

2012 PRSA Puget Sound Totem Awards
Category: U Crisis Communications
Entry: Snowmageddon / January 2012 Storm
Organization: Puget Sound Energy

Background & Research: PSE is Washington's oldest energy company, serving 1.1 million electric and 750,000 natural gas customers in 11 counties, covering more than 6,000 square miles. Following the 2006 Hanukkah Eve Storm, a full communications audit was conducted, both internally and by a third party consultant, KEMA. Findings noted: the Communications Team needed to respond more quickly to the media, needed to provide more information to customers, and needed to be more responsive using emerging media. In 2006, PSE didn't tell its story effectively and the media found people willing to paint the picture about how they were dealing with an extended power outage – it wasn't pretty.

Planning: We were challenged to protect our reputation and ensure customers knew we cared about them and that our crews were working hard around the clock to restore power and keep them safe. We improved our crisis communications plan by: 1) revising our crisis communications / emergency response plans to include a social media strategy; 2) improving our online communications plan; 3) identifying and training contract photographers to deploy; and 4) improving our overall proactive media response. We worked to improve our processes, using mock storm exercises to hone our skills and strengthen our response plan.

Execution: Communications Response to Snowmageddon: As the January 2012 storm approached, we: 1) posted emergency preparedness and safety messages on our website and via Facebook and Twitter; 2) encouraged customers to keep outage reporting information close at hand and to let us know of emergency situations – safety is priority one; 3) provided media briefings to alert customers to be ready for possible power outages; 4) called in 30 extra line crews and stationed them to be ready to respond quickly to outages; and 5) shared with media and through all outlets that we were prepared to manage the potential snow storm.

Jan. 18 a light fluffy snow fell – not a problem. Then, an ice storm hit, followed by a windstorm, two days later another wind storm, and more snow. In 12 hours, we went from having the situation under control to calling in line crews from around the country to help. Some areas of our territory received four inches of ice; the trees gave way to ice, snow and wind, transmission lines snapped, substations were crippled. Crews from 18 states arrived to assist. On the fourth day, a landslide in Bellevue resulted in a ruptured natural gas pipeline.

Damage by the numbers: 67 transmission lines; 1,077 cross arms; 285 overhead transformers; 87 miles of wire; 74 substations; 209 power poles, and a natural gas pipeline. Estimated cost: \$73 million. More than 478,000 customers lost power; many multiple times; some were without power for eight days.

Using Traditional and Social Media to Tell Our Story – and Protect Our Reputation: In a major event, such as a devastating storm, customers will generally stay calm and understanding for two to three days – after that, if they don't have electricity, nerves are strained and angers flare. We knew this was a multi-day event and we knew we risked feeling the tide turn from supportive to frustrated and angry quickly. The Communications Team rallied quickly, staffing the Emergency Coordination Center, responding to media requests for information and updating our internal and external websites.

We launched a “window shade” on our website, alerting customers that our service area was experiencing damaging storms resulting in widespread power outages. We launched the Service Alert Map on our website, which showed outages by region and provided estimated restoration times. We deployed in-house and contract photographers; we used Flickr to post photos of downed power lines mangled in trees, road closures, power poles toppled by old-growth trees, and PSE crews working through the night in the snow and ice to restore power. The morning following the ice storm, when customer calls were at their highest level, PSE's Call Center phone system failed! Customers posted information on Facebook and Twitter – including addresses, phone numbers, and account numbers. Concerned for their safety, we worked to identify an email address for customers to report their power outages; it was successful. We broadcast the email address using traditional and social media. Once the Call Center phone lines were in service, center reps reported that calls were at manageable levels and that they were receiving more reports via email than via phones. Center reps were able to focus on answering emergency calls, rather than taking power outage reports.

