

## Tactical Uses of Social Media in Emergency Management<sup>1</sup>

The FEMA Course **Social Media in Emergency Management** largely covers better practices that are strategic in nature. This list is intended to address tactical uses of social media in emergency management. While some tactics may be used during all phases of an emergency, others may be specific to one or more phases of an emergency or particular to a kind of social media platform or social media site.

Improving the effectiveness and reach of your social media strategies requires a commitment to developing relationships in this medium with the public. We can make better use of social media by realizing that every post, every tweet, every share, every plus is an opportunity to learn what others appreciate and how it can have a positive impact on their lives. Following these set of tactical guidelines can help you make LEARNING POP!

***Note:** This list of social media tactical uses in emergency management is not meant to be an exhaustive list of all those in use nor is it meant as a static list, recognizing that emergency management practices associated with social media are constantly evolving. It is strongly suggested that these tactics be reviewed and evaluated for their effectiveness on an ongoing basis and as social media platforms change and new features and tools enter the market.*

**L -- Listen.** The first and most important step in building a successful social media presence is listening.

- Learn the language of Social Media before an event. If your agency is not familiar with social media, then learn the associated jargon now, before an emergency strikes. The last thing you want to be doing during an event is trying to figure out what a retweet is or how to read a tweet<sup>2</sup>.
  - Find out more about hashtags and Twitter use at:  
<http://support.twitter.com/articles/49309-what-are-hashtags-symbols>
  - Find out more about acronyms on Twitter: <http://tinyurl.com/7tb2qxd>

There is a list of common Twitter hashtags in general use for emergency management, both in discussion on this topic and general preparedness, included at the end of this document.

---

<sup>1</sup> This list of tactical better practices in social media use for emergency management was culled from several sources referenced in this document. It is largely based on a blogpost by Mark Chubb, Interim Fire Chief, Woodinville Fire & Rescue .

<sup>2</sup> From <http://idisaster.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/top-7-lessons-on-sm-from-la-arson-fire-event/> based on the experience of the L.A. Arson Watch Task Force

**Course Title:** Social Media in Emergency Management

**Course#:** IS-042

- Learn what interests others and how they engage one another is essential to gaining acceptance from other social media users.
  - One of the most important ways of showing your interest is in following and *friending* others online who share your interests.
  - Most social media users find few things more annoying than finding their stream filled with messages from social media dilettantes, so limit the number of messages you send and spread them out so others feel they can get a word in edge-wise.
  - Use your social media presence to gauge public sentiment and information needs, then post what the public is asking for.
- Keep track of information shared about your agency to help detect rumors and misinformation quickly and make it easier to correct misinformation before it spreads. During all phases of emergency management, but in particular during a disaster response, communication needs to be tracked<sup>3</sup>:
  - Track blogs via Google Blogs and Google Alerts, aggregate on Google Reader.
  - Track traditional media through Google News and aggregate on Google Reader again.
  - Identify keywords and hashtags (#) on Twitter that are relevant to the incident. Use tools such as hashtags.org, Twubs, Trendsmap, Kurrently, Social Mention and more.
  - Determine where your followers are, what's trending near you and other location-based searches through tools such as: Trendsmap, TwitterMap, or Monitter.
  - Monitor trends, hashtags and tweets with tools such as Hootsuite, Tweetdeck, Monitter, Netvibes, Tweetgrid and others.
- For verifying crowd-sourced data see the following report by Patrice Cloutier, one of the leaders in social media emergency management field:
 

<http://www.crowdsourcing.org/document/verifying-crowdsourced-social-media-reports-for-live-crisis-mapping-an-introduction-to-information-forensics/8811>

**E — Share Experiences.** Really, nobody wants to know what you had for lunch today. But they just might find your choice of lunch-spot interesting if you have something to say about the service, quality or atmosphere where you dine. In other words, share the experience not just the event.

