

RISK COMMUNICATION

AND SOCIAL MEDIA: TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR USING NEW TOOLS TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

BY DR TIM L TINKER, GRANT MCLAUGHLIN, AND MICHAEL DUMLAO

Risk and crisis communicators face pressure to adapt to the changing 21st-century landscape. With new threats like terrorist attacks, biological warfare, and cyber security breaches, critical information and messages must reach broader populations faster and with higher impact than ever before. With these and other new threats constantly emerging, it is essential to understand how changing trends and innovations such as social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and more) are shaping the what, why, how and timing of public – and private – informational and call to action messages during times of crisis.



Recognizing these challenges and opportunities, public health and emergency management professionals are taking advantage of the rapidly evolving communications landscape of social media to reach more people with more relevant messages during public health and safety emergencies. Social media is allowing them to have direct access to the public on everything from salmonella-related food recalls to disease outbreaks and weather emergencies.

“It speeds up communication and, for all practical purposes, it speeds up awareness,” said Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

To gain a better understanding of how social media is shaping the way crises are communicated and responses are coordinated, the Expert Round Table on Social Media and Risk Communication During Times of Crisis met on Mar. 31, 2009, at the APHA headquarters in Washington, D.C. This select group of thought leaders and practitioners engaged in public health, emergency response and crisis communications agreed that the use of social media during emergencies is leading to a roadmap to help disaster planners, emergency managers and public health officials craft a unified strategy on applying social media to communicat-

ing with the media, the public and key stakeholder groups.

What is Social Media?

Social media is the various electronic tools, technologies and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange. Wikipedia – itself a social media tool, as any Internet user can add to its content – defines social media as “media designed to be disseminated through social interaction [and] created using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques.”

These various interactive communication and content exchange vehicles are being used by individuals as well as organizations and government agencies during high risk and high concern situations.

Blog. Short for “Weblog,” it is a type of Web site that is frequently updated and usually maintained by an individual. Conversational in tone, a blog contains commentary, descriptions of events and other materials such as video or graphics. The Internet has millions of blogs.

Microblog. A form of blogging (e.g., Twitter and Plurk) that allows users to write and publish brief (i.e., up to 140 characters) updates that can be viewed and commented on by the community or by a restricted group.

Podcast. A Web-based audio or video digital media file that is available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio/video player.

Social Networking Site. An online community such as Facebook and MySpace that allows users to connect, interact and exchange information with those who share interests or activities.

Text Messaging (or Texting). The exchange of brief messages over mobile devices.

Wiki. Collaborative Web pages or a collection of pages that allow all users to contribute or modify the content.

Widget. A portable piece of self-contained code (i.e., a small application) that can be embedded into a Web site or program to perform a specific function.

Social Bookmarking. A Web site (e.g., Delicious and Digg) on which a virtual community can exchange links to Web pages and store them for future use.

Really Simple Syndication. RSS is a file that contains frequently updated information (news headlines, blog posts) to which one can subscribe and is accessible by using programs called feed readers or aggregators.

Image/Video Sharing. A user-generated Web site (e.g., YouTube, Flickr) that allows users to upload pictures or videos and to view or comment on material uploaded by others.

Virtual World. A computer-based, simulated environment (e.g., Second Life, Whyville) in which users interact with each other via avatars or virtual representations of themselves.

Internet Forum or Message Board. Online discussion Web site on which users can discuss issues, exchange information and share views.

Mobile Web Site. A Web site that is accessible via a mobile device such as a cell phone, personal digital assistant or other portable gadget that is connected to a public network.

Social Media’s Role in High Risk and High Concern Situations

According to Wikipedia, “Social media supports the human need for social interaction with technology, transforming broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many). It supports the democratization of knowledge and information, transforming people from content consumers into content producers.”

Such broad, strategic public engagement was largely missing when the New Orleans levees broke after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August 2005. In today’s environment, however, lack of awareness is no longer an issue. Citizens not only consume information from multiple sources, they provide it as well. For example, during the November 2008 terrorist activity in Mumbai, the victims themselves broke the news to a worldwide audience by using their mobile phones to upload emerging information on YouTube, Twitter and Flickr.

How can risk and crisis communicators manage so much raw information? How can they handle messaging, public outreach and response in light of social

TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Blog

Microblog

Podcast

Social Networking Site

Text Messaging (or Texting)

Wiki

Widget

Social Bookmarking

Really Simple Syndication

Image/Video Sharing

Virtual World

Internet Forum or
Message Board

Mobile Web Site

media’s immediacy? The answer lies in collaborating with the public and partnering with social networks. Effective public outreach campaigns must now be far more conversational than ever before.

