

Crisis Management and Social Media: The New Opportunity

*Ralph Metzner, Director Product Development
FEI Behavioral Health*

Crisis Management and Social Media: The New Opportunity

The transfer of information and news via social media outlets is one of the most influential and widespread means of communication in the world today. Technological advancements have allowed us to have nearly effortless access to social media sites, at any given time or place. With outlets such as Facebook and Twitter leading the market, the prevalence of social media can be seen almost everywhere we go. This prevalence becomes even more convincing when looking at the statistics of Facebook alone:

- There are more than 500 million active users.
- Users spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook.
- More than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, photos, etc) are shared each month.
- Over 250 million active users are currently accessing Facebook through their mobile devices.
- Mobil users are more than twice as active on Facebook as non-mobile users.

Social Media and Disaster Response

This daily abundance of access to social media sites has sparked an interest amongst many in how these outlets can be used for more than just social entertainment. The crisis management field, in particular, has taken note to the advantages of using social media in disaster situations. Social media outlets exhibit a feed of information in which responders can pinpoint, to the minute, what exactly happened in the crisis. This information is received through firsthand accounts which allow for a real-time assessment of the disaster, and can be particularly helpful in locating victims or determining their needs. Using social media sites to disseminate information during a crisis is extremely beneficial in both responding to these disasters and to the recovery process.

The use of social networking during a crisis is gaining popularity outside the crisis management field as well. A recent survey conducted by the American Red Cross found:

- Over two-thirds agree that emergency response agencies should regularly monitor their websites and social media sites to respond to requests made.
- 1 in 6 people have used social media to get information about a crisis event.
- 55% of the respondents indicated that they would use a social media channel to mention that they needed emergency assistance.
- About half would sign up for emails, text alerts, or applications to receive emergency information.

Social Media is Changing the Game

Social media outlets have become a major advantage for reaching a large amount of people on a limited amount of time, battery life, or resources. Countless victims of disaster situations have turned to social media outlets to call for help in the midst of limited options. In 2009, two Australian girls aged 10 and 12 were trapped in a storm drain and chose to post a cry for help on Facebook instead of calling Australian emergency services. The girls were rescued after a classmate saw their post and alerted authorities. Similarly, during the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, a Canadian woman sent a text message requesting emergency assistance. The Canadian Foreign Affairs Department was able to alert Canadian authorities of the woman's exact location and was ultimately able to rescue her.

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administrator, Craig Fugate, has become a key advocate for the use of social media in responding to disaster events. In a recent written statement Fugate explains, "rather than trying to convince the public to adjust to the way we at FEMA communicate, we must adapt to the way the public communicates by leveraging the tools that people use on a daily basis." He has pushed federal agencies to create mobile-friendly versions of their websites that would allow people to view easy to load versions of their web pages directly through a Smartphone in the event of a crisis. In 2010 FEMA launched their own mobile site allowing users to apply for federal disaster assistance directly from a Smartphone.

Innovations in Disaster Response

Fugate has not been alone in his efforts to utilize social media for crisis management opportunities. The U.S. Geological Survey has begun to create the Twitter Earthquake Detector (TED) for gathering geographically pinpointed accounts of earthquake activity via Twitter. TED searches the Twitter database for any keywords associated with the word, *earthquake* and then formulates a map based on the amount of "tweets" sent from each geographic area. This information is extremely important as scientific alerts of earthquake hazard information can take up to 20 minutes to receive. Twitter feeds exhibit this information within seconds of its occurrence.

Crowd sourcing has become a widely popular concept for disaster response within social media outlets. For example, the geo-platform Ushandi is free and open source software that crowd sources information through a number of social media channels and develops interactive mapping of the information it has collected. Ushandi was originally created to map reports of violence in Kenya after the 2008 elections and has since played a critical role in assisting with the earthquakes in Haiti.

During the 2011 tornado destruction in Joplin, Missouri many of those affected turned to Facebook sites such as, "Joplin Tornado Citizen Checks" to receive updates about loved ones they could not acquire elsewhere. Similarly, Google has created a site called,

“Google Crisis Response” in which victims from recent disasters, such as the earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, have been able to find resources and loved ones through applications such as, *Person Finder* and *Resource Finder*.

FEI Advancements in Social Media

FEI Behavioral health, a leader in crisis preparedness, response, and recovery, acknowledges social media as a powerful strategy in crisis management and incorporates it as an integral aspect of their services. Within each client’s crisis plan, FEI supplies a trusted crowd sourcing site made exclusively for that organization. This site is available immediately after an event takes place and serves as a resource for family members or loved ones to receive updates about the crisis. Family members are able to visit the site, enter in information about the person they are inquiring, and be contacted by FEI shortly after with an update of their loved one’s current condition. Unlike similar open-source sites, FEI’s family assistance sites are specifically catered to the employees of these organizations, and are readily available in the event of a disaster.

FEI also utilizes the Twitter supported application, TweetDeck within each of its activation responses. TweetDeck is similar to an “air traffic controller” system and allows for a variety of social media outlets’ feeds to be monitored within one setting. FEI’s highly trained response team will closely observe trending topics that are automatically updated through a real-time feed of information about the crisis event. This information, when coupled with FEI’s experienced crisis team, and services such as *Accounting for People* and the Family Information Center (FIC), is extremely valuable to an organization’s recovery.

Taking social media monitoring a step further, FEI has developed a Social Networking Crisis Simulation tool to be used within the planning stages of an organization’s crisis management plan. This tool integrates social media into an organization’s crisis training drills by simulating the way social media messages propagate during a crisis event. Customers then have the ability to more accurately test their crisis plan by experiencing how social media would behave and be used within an actual crisis event.

In addition to their advancements in social media, FEI utilizes a full spectrum of workforce resilience solutions to protect and enhance organizational resiliency and business continuity. FEI’s services range from crisis preparedness and management to employee assistance programs (EAP) and wellness services. By integrating its behavioral health expertise, emergency management experience, and technological advancements, FEI offers specialized services that address the human dimensions of crisis management. In addition to providing intervention in the aftermath of natural disasters and workplace violence, FEI has provided assistance to thousands of victims as a result of domestic and international terrorism events. For over 30 years, FEI has been providing organizations with the tools, processes, and resources needed to maintain a strong and resilient workforce and business, in the face of any challenge.