- Keep information short and to the point but keep it interesting. Post information that's relevant, timely and actionable; always include a link back to your agency's Website and other agency social media platforms.
- For blogs during the non-emergency phase and for preparedness, people are much more interested in how something made you feel than what you did. Give them something to relate to, and they will come back for more.

**A -- Ask.** Everybody has an opinion, but nobody has all the answers. Questions make us think.

- Like listening, asking questions gives others the opportunity to offer insights and experiences and shows members of your network that you value their opinions. Making social media interactions true conversations requires give and take. Questions make it clear you want feedback and do a better job of stimulating thoughtful responses than even the most provocative statements.

---

<sup>3</sup> This list was gathered and edited from Emergency 2.0 Wiki  
[http://emergency20wiki.org/wiki/index.php/Monitoring#Monitoring\\_the\\_emergency](http://emergency20wiki.org/wiki/index.php/Monitoring#Monitoring_the_emergency)

**R -- Repeat.** If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then repeating, sharing and extending the reach of what others have to say is a very close second. Social media demonstrates just how small and interconnected our world is. We tend to repeat and share only those things that resonate most deeply with our core beliefs and attitudes. And authentic, interesting, intimate, or moving images and messages only achieve universal appeal through widespread dissemination across the web of social networks we inhabit.

- During an emergency make sure to repeat critical information every so often as the life of a tweet is very short.
- Share critical information from partner agencies in a timely fashion. Remember that speed trumps accuracy.

**N -- News.** The reach of traditional media has become increasingly limited as each of us and those with whom we connect becomes a source of information about what's happening and what it means. We still rely on others to stay in touch with parts of our world beyond our reach, but we no longer assume that traditional sources and mainstream media have any particular advantage over ordinary people.

- Since Twitter only allows for 140 characters, this helps tailor short, simple, factual statements that can be readily approved. Forget word-smithing: stick to the facts and get the info out-the-door.
- As we learned from the earthquake in Haiti, during an emergency assume that communication will be limited. While still getting your message out on as many platforms as possible, some social media platforms may not function, so you also want to focus your communication within the constraints of those possible limitations. Take into consideration that on Twitter messages longer than 140 characters will be truncated; make sure to make Twitter messages SMS compatible by keeping them simple and to the point, including only critical information. If the message is longer than one tweet, then reference that the two or more tweets are connected.

**I -- Insight.** As noted above, hard, cold facts have their place, but people are more likely to relate to your insights if they shed light on the meaning or impact of an event as opposed to simply offering a restatement of the already available facts. This applies doubly to those instances when those facts are in or of themselves novel, neglected or otherwise surprising.

**N -- eNlarge.** Just as others' insights offer a glimpse into the meaning of small details we might otherwise overlook, we also need others to help us keep things in context or put them in the proper perspective. Despite the tendency of social media to amplify things that might otherwise seem incredibly trivial, social media does an incredibly good job of connecting us and others to a wider sense of what's valuable, important or even transcendent.

- Follow partner agencies, organizations, and the media, as well as community influencers and leaders. Often those you follow will in turn follow you. Following others can help grow your group of followers, making it easier to disseminate information quickly.

**When working in a Joint Command/multi-agency put systems in place for a social media presence before an event<sup>4</sup>.**

---

<sup>4</sup> From <http://idisaster.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/top-7-lessons-on-sm-from-la-arson-fire-event/> based on the experience of the L.A. Arson Watch Task Force

**Course Title:** Social Media in Emergency Management  
**Course#:** IS-042

- Agencies work hard to establish trust with their constituents and audiences, particularly on social media platforms, so there could be fear that joining under one name would diminish not only their presence but their ability to highlight their contribution to the response effort. These concerns can be ameliorated beforehand if they are understood and addressed. It is also important for all the agencies involved to understand the potential rewards and benefits of working under one name.
- Establish joint accounts before an event occurs. If you use these accounts each time for similar events, then public familiarity with them will rise.

