 9/11, the current pandemic has been a global attack of a different kind. The tragic 9/11 attacks occurred on a single day, across three northeast US locations. This contrasts with the prolonged and continued effects from the virus on global economies and much of corporate real estate from COVID. The recovery from the pandemic also differs from 9/11 in the means of domestic U.S. business recovery. After 9/11, there were some Small Business Administration (SBA) programs that aided in business continuity that were available to very few. Much of the aid available to business at the time was tied to the physical damages from the attack and was administrated by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) on that basis.

The pandemic presented a very different opportunity to help U.S. domestic business effected financially by the shutdowns and lost revenues. Payroll Protection Programs (PPP) loans have been the lifeline to business in all sectors to continue operating and hold onto their staff. AV sector companies, manufacturers, dealers, consultants, and integrators will have to operate better & faster and with a watchful eye on operating costs. Clearly, companies that went into to the pandemic with managed costs and low debt have an increased opportunity to build and even thrive in an AV recovery from COVID19.

My final thought is that this article was somewhat difficult to write as it forced me to stare-into the horrors of both 9/11 and COVID19. I dedicate it to the family, friends, colleagues, first responders and healthcare workers we lost or who suffered during 9/11 and the COVID-19 pandemic. May we always be able to view tragedies as learning opportunities and work alongside our communities to make tomorrow better than today.