We realized that if we didn't tell the story about how we were working hard to restore power, the media would tell stories of people in cold, dark homes angry that they had no electricity. Instead of waiting for reporters to call us, we reached out to them, scheduling in-field briefings with our officers and scheduling on-site interviews with our CEO, Kimberly Harris. On the third day, as the tide of public sentiment started to turn negative, we set up a media event

with Gov. Gregoire; wearing a PSE hardhat, the governor assessed damage while talking with our CEO. We assigned staff members to track and provide crew location information so we could direct the media where to get footage of our crews working. We provided proactive media outreach from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day for eight days. There were stories about angry people in cold homes; more often than not, those stories were immediately followed by shots of our crews working in the snow and ice to install power poles, stringing new wire, fixing substations, hiking up snowy mountain passages to reach our damaged facilities. We were painting the picture of our restoration efforts and our customers were supportive. The Olympia / Thurston County area was hit hardest; we opened our customer service office over the weekend to service customers, we donated food and water to warming centers and shelters and assigned staff to work in the shelters and answer questions about power restoration.

Social Media Strategy – A Team is Formed to Respond: When the ice storm hit, our social media activity caught fire – what’s going on, how do I report a power outage, where do I report downed power lines, how long before my lights come back on, what do I do if I smell a natural gas leak, where are the crews working, why are my neighbors lights on but not mine – we were seeing posts every three seconds and knew we needed to be responsive. We needed a team of people to help our two team members who typically respond to social media. We put out a call for help and within two hours, 27 staff members responded! We drafted guidelines, talking points, FAQs, and conducted a conference call training session for our newly deputized social media team. Team members were scheduled to work shifts and were given alphabetized assignments so they interacted with the same customers. The system worked well; our customers responded overwhelmingly positive to the personalized attention. Social media responses were posted from 5 a.m. until comments on our social media sites died down, typically after midnight. We tracked comments and trends daily. We posted photos on our Flickr site to show damage to our system, as well as crews working to restore power. The response was tremendous. We tracked more than 1.5 million hits the first week and nearly two million hits by the end of the second week; this site typically sees 200 hits a week. People left comments of appreciation for the crews and the work they were doing; some delivered cookies and coffee.

The day before the storm, we had about 1,000 Facebook followers; three days later, we had more than 7,000 followers commenting, lamenting, complaining, and thanking PSE’s crews and staff. The comments were overwhelmingly positive. We posted updated information on Facebook and Twitter – local traditional and social media picked up our posts and used them in newscasts, taking some pressure off our very busy rotating media officers.

Evaluation: Was The Effort Successful?

- Two weeks after the storm, a survey of PSE customers was conducted: 76% of respondents believed PSE did a good job responding to the storm and providing necessary information.
- Facebook followers increased 465% ; Twitter followers increased 51%; PSE daily web usage increased 278%
- Photos posted on Flickr generated two million hits to the site within two weeks, a 400% increase in views.
- PSE Twitter posts were re-tweeted by customers and local and regional media, helping us to tell our story, share important safety information, and stay connected with our customers.
- Overwhelmingly positive media coverage was garnered before, during, and after the storm. An editorial cartoon in the one of the hardest hit areas was captioned, “Real life heroes.”
- PSE’s internal After-Action Report declared that communications to customers was significantly improved, resulting in protecting the reputation of the company. The formation of the crew locators and the social media team were noted as “game changers.”
- A third-party KEMA Report audit stated, “The communications situation was the most dramatic improvement between the Hanukkah Eve Windstorm and the January 2012 storm (referring to the PSE response overall). These improvements occurred across all channels in which PSE communicated to customers, stakeholders, and the media. The recommendations and actions taken since the Hanukkah Eve storm proved to be very effective – and the results impacted all aspects of the storm response.” “PSE’s use of social media during Snowmageddon created an industry leading practice,” “PSE’s strategy to proactively engage the media and ‘tell all’ was successful,” “Executive visibility during the storm was a key factor in the media’s treatment of PSE and in the motivation of employees,” “PSE’s use of the internet/social media was a ‘game changer’ in this event by providing a means to control the story.”
- Our team was invited to present our story at a national EUCI, Inc. utility conference in July. The conference brochure is included in the Appendix.
- “Chartwell’s Best Practices for Utilities & Energy Companies” published a feature story about how PSE managed communications during and after the storm and protected the company’s reputation; the story is included in the Appendix.
- Communications Team director co-led an electric utility webinar with JD Power & Associates to share lessons learned and, specifically, how our team protected the company’s reputation during the storm period.
- As a result of the Social Media Team success, we developed a training program and recruited a team of PSE employees to respond in emergencies. That plan is included in this notebook.