**G -- Gratitude.** One of the ways social media achieves its mass appeal and ability to influence what we think and how we act is through its ability to facilitate reciprocity. The act of engaging others is, in and of itself, a way of saying thanks for connecting and sharing your world with me. Of course, it still doesn't hurt to say thank you from time-to-time.

**Public**—Trust the Public and Encourage their Tech Readiness.

- Trust that the public, who are proficient in these tools, will do the right thing most of the time. The public will answer each other's questions, often before you even have a chance to respond and will also shout down people who make really stupid or insulting comments. This can allow a government agency to simply ignore this kind of behavior. However, it is still prudent to have a take-down policy stated on your "info" tab that describes how comments will be handled if they do cross the line.
- Get the word out to the public about social media access to your communication. For non-emergency communications, encourage the public to use text messaging, e-mail, or social media instead of making voice calls on cell phones to avoid tying up voice networks. Data-based services like texts and emails are less likely to experience network congestion. They can also use social media to post status updates to let family and friends know they are okay. They can also use resources such as the American Red Cross's Safe and Well program.
- In addition to standard personal and household preparedness, an important component is tech readiness. See the following list on how the public can prepare:  
<http://www.ready.gov/get-tech-ready>

**Prepare**—During an emergency be prepared to staff 24/7 and have your communications strategy ready.

- When planning for a social media presence, include staffing measures for 24/7, even if that means using volunteer services or partnering with other agencies. Facebook and Twitter are a beehive of activity by the public and reporters. It is preferable to be on those platforms in order to not only provide information, but also to monitor the conversation. Make sure employees have access to social media from their desktop computer and mobile means (smartphone or mobile laptops).

Make sure that you have prepared messages for all hazards that require only event specific information to be added and then sent out. Developing some predefined hashtags and keywords to use for a type of hazard. For example Jeff Phillips, Emergency Management Coordinator, Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, New Mexico has established some set hashtags for emergency communication such as #NMEM, #NMFire, #NMStorm and #NMwx.

Using some of the aggregating sites referenced in the course for multiple platforms can help with this and to prime the pump so when you have to push out emergency messages to multiple platforms, you will be ready.

## **Twitter Hashtags Related to Social Media for Emergency Management<sup>5</sup>**

### General Hashtags

#SMEM = Social Media & Emergency Management [Used to share info on the intersection between social media & emergency management. You may see articles shared, questions posed and broad information-sharing.]

#SMEMChat = Used during Friday one-hour conversations on Twitter between 12:30p-1:30ap EST

#EM = Emergency Management

#EGov or #OGov = Electronic Government or Open Government

#Gov20 = Government 2.0 references government use of online tools, broader than

### Emergency Management

#HSEM = Homeland Security Emergency Management (discussion underway about using this instead of SMEM to designate incident underway)

#SM = Social Media

#WX = Weather-Specific Tweets (for state-specific, these will be preceded by state initials).

#2BeeRdy = Grassroots Preparedness Website at <http://2BeeReady.org>

#CoEMS = Chronicles of EMS

Conference & Association Hashtags

#NEMA = National Association of Emergency Management

#IAEM = International Association of Emergency Management

#UASI = Urban Area Security Initiative

#VSMWG = Virtual Social Media Working Group (w/ DHS Science & Technology Directorate)

#IAEMETC = IAEM Emerging Tech Committee

In order to facilitate further discussion, FEMA created the following hashtags:

#imprepared used to encourage individuals and families to get prepared; #kidsfiresafety used to encourage parents to practice fire safety tips;

#howihelp (in partnership with the ARC) used to encourage people to talk about how they help their neighbors and communities.

---

<sup>5</sup> List of Hashtags courtesy of Cheryl Bledsoe, Emergency Management Division Manager at the Clark Regional Emergency Services Agency <http://www.sm4em.org/active-hashtags/>