

Social Networking: Web-based applications for Public Information

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Officially, social media is “an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos, and audio.”

<http://www.wikipedia.org>

Social media and Web 2.0 use uses many technologies and forms, including RSS and other syndicated web feeds, blogs, wikis, photo-sharing, video-sharing, podcasts, social networking, social bookmarking, mashups, widgets, virtual worlds, micro-blogs, and more.

www.mashable.com

<http://www.howstuffworks.com>

What are these applications?

BLOGS: these are some free applications. You can add pictures, your twitter feed, video using widgets that are available for free.

www.blogspot.com If you have a Gmail account you already have access to blogspot/blogger.

www.Tumblr.com

www.wordpress.com

www.typepad.com

www.posterous.com This site is crazy simple and is picture or video driven.

Twitter

www.twitter.com Actually a micro-blog. You put out information 140 characters at a time. This is simple and can be done from your cell phone. You can use this application to update your Facebook Fan Page.

Facebook

www.facebook.com The most popular social media site worldwide. For your office you would create a Fan Page not a regular page.

YouTube

www.youtube.com. This is a video sharing site. You create your own channel.

Use Of Social Media Tools At FEMA

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Social Media tools are becoming increasingly more engaged and important in crisis management informatics. These Internet and mobile-based tools offer like-minded (and mutually interested) social communities a locality-based, sector-based, incident-based platform for exchange of potentially life-saving information.

Why FEMA is involved in social media

FEMA is engaged in the expanding world of Web 2.0 communications specifically through its use of existing social media tools and through incorporating compatibility into its website and communications strategies. These tools provide opportunities to communicate directly with stakeholders, partners, the general public and the media officially and rapidly as part of the next generation of online communications. FEMA's venture into social media is being coordinated through its office of External Affairs, and provides supplemental products to enhance current outreach objectives.

FEMA's goals with social media are: to provide timely and accurate information related to disaster preparedness response and recovery; to present a human, public face to the agency; provide the public with transparency into the agency's operations; and engage in a public dialogue that provides the appropriate forum for internal and external voices. External Affairs' social media ventures function as supplemental outreach, and appropriate channels for unofficial input.

FEMA External Affairs has been pragmatically adapting its communications efforts towards inclusion of social media since June, 2008. In fact, FEMA External Affairs, in coordination with the FEMA Office of Chief Counsel, was one of the first federal agencies to achieve a modified user agreement with Google in May, 2008, providing a working example for other federal agencies. It also broke new ground for a federal agency through its use of Twitter to host the first all access "press conference" through the tool. For the Twitter event, FEMA set new ground rules for federal engagement and provided its results online in a move to usher in full transparency www.fema.gov/media/2009/010909.shtm behind federal social media exchanges.

How FEMA is Involved

FEMA is expanding its use of web 2.0 tools to distribute external products by adapting existing information to current standards and applications. This includes direct text-based communications as well as broad-scope visual products that can be shared across platforms.

All off-network accounts (outside of the FEMA.gov domain) for FEMA social media carry the femainfocus look and feel. This provides consistency and accountability for non-network content in that the public and our partners can rest assured it is the authorized FEMA account and that the information is accurate.

Starting with YouTube as a platform to host and share videos, FEMA began capturing stories from disaster response and recovery efforts to explain the scope of its mission. Videos have ranged in subject from preparedness, response, and recovery to mitigation and explanations of how specific federal aid programs operate. The subjects, or voices, have been FEMA staff, state and local authorities, and individuals affected by disasters. The approach to these web videos was to capture the voice and perspective of the community involved in a disaster and present it as an opportunity to help educate others on FEMA's mission and programs.

FEMA has been using Twitter www.twitter.com/femainfocus since October, 2008 as a means to offer information about the agency's mission, efforts and perspective. The agency also launched its YouTube page www.youtube.com/fema in October, 2008 to provide stories about how its programs work in communities nationwide as they prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

Previous to the transition of the former agency leadership, Administrator Paulison participated in a media availability using FEMA's Twitter Account. The Administrator sent and received messages through the agency account to citizens utilizing the social media tool. The exchange was followed by staff, mass media, the American public and local/state emergency managers. Deputy Administrator Johnson participated in the agency's first Bloggers Roundtable in January, 2009. Both events offered greater transparency and a candid public interaction of senior level government employees addressing public queries.

Specific Social Media Tools

Apart from efforts on third party social networking sites, FEMA continues to grow its use of web 2.0 tools to improve content on the agency's website. The official FEMA website (www.fema.gov) completed a redesign of its multimedia site to enable better graphic display and end-user functionality. The new multimedia site replaces the agency's online "Radio Network" with Podcast capabilities, video sharing and other standard social media functions being integrated as part of this redesign. This builds on the mission to provide timely and accurate information in a format that can be easily transferred among public and private networks. By doing so, FEMA will have a greater opportunity to prepare the nation for disasters and provide information during disaster response and recoveries.

