

2012 Totems

Category: F-4 – Technology: Social Media

Entry Name: Emergency Management via Facebook



COVINGTON
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Project Statement

In January 2012, *Snowmageddon* hit the Pacific Northwest, followed by dangerous ice and wind storms. The City of Covington used Facebook as its primary communications platform, but instead of just posting updates after the storm hit, the City embraced the opportunity to use Facebook before the storms, during the storms and after the storms. What resulted wasn't just an increase in Facebook followers, but a forum for relationship-building, crime fighting and dispatching workers to needed areas.

Situation/Planning

In January 2012, experts were predicting one of the worst winter storms to hit the Pacific Northwest in decades. After a warmer than normal winter, a storm expecting to leave from four to 14 inches of snow was on its way. Reporters in the Seattle area are known to overhype weather-related events; so many people were getting prepared for the impending storm, yet not getting prepared enough for what was actually coming. And what actually came was record-setting and destructive.

Coined *Snowmageddon* by locals and the media, the winter storm packed several punches with the bulk of the storm hitting January 18 and 19. In addition to the high amount of snowfall, it was followed by a strong windstorm and followed again by an ice storm. The winds caused some damage to trees and power lines, but the ice storm wreaked the most havoc. Trees and power lines came down across the region, blocking roads and damaging cars and houses. Hundreds and thousands of people lost power, some for up to a week. Additionally, the storms halted sanitation services, closed public offices, many businesses and area schools for days.

Intended Goals/Outcomes

- To pre-warn citizens about the impending weather-related issues to help them prepare properly.
- To provide citizens with as much useful information as possible including road conditions, power outages, school closures, shelter information and more.
- To get reports from citizens about conditions in their respective areas of the city to help triage problems.

Implementation/Execution

The city had a few days warning in advance of the storm, so public works crews began planning for the worst. We didn't have time to notice people through any of our printed publications about the storm and how the City operates during such times, so we turned to Facebook as an opportunity to get the word out. We pushed out information before the storms about what to expect and tips for being prepared. We posted important information during the storms like photos of road conditions, statuses of power outages and street clearing, school closures, and more. And, after the storm we provided information about debris clean-up and power restoration.

The staff in charge of posting to the city's Facebook page was also impacted by the storm and was unable to get into the office some days. That staff utilized Facebook remotely through all hours of the day and night to ensure timely dissemination of information and responses to citizen questions and posts. In addition to the informational posts, we requested status reports from followers to help gauge the problems out in the community and guide public works crews to areas they didn't know about. Followers were happy to engage in conversations with the City and other fellow residents.

Evaluation

During the pre-storm, storm, and post-storm periods (January 12-31) we made 52 storm-related posts to our Facebook page. During normal times, we would post four to five times a week, but we averaged just over 17 posts per week during the event. We were able to make eight posts in the pre-storm period to warn of the impending storm, give tips on driving in the snow, and post photos of the early road conditions.

Facebook was very helpful in providing the City with details of what was happening out in the community. Facebook fans voluntarily offered up information about snow amounts, downed trees, power outages and even storm-related crimes including alerting police about generator thefts allowing them to increase patrols in those areas.

	On Average	During Event
# of Posts	16	52
# of Comments	10	280
Total Reach	5,119	17,213
Total Impressions	15,756	57,331
Viral Reach	51	934
Viral Impressions	144	3,397
New Followers	14	74

While the city normally allows feedback and conversations to occur on its Facebook page, unlike other city's who prevent comments from being posted, the January storm opened a much larger dialogue between the city and its residents. Even after the storm, residents are now much more likely to engage in conversations with the city on Facebook than before the storm.

Summary

The City's use of Facebook for emergency management in this situation was a success. Followers raved on Facebook about the information they were receiving and thanked the City for keeping them updated and giving them the opportunity to converse with us. Many followers even reported that their only form of communication and receiving information was via the City's Facebook page on their smart phones because there was no power and no way to drive anywhere to find power.

FEEDBACK:

"City of Covington! YOU GUYS ARE THE BEST!!! We live in the very best community!!! THANK you so much for keeping us updated and informed and most of all offering encouraging support through this horrific ordeal!!! Thanks to having my laptop charged and Verizon wireless 4G – I've been able to pop online to stay current as to the goings on around us. Thank you so much for the 'Lifeline.'" –Anna Rhodes

"City of Covington – I do a lot of social media, and let me tell you... you folks are doing a GREAT job with your FB site and the way you are disseminating information!" – Steven Banks