

ORGANIZATION OF EMERGENCY MANAGERS CANADA
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MORNING PRESENTATION
Social Media Briefing

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has added a new dimension to the way communities, and people the world over, access and contribute to information. For many, the idea of waiting for the newspaper or sitting down to watch the six-o'clock news is obsolete; rather, users with internet-connected computers, smartphones, and tablets, can access any information in real-time. Further, and for the first time since the dawn of the media empire, that information is no longer transmitted unilaterally from the top down; every user partaking in social media networks can share their own thoughts, information, and commentary—importantly including images, audio and video. These new realities have forever changed the way individuals and communities stay informed and have created a public and international forum for publishing personal ideas and personal content from portable personal devices anywhere in the world.

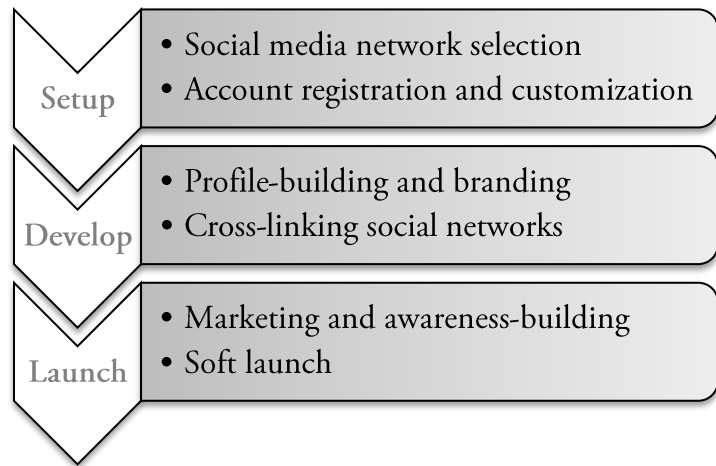
The implications here for emergency management agencies are profound for two reasons: first, when the timeliness of information can mean the difference between life and death, being able to reach a wide audience with critical updates in microseconds instead of hours translates directly into safer communities and a great potential to mitigate the risk to human life with instant warnings and instructions; second, because fear and panic can easily breed mistrust, and because uncertain situations tend to invite an insidious host of rumours and distortions of truth, the communal element of social media affords emergency planners the opportunity to monitor trending public thoughts and opinions in order promptly to allay uncertainty, correct misinformation, and build trust.

This briefing will detail the way forward for a small emergency management organization to enter the realm of social media in order to benefit most fully from the possibilities it affords. It will recommend the use of specific social media platforms best suited for emergency planning and response efforts. And it will outline the types of information that can be provided on those platforms in order best to serve emergency organizations and the people they strive to protect.

GETTING STARTED

If printed media is an organization's (or an individual's) comfort zone, then making the leap to the domain of social media will likely seem daunting. In this case, always remember two things: 1) social media is engineered to be easy, fun, and very forgiving—so don't let it scare you too much; and 2) in the end, your efforts will help to save lives.

Getting started is just a matter of choosing which sites will best suit the needs of the public and the emergency organization and then signing up for an account. That process is as easy for a company as it is for a child; in fact, it is literally the exact same process. The only difference is that you won't be



tweeting about butterflies and rainbows—unless they're a threat to public safety. All you'll need to sign up is a username that represents your organization, an email address, and a password.

Once your account is set up—and that shouldn't take more than ten minutes—you can customize it with your organization's information, including contact names, telephone numbers, important graphics, logos, and branding. For example, you might include a short version of the organization's mission statement. You should also post links to your other social media pages, as you build them, so that users will always have access on the platform of their choice (e.g. one might prefer your webpage on a desktop computer but use Twitter on a smartphone).

Finally, build awareness through online and offline advertising to develop a user base. The gradual inflow of these users will represent a social media soft launch, which will enable you to work out glitches and modify content based on feedback from a small (but growing) group.

SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

So what are the social media networks? There are thousands of them, from local university networks to global behemoths, but there's no need to worry about them all. The market monopolization of a select few has made this part easy. For example, Facebook—indisputably the largest and most ubiquitous social network—launched on February 4, 2004 and currently has 1.01 billion active users (i.e. who log on at least once every month), and 604 million among them (or roughly 60%) access Facebook from a mobile device.¹ Twitter, another goliath in the social media world, has 200 million active users who generate an impressive average of 340 million tweets and 1.6 billion search queries per day.² With those staggering figures in mind, it becomes clear that it isn't necessary for an organization to be a member of many social media networks in order to reach a broad audience; it merely has to select which networks will best serve its interests and develop those connections fully. To that end, and with the above in mind, the following outlets are recommended.



WordPress Website: A website is an essential component of online communications because, unlike other outlets, the content it can display is limitless. A website can be configured to display as much or as little information as the user wants, in any format, in any order. It can host audio, video, and interactive media. And it can be set up to display different content to different users—for example, by having users create accounts and choose what information they care about, by automatically detecting a user's geographic location, or by determining what kind of device the visitor is using (e.g. Apple computer, PC desktop, laptop, tablet, smartphone). But administering a website can be a technical task, and understanding HTML code is the most minimum requirement, to say nothing of more complicated computer languages such as PHP and Java or databases like SQL.

¹ Yahoo! Finance, *Number of Active Users at Facebook Over the Years*, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/number-active-users-facebook-over-years-214600186--finance.html> (October 2012).

² Ingrid Lunden, *Analyst: Twitter Passed 500M Users in June 2012, 140M of Them in US; Jakarta 'Biggest Tweeting' City*, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/number-active-users-facebook-over-years-214600186--finance.html> (July 2012).