FEMA also promotes transparent communication and collaboration using Email and Web 2.0 technologies that allow any visitor to the FEMA website to register to receive updates across 86 important topic areas. Signup options are promoted on the homepage and across the website with "subscribe" links functioning as "add to cart" links might in the private sector. The site also provides robust collaboration with 15+ other agencies using a Web 2.0 mashup.

FEMA has also engaged in beta-tests, monitored, developed, and activated multiple third party tools, including the following:

- YouTube - Video service that provides FEMA opportunity to tell timely and accurate stories of its mission. Recently, the FEMA channel (www.youtube.com/fema) was used to help state partners host and share public service announcements, explain federal reimbursement process and mitigation efforts local to specific communities. These short videos provide access to the overall operation and offer an opportunity for the voices within the community to explain how programs affect, or don't affect, their lives.
- Twitter - Microblog that gives FEMA the opportunity to direct followers and users of the tool to specific information in a timely manner, such as during emergencies and disasters. Current followers of FEMA's account (www.twitter.com/femainfocus) are from the emergency management community, the media, and the general public. Twitter provides SMS capability for instant texting during disasters. FEMA also uses Twitter to supplement the efforts of state and local responders by rebroadcasting, or retweeting, posts from these partners. And FEMA uses Twitter to engage the general public in discussions on disaster preparedness, recovery process and mitigation tools.
- Widgets - Widgets provide data feeds through transportable well-defined web-based graphical interfaces. This is akin to a "box score" anyone can put on a website they use that is fed data from sources we define. Earlier this year, DHS launched a widget on its site that provided a feed of FEMA's response and recovery information related to Hurricane Gustav (www.dhs.gov/xprepresp/programs/gc_1220128923561.shtm). FEMA External Affairs has developed widgets for similar data. Current widgets can be found at www.fema.gov/help/widgets/ike_index.shtm. The real value of a widget is to provide specific, localized data in a specific reporting cycle for non-FEMA.gov sites to incorporate into their informational products. One example would be a "box score" of Public Assistance applicants for infrastructure projects and money disbursed related to a specific disaster that is updated automatically through validated internal sources and presented through a widget on a local newspaper or TV station's website.

- RSS - FEMA currently offers national-level RSS feeds that provide subscribers with automated updated information (www.fema.gov/help/rss.shtm). Apart from press release and disaster declaration information, subscribers can receive notifications on the issuance of new situation reports and photographs added to the official FEMA photolibrary.
- GoogleBooks - FEMA has been working with GoogleBooks to provide its published content in a free, easy to access format online. FEMA currently offers publications on preparedness, mitigation and its recovery programs in hard copy through its distribution warehouse. FEMA will be able to provide this content and future content on a broader scale by leveraging the technology and networking platform that Google provides.
- FaceBook - FEMA has been using its FaceBook account (www.facebook.com/fema) since May, 2009 to provide a forum for preparedness information and to engage the public with links and topics.

Recent Examples

FEMA has recently been using its social media tools to tell the complex story of its mission and to personalize the delivery of aid it provides to American communities. One topic of focus has been the debris removal issue along the Texas Gulf Coast following Hurricane Ike. Media reports slammed the agency for a perceived sluggish response. In truth, debris removal can be a fairly complex issue involving many factors and levels of government and private sector involvement: which means it takes time, money and a lot of planning.

FEMA External Affairs captured some of these stories on video and played the vignettes online to help demystify the process. One such vignette, titled "Working Dog Searches for Missing in Bolivar Debris" focused on the Texas-based fire and rescue team performing searches for human remains among the debris. Told honestly and with dignity by the local team lead, the short video achieved several important goals: explained FEMA's commitment to the families affected by the storm, depicted how we work with state and local partners, and showed the complexity of debris removal following major disasters.

Since its upload to the FEMA YouTube channel on December 19, more than 879 individuals have watched the "Working Dog Searches for Missing in Bolivar Debris" video. Overall, FEMA's YouTube site counts new subscribers every day and currently 17,644 individuals have logged on to view the 60 videos currently playing. These individuals can further play the videos by embedding them on their websites.

On Twitter, another social media tool which we use, comments have been positive to the videos in general. In fact, other users are promoting their presence from time to time as the subject matter relates to their interest. In regards to the specific video, one user not affiliated with the agency promoted it among his own network, saying, "A grave and serious video about missing people from Hurricane Ike: is.gd/cOrC. FEMA is important."

The Way Ahead

More collaborative tools and deeper integration of social networking practices into FEMA's communications plan will help it achieve its mission to help the nation prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. FEMA is also looking toward integrating new media or web 2.0 practices into its public communications through such functions as online GIS data and automated feeds for disaster specific information.

Concurrently, FEMA is working to implement social media tools to enhance internal collaboration. Organizational plans for internal communications focus on awareness and education for employees as well as facilitating dialogue.

As FEMA continues to develop its capabilities to communicate in new methods that leverage social networks, the focus of these messages will continue to be in line with the agency's mission of preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation for all hazards.