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Just Another Communications Tool

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Several communications tools are used by emergency management agencies (EMAs) to disseminate emergency alerts and warnings, including sirens, television, radio and telephones. In recent years, some EMAs have begun to use social media for a variety of emergencies to relay important information to the public and to engage the citizenry in useful discussions on preparedness and recovery.

In a 2014 survey of 139 FEMA-approved alert authorities, nearly 90% of respondents indicated that they use social media to disseminate public alerts. However, there are still late adopters. In addition, social media use is not universal or uniform across all EMAs. The findings presented in this article are based on interviews of representatives from 13 emergency management agencies (at the state and local level) in different locations across the United States.

How Do EMAs Use Social Media?

When there are no active incidents, social media typically is used to relay preparedness information, public relations, information about historical emergencies or disasters, and staff accomplishments. Interviewees in this study use social media platforms to distribute information on places to get assistance, shelters, road closures, volunteer opportunities, and places to donate. The identified advantages of using social media platforms include: the potential for interaction, dialogue, or keeping a two-way flow of communication; use for direct communication (usually equated with Twitter); helping to quash rumors, especially during

unusual or unexpected events; the use of well-known partners for retweeting general information; and the "crowdsourcing" of information.

What Platforms do EMAs Use?

By the numbers, the majority of EMAs with social media platforms use Facebook. However, the interviewees in this study suggested that Twitter is more useful during emergencies. Most interviewees linked the benefits of using Twitter to its ability to rapidly disseminate information in near real-time, as well as its ability to monitor and gather information from the public, including victims, and from other public safety agencies. Emergency managers typically used Instagram for mitigation and preparedness information. YouTube, when used, was the most likely place for EMAs to present information in an accessible format for the deaf or those with language barriers. While YouTube has a closed-captioned feature, the best accessible format was when the EMAs placed English text, English voice over, and American Sign Language (ASL) into their original video prior to uploading it to YouTube.

Engaging People with Disabilities and Language Differences

Emergency management agencies need to be aware of the potential that social media has for reaching the whole community. Some are using these platforms to engage the public, but very few are considering the needs of people with disabilities or those with language barriers. Fewer than five of the interviewed emergency management agencies indicated that they

disseminate messages in another language. Only two used YouTube videos to present messages in ASL and with closed-captioning. However, many are using other methods to connect with access and functional needs groups, such as having a monthly meeting with disability-related organizations.

Liability Concerns

A few interviewees discussed concerns regarding the potential for misinformation to be posted on social media, especially when engaging individuals directly. However, these concerns were not shared among all. Others highlighted the usefulness of social media with regard to their open records policy. With the exception of foul language, these agencies allow all information posted on social media to be readily available as a means of compliance with their state's open records act. Understandably, legal concerns are a complicated issue, especially when the question of anonymity comes into play, against a backdrop where personal identifiable information is also readily available.

General Good Practices to Consider

Social media platforms are just another method to communicate with the public and should not be used as a replacement for other methods. Be sure to manage expectations when using social media, in particular when engaging in direct communications. The robust features of social media can be used to maintain your online presence, engage the public, and

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meet the goals of your emergency management agency's mission.

Going Forward

■ Social media platforms can be used for response, recovery, mitigation, and preparedness messaging.

■ The most active EMAs currently consider Twitter to be the best for response messaging. However, Facebook is still the most popular social media platform.

■ Don't forget about the access and functional needs group. Posting in multiple languages, including ASL, can go a long way toward connecting with hard-to-reach populations.

■ Engaging the public through two-way communication is one of the most unique features of social media platforms used for emergency communication.

■ It may be possible to consider social media content as an additional means of complying with any open records policy in your area.

■ Social media platforms are constantly evolving. What is most popular today may not be tomorrow.

■ Remember that social media is just another tool in your toolbox that enables you to communicate with more people.

Emergency management agencies (EMAs) are using social media during all phases of disaster. After interviewing several representatives from EMAs, patterns emerged in how social media was used and what social media platforms were preferred. While there are several other platforms used among the EMAs, the findings presented here are based on what the representatives chose to discuss as it related to social media. Also, each of the representative interviewed used social media platforms in a variety of ways. Some were more active on social media than others. A few agencies expressed concern about not having full control over their social media sites, as they were run by another state or local government agency. Other agencies were able to delegate the maintenance of their social media site to more than 10 employees. Even though social media platforms are just another tool to disseminate information to the public, these platforms allow emergency managers to engage in two-way (or direct) communication with the general public and others with access and functional needs. ▲