“Social media is obviously about more than how we reach out to the public and educate the public,” said Nathan Huebner, emergency risk communication specialist and lead for the emergency Web sites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “It’s about the public talking to us. It’s also about the public talking to the public.”

How To Use Social Media During Emergencies

Experts gathered at the round table shared experiences and insights into how their organizations leverage social media devices and practices to strengthen and broaden their social networks, empower citizens to share information and manage public outreach. The following guidelines should be followed

CONTINUED ON PAGE 114

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 113

when using social media to engage with the public:

- Make social media efforts message driven, not channel driven.
- Embrace every possible teaching moment, which will allow your social media networks to grow.
- Tap into all available resources. If you have a large cadre of volunteers, consider training them as social media ambassadors.
- Keep messages brief and pertinent. Social media users tend to scan rather than thoroughly read the information.
- Make sure you can receive public input. Social media involve you talking to the public as well as the public talking to you and to each other.

Social media is changing the rules for how we communicated before, during, and after crises.

- Use social media to support a unified message. Instead of creating a new message to use for social media, use social media to support your existing message in a larger communications model.
- Have a Plan B in place. What will you do if phone lines are jammed or computers are down?
- Forge partnerships for sharing methods and messages. Federal agencies and the private sector, for example, need to reach out to one another.
- Focus on people when formulating your communication plan. Networks of people will get the work done, even when there is no electricity.
- Avoid elitism. It is not helpful to believe that people in charge know more and that the general public is prone to misbehavior.
- Shift your way of thinking about how to communicate with your audience. New technologies are not simply new types of media with which to do the same old things.
- Avoid “shiny new object” syndrome. Quickly adopting every new social medium that emerges as soon as it emerges is not necessary.

How To Establish Social Media Best Practices

As public and private health officials and crisis communications experts use social media to get out their messages, they are establishing some notable best practices along the way. Whether using Twitter, YouTube and blogs at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Flickr and Facebook at the American Red Cross or a combination of social media at National Public Radio, some commonalities have emerged.

- Develop a research agenda that will allow you to evaluate the effectiveness of social media in a disaster communications model.
- Use subject matter experts to help with data collection.
- Initiate a cultural shift. Allow your group or agency the room to grow in developing a new approach to social media. This is where leadership is key.
- Get feedback from users in the community.
- Be aware of the three main barriers to adopting social media: 1) leadership buy-in, 2) sustainability, and 3) information technology and access issues.
- Remember that people are in a social media environment because they want to be; they are not being forced to be there.
- Seek ways to address technical hurdles (e.g., mobile phone towers not working during a hurricane).
- Think partnerships. For example, use groups such as APHA to help you expand your social media communications tools. Such groups might not have the same constraints as a government agency. It’s all about partnering – with your leadership and with your community.
- Keep trying. Best practices will emerge.
- Balance core capacity with social media capacity. Know that part of any communications strategy includes balancing time and resources.
- Be relevant. Do not “spam” users with too much information.
- Choose a few social media tools and develop them well.

- Realize that social media is a moving target. Be flexible and use volunteers and community members to help you adapt your communications strategy accordingly.

- Focus on building relationships. Work to give the public a way to engage.

The use of social media tools in risk and crisis communications will continue to evolve and change and so will these initial best practices. As Grant McLaughlin, Booz Allen Hamilton principal and an expert in strategic communications, marketing and stakeholder outreach, said, “The tools and tactics are still emerging, and as they mature, we’ll be able to better define measures of effectiveness and next steps.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dr Tim L Tinker (tinker_timothy@bah.com) is a Senior Associate in Booz Allen Hamilton, specializing in risk and crisis communication.

Grant McLaughlin (mclaughlin_grant@bah.com) is a Principal in Booz Allen Hamilton.

Michael Dumlao (dumlao_michael@bah.com) is a Senior Consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton, specializing in graphic design, web development, and the role of social media in government and emergency communication.

FROM HSTODAY

Detecting the Bio Threat

The recent flurry of alleged terrorist plots has renewed concern that other attacks may be planned. Although the recent plots have involved explosive bombs, there is an even more ominous threat –biological weapons.

Visit www.GUIDErequest.com/CR to link to the article.

FROM GORDONHOMELAND.COM

GordonHomeland.com is a homeland security website featuring reports, publications, articles, presentations, references and resources, and other material relating to homeland security. Recent Post on Gordon Homeland.com

Some Conceptual Tools for Understanding and Addressing Catastrophic Challenges As Well As Other Lesser Emergencies

Visit www.GUIDErequest.com/CR to link to the article.