

Social Media In Emergencies

Social media has completely transformed the way news is gathered and reported, and is a force companies must understand so they don't get swamped in an emergency.

Social Media and Newsgathering

Social media has changed the way news is gathered. The deadline pressure is now constant, and everything has been turned upside down! Newspapers post videos to their web sites and constantly update stories before and after print editions come out.

TV news streams live coverage to their web sites, uses laptops and smartphones for coverage, and doesn't even need microwave or satellite trucks anymore to go live from an event thanks to cellular broadband systems that fit in a backpack.

During a big event, it is not uncommon for a news source to be contacted by a day TV crew, a night TV crew, and repeatedly by the station's web site editor for updates and bullet points. The web crew just wants bullet points. As a TV news director puts it: "Nowadays a picture and a caption, posted to a Facebook page, is a story."

Using Social Media to Communicate During an Emergency

News releases, the traditional way of releasing information, are not always needed anymore, and they are way too slow to be of great use in an emergency. They are often best used for follow up or for aggregating information that has been released over a period of time.

Twitter is the go-to app in an emergency. Citizens and the media are monitoring it, and by using a hashtag for the event (i.e. #SFquake), the media and public are sure to see your content.

Best practice involves releasing updates and information in bite-size chunks via Twitter as soon as it is approved and ready to go, rather than waiting for a lengthy news release to be written, reviewed, tweaked, approved, converted into a PDF and posted to a web site or sent via e-mail. It is simply not fast enough in an emergency situation. Quickly distributing information via Twitter can save lives.

In an emergency, it's important to realize that if you don't speak, someone is sure to speak for you, and it may not be the message you want communicated. It is essential to establish yourself as the authority, immediately. The "holding statement", as it's called, can be as simple as "We've heard the reports about the event, and our response teams are arriving on scene." The U.S. Navy in 2014 tweeted in real time about its Washington Navy Yard Shooter event, receiving widespread praise for the way it handled the tragedy and immediately establishing itself as the go-to authority.

Social media monitoring during a crisis is also as important as pushing out information. Knowing what the media and citizens are saying can help you quash rumors and know what questions need to be answered at your next news conference. It also helps with situational awareness, as you can see and read what eyewitnesses are seeing.

Having the ability to shoot quick update videos and immediately post audio or video clips from news conferences or subject matter experts also lets you take control and make sure your message is getting out. Smartphone video apps allow easy editing and uploads, document apps allow you to shoot a photo of any document and make a PDF on the spot for sharing, and communications apps like Voxer (voice) or GroupMe (text chat) let you communicate easily with your team during an event.