That's where WordPress saves the day. Setting up a website with WordPress takes a moderate amount of technical skill, but nothing that would exceed the capacities of an average tech-savvy employee. And, once WordPress is set up on your domain (e.g. <http://disaster.info>) with desired formatting and layout, all updates can be added through an admin panel sporting a friendly graphical user interface (i.e. you can click on stuff and the software will do what you want). To boot, the WordPress community has developed hundreds of applications and widgets that can be embedded onto the website with just a few clicks. So, for example, if you wanted to start collecting the email addresses of your visitors for promotional or alerting purposes, you could install a widget that prompts users to enter their email address for storage in an automated database. Other add-ons include customizable newsfeed tickers, current time displays, weather graphics, RSS feed aggregators, sitemap and index page generators, and automated search engine optimization, among many others.

An emergency management organization's webpage will contain the most complete set of information available online. It will also be linked to all of the other social media networks, pointing to the site's Facebook page and Twitter feed, and similarly displaying the organization's tweets on a panel of the website. As the organization's most important presence online, the webpage must look professional and visually appealing; it must be glitch-free no matter what device is accessing it; the content it displays must be professionally-written and absolutely free of spelling or grammatical errors; and it must always be kept up to date, especially during an ongoing emergency event. During an emergency, credibility means everything, and not meeting the highest international standards for professionalism and functionality is a categorical failure.



Facebook Page: A Facebook page is a lot like a webpage, but there is nothing technical about it, and there is a lot less you can do with it. What's the point, then? It's embedded in the Facebook social network (with it's 1.01 billion users), so it's easily accessible, 'like'-able, and shareable. A Facebook page will contain text, images, videos, audio, and links, as needed and desired, displayed in newest-first chronological order. Update, integrate, go.



Twitter: Since its launch in 2006, it has become near impossible to witness or hear about any kind of emergency and not also hear about the role of Twitter. This innovative social media tool allows users to post short, 140-character updates called “tweets” to their accounts, which can be found by other users searching by category (“hashtag”) or by subscribing to (“following”) that user’s updates. In short, Twitter allows users to find and read short messages containing information they care about and post short messages of their own, which in turn can be read by other users. Of course, audio and video can be tweeted as well, and thus Twitter is often the medium for first-hand eyewitness reporting as bystanders record events from smartphones and upload the footage to their feeds.

There is no limit to the kinds of information that one can post on Twitter, so appropriate categorization is very important. This is accomplished by adding hashtags to a post, which are marked by a preceding pound sign (hash) symbol, without a space. (Brevity is key, though, as the tags *do* count towards the 140-character limit—so trying to use a hashtag along the lines of #emergencymanagementorganizationofeasternontario³ might require the rest of your message to be a little too succinct.)

Twitter is the best tool for reaching a broad social media audience instantly. As soon as a tweet is posted, followers can get an alert on their cellphones or other connected devices. Information is necessarily pithy and is thus likely to be read. For instance, a tweet could read: “Ottawa Evacuation Order: Leave city now. #ottawaemergency”.⁴ Of course, users can always refer to the website or Facebook page (preferably after they’ve evacuated the city, in this case), but the important thing is that the most critical information is distributed widely and immediately.

Signing up for a Twitter account takes all of five minutes. Branding and customizing it is equally fast. There is no excuse for an emergency management organization not to use Twitter (#do.)

³ That’s 47 characters, in case you were thinking about counting.

⁴ Spaces count too, by the way. This one’s 57 characters, all in—room to spare!

INFORMATION

It is important to remember that social media networks are not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are a powerful tool to be used in accomplishing a broader objective—the efficient spread of accurate information critical to public safety. To that end, the following types of information will be shared on each social media platform.

Website:

- Mission Statement & Values
- General information on personal best practices and emergency preparedness
- Contacts at the Emergency Management Office
- Emergency status: None, Possible, Impending, In Progress
- Information and instructions during an emergency (when status is “in progress”)
- Important resources (e.g., local police, fire, municipal services, predetermined shelters)
- Links to the Facebook page and Twitter feed

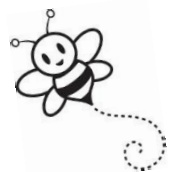
Facebook Page:

- Mission Statement & Values (abbreviated version)
- Quick tips (“wall posts”) on personal best practices and emergency preparedness
- Information and instructions during an emergency (when status is “in progress”)
- Links to the website and Twitter feed

Twitter:

- Regular tweets about personal best practices and emergency preparedness
- Very short updates and instructions during an emergency (when status is “in progress”)
- Links to the website and Facebook page

Tip: On the internet, your target audience will always have the attention span of a bumblebee. Do not include unnecessary information. Never use ten words when you can use five.



THE FOUR PHASES

When we think of social media for emergency management, we tend to think of it in use *during* an emergency. To be sure, effective communication and social media are most important when an emergency is in progress. However (we hope), most of the time that will not be the case; the vast majority of the time, an emergency management organization is in mitigation and preparedness mode. Therefore, it is important during these times, to keep social media networks alive so that they can be readily put to use when an emergency does occur. The following are the suggested uses for social media in each of the four phases of emergency management.

Mitigation

- Educating the public to the possibility of various kinds of emergencies
- Inciting people to imagine what an emergency would be like and how they might react

Preparedness

- Encouraging people to foresee their individual and familial needs during an emergency
- Incentivizing personal-level emergency planning and resource procurement

Response

- Providing up-to-the-minute information about the emergency and response efforts
- Alerting the public to immediate threats and issuing appropriate instructions

Recovery

- Informing the public of resources available to help them until normalcy is restored
- Keeping the public up-to-date on recovery effort actions and plans
- Reminding the city to stay strong and perseverant; morale is a struggle in and of itself
- Expressing gratitude for the emergency responders, workers, and volunteers

