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[USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN A PUBLC HEALTH EMERGENCY]

Social Media has greatly expanded the ability of people to communicate with one another. Local health departments have an opportunity to augment their strategic communications plans with these technologies. Through the deployment of an aggregator such as Ping, critical and sensitive information can be widely publicized throughout the social media space in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Introduction

Quickly publicizing public health information during an emergency is a critical deliverable for many emergency response coordinators. Traditional communications techniques, such as press releases or news conferences, can slow the distribution of life saving information. Social Media technology appears to be a promising supplemental technique that can close the gap between the time an agency releases information to when it becomes available for use by the public.

What Is Social Media?

Social Media is an umbrella term that includes interactive broadcasts such as blogs and podcasts, as well as social networking websites. These websites often allow visitors to become users or members, create personal profiles, and upload and share content through the internet.

> **Facebook** – One of the largest social media sites today, Facebook has over 55-million users in the United States as of March 2009. Users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with other people. Users can add friends, send them messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves.
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> **LinkedIn** – A social network designed for business professionals, LinkedIn has over 38-million members in over 200 countries and territories around the world. Users can find, be introduced to, and collaborate with qualified professional. Executives from all Fortune 500 companies are LinkedIn members.
>
> **Twitter** – Ranked as the third largest social network behind Facebook and MySpace, Twitter draws nearly 55-million visits to its website every month. Twitter users can send and read user updates, known as *tweets*, much like a SMS (Short Message Service) cell phone services. Tweets are text-based messages of up to 140 characters in length.

In addition to these internet services, social media also includes internet weblogs, instant messaging (IM), and peer-to-peer networking (P2P) such as the BitTorrent and Napster file sharing services.

Who is Using Social Media?

According to a survey my Universal McCann, half of American adults use some form of social media.

- 1 out of 10 U.S. adults now publish blogs (up from 5% in 2007)
- 22% of U.S. adults use IM (up from 9% in 2007)

Employers are increasingly allowing staff to use social media applications during working hours. Awareness Inc. estimates that 75% of employees use social networking such as such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn for business purposes, up 15% from 2007.

Social Media Examples During Natural Disasters

From the Virginia Tech shooting to the Sichuan earthquake in China, social media is adding a new element to information gathering and recovering planning. When USAir Flight 1549 dove into the Hudson River in January 2009, the first pictures of the disaster came from Twitpic, a service that allows people to send images over Twitter. According to analysis,

> It was the first mention, anywhere, of the Flight 1549 crash landing. It beat CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News and all the rest by a good twenty minutes.

During the Sichuan Earthquake, a college student saw news reports about the military's problems landing helicopters near a destroyed village.

> The woman, who had grown up in the area, posted a detailed description of a potential landing spot in an online forum, and begged users to forward it to authorities. The post eventually found its way to the military, who landed the helicopter in the spot she described.

In general, professional emergency responders are only vaguely aware of how citizens use social media during disasters. Such examples of citizen journalists or citizen relief coordinators fall into the grassroots model where information bubbles up from the bottom of a pyramid into official response organizations. For a public health emergency, however, the pyramid turns upside down as a large number of people seek one or two specific pieces of information. It is here that emergency responders can use social media as an effective tool for mass communication.

Public Health Emergencies

A local health department typically is one of the last places the general public looks to for information on routine medical questions. Local physicians, and sometimes the Internet (for more basic questions), are the first link in the health information chain. This situation changes dramatically, however, with an outbreak of meningitis or West Nile Virus. In those cases, the general public looks to their local health department for information concerning treatment, quarantines, and other specific information.

The dissemination of such critical information follows a traditional agency-to-media path.

- Agency issues a press release announcing details of the health event
- Television and Radio interviews reinforcing key actionable requests
- Newspaper articles chronicle both the details and actionable request

The end of this cycle might include publishing the press release and frequently asked questions to the agency's website. Afterwards, standard public information follow-up prevails.

Deploying Social Media to Push Information to the Public

As previously discussed, social media allows people to communicate a wide range of information among a relevant and inter-related community. This information can range from the mundane to the extraordinary. In either case, information propagates quickly throughout the population.

But the use of social media is not restricted to private individuals. There are examples of public interest applications that can be applied to public health agencies, forming a template for "push media."

- In the Southeast United States, television meteorologists use social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook to communicate severe weather information to an audience beyond the station's regular viewings.
- Major software designers, such as Symantec, use social media as an additional channel to announce important warnings about computer virus attacks.

In the government realm, the Centers for Disease Control use both RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds and Twitter to inform the general public about a wide range of health-related news and information.

Local health departments should include social media tools as part of their public information program. This cost effective medium allows citizens to connect to the health department during a public health emergency for the purpose of receiving important safety information in a timely manner.

How to Choose Among Many Social Media Platforms

With tremendous innovation and competition in the social media space, it is impractical to select one single platform as a primary method to push content to the general public. Even more arduous is the task of using each individual social media platform during a public health emergency. Such a strategy would overwhelm an already under-staffed communications team battling to feed news organizations hungry for details, facts, and talking points.

Solution: Use an Aggregator Like Ping.fm

Ping.fm (hereafter "Ping") is a free social networking and micro-blogging web service that enables users to post to multiple social networks simultaneously. Making an update on Ping pushes the update to a number of different social websites at once. This allows individuals using multiple social networks to update their status only once, without having to update it in all of their social mediums individually.

Ping interacts with 34 individual social media services, grouping the services into three categories.

1. Status Updates – Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn
2. Blogs – Sites such as WordPress, TypePad, and Blogger
3. Micro-blogs – Sites such as Twitter, Jaiku, and Tumblr.

Deploying Ping as a Social Media Aggregator

Prior to a public health emergency, the communications department should register with various social media platforms. Once the agency has an account on these sites, the communications department then would configure Ping to communicate with these other services. The agency should then test and promote the fact that it has adopted social media as a means of communicating critical information.

Considerations

Using Ping does not replace other traditional crisis communication techniques such as press release or news conferences. Ping provides a local health department with an efficient method of communicating a "flash" message to news media and the general public. For example:

> County Health Department confirms 3 cases of spinal meningitis. No deaths. Details and FAQ now online at our website.

Another example might announce a news conference.

> County Health Department closes seven restaurants after E. coli outbreak. Presser @ 2:30 PM in lower level conference room. Media inquiries @ 312-555-1212.

Conclusion

The popularity of social media sites have greatly expanded the ability of people to communicate with one another. Local health departments have an opportunity to augment their strategic communications plans with these technologies. Through the deployment of an aggregator such as Ping, critical and sensitive information can be widely publicized throughout the social media space in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

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About Brian McDaniel

Brian McDaniel is a strategic communications professional with over 20 years of experience in marketing and brand development for Fortune 500 companies and government. Brian serves on the Board of Directors of the Argonne Credit Union in Romeoville, Illinois; the Board of Directors of the Benedictine University Alumni Association; and is a Fourth Degree Knight of Columbus. Brian has a degree in Business and Economics with a minor in International Business, and blogs at www.BrianMcDaniel.org.