

Social media expands disaster response capabilities

The American Red Cross uses social media to better target relief and vital information for disaster survivors while mobilizing community support

Industry: Humanitarian Aid
Country: United States
Employees: 25,000
Website: redcross.org



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Suzy DeFrancis, Chief Public Affairs Officer, American Red Cross

Business need

The American Red Cross wanted to expand its social media capabilities to better engage communities day-to-day while responding faster and more effectively to disasters

Solution

To further support community engagement and disaster response, the agency added a third Digital Operations Center in San Jose, California

Benefits

- Enables more proactive social engagement and response to crisis situations
- Accelerates capacity to connect people with needed resources after disasters
- Improves identification of requirements in disaster areas

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In any given year, disasters are inevitable across the U.S. Most are caused by nature — floods, mudslides, tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and wildfires — although many can be started by people, such as house fires. Whatever the disaster, people usually suffer and are often left homeless and without food and water. Help can come from many sources, but primarily from government agencies and the American Red Cross.

Founded in 1881, the American Red Cross is one of but a few nonprofit agencies with a charter from the U.S. Congress. That includes giving relief to, and serving as a communication link between, members of the nation's armed forces and their families while also providing national and international disaster relief and mitigation.

Today the organization, based in Washington, D.C., has more than 25,000 employees. In the U.S., it operates through a network of nearly 500 local chapters and with the help of more than 340,000 volunteers. In addition to its chartered mission, the American Red Cross also conducts blood drives and training in health and safety. It uses the same technologies that help other large businesses and organizations operate efficiently and effectively, including social media.

Disaster opens new social media possibilities

The organization began using social media in the mid-2000s. It started blogging and monitoring various

social websites that were emerging then such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter. The goal was to engage the public in conversations about the American Red Cross and issues relevant to its mission. It also saw an opportunity to strengthen its relationships with volunteers and benefactors, large and small.

In 2010, when an earthquake devastated Haiti, the American Red Cross discovered two ways in which social media could be used in a much more powerful way. One was for fundraising. After launching its first-ever giving campaign using mobile phone texting, its plea for donations was retweeted 3.2 million times in 48 hours and the campaign raised more than \$32 million. Forty-two percent of the donors were under age 34.

The second revelation was how people were turning to social media both to relay eyewitness accounts of the disaster and to broadcast pleas for help. The American Red Cross staff rallied to manually verify this information and reroute it to rescue groups on the ground in Haiti. At the same time, the staff realized that they needed more robust technology and infrastructure to monitor and respond effectively to the massive amounts of incoming social data during a disaster.

Scaling social media to its fullest potential

“We began to concern ourselves with scaling our social media operations and expanding the limited scope of what we listened to on the social

web,” recalls Wendy Harman, director of information management and situational awareness for the American Red Cross. For guidance, the organization turned to NTT DATA Services, formerly Dell Services, a long-time corporate benefactor, and a company that has established itself as a leader in social media and digital

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marketing.

In 2012, after working closely for nearly a year with consultants from the Social Media and Digital Marketing Services team, the American Red Cross opened its first national Digital Operations Center as a social media command center. Located within its Disaster Operations Center at its Washington,

D.C. headquarters, the facility can be in the middle of the action when disasters strike.

Known by staff members as the “the DigiDOC,” the command center has served as the template for two additional facilities, one in Dallas, Texas, and the other in San Jose, California. All were designed and built with Dell’s financial support and modeled after NTT DATA Services’, formerly Dell Services’ own Social Media Listening Command Center. “The relationship between the Red Cross and NTT DATA Services, formerly Dell Services has been critical in helping the Red Cross use social media to carry out its disaster response mission,” says Suzy DeFrancis, chief public affairs officer for the American Red Cross

Listen nationally, respond locally

Each DigiDOC features multiple large monitor screens. The monitors display different data visualizations of relevant public conversations that are happening in real time on the social web. Social engagement team members in each DigiDOC monitor the stream of conversations using Social Studio, an application formerly called Radian6 that is now a part of the Salesforce Marketing Cloud suite. The team also compiles and publishes regular reports that help keep the organization’s management apprised of the sentiments and trends among the organization’s many stakeholders, including the

public, volunteers, benefactors, community partners and government agencies, especially regarding emergency response.

“With our social media command centers, we can support local chapters’ disaster response, too, by sharing conversations happening in their communities,” says Debbie Immel, regional chief development officer, American Red Cross. “NTT DATA Services, formerly Dell Services has had a huge impact on our crisis response.”

Turning up the volume

On an average day, the American Red Cross is mentioned as many as 7,000 times across all the social media channels it monitors. “That grows exponentially during disasters large and small,” Immel says. “During a disaster, people are increasingly taking to social media to express their fear, ask how they can help, or learn how to get help. Having a robust social listening program allows the Red Cross to give the public a seat at the table when we’re making disaster response decisions.”

Immel could choose almost any major U.S. disaster to show how the expanded and more sophisticated social media capabilities have improved the response of the American Red Cross. Citing one example, she says, “Before Superstorm Sandy made landfall several years ago, our DigiDOC social team distributed information urging people to download our free

Red Cross Hurricane app. This drove more than 400,000 downloads of this app and put vital preparedness information right in the palm of people’s hands.”

Getting help where needed faster

After the storm hit, the DigiDOC in Washington, D.C., monitored postings to “When our social engagement team can provide words of encouragement and useful information so people feel empowered to help themselves and others,... it’s like giving them a ‘digital hug.’” Debbie Immel, Regional Chief Development Officer, American Red Cross 4 its social media channels and identified specific areas where help was needed. That information was quickly relayed to government and Red Cross relief workers on the scene to get aid there faster than it might have otherwise. “After the storm, we collected and analyzed more than 2 million public social media posts, and then made significant adjustments in our services based on what we learned,” she says.

In another example, during an episode of especially devastating Oklahoma tornadoes, the DigiDOCs and their social engagement teams, plus Digital Volunteers from across the country, made a big difference in the American Red Cross response. Together they collected more than 800,000 posts and directly responded to hundreds of them

through Facebook and Twitter. “In one instance during the Oklahoma tornado response, social media led us to a small, rural community that no one knew had sustained damage,” Immel says. “Our volunteers were able to get help to that community just hours after seeing the reports on social media.”

One of the most important components of the American Red Cross social listening program has been the emotional support provided to those coping with a disaster. “It can be a big boost when our social engagement team can provide words of encouragement and useful information so people feel empowered to help themselves and others,” Immel says. “In effect, it’s like giving them a ‘digital hug’ so they don’t feel so isolated and without good information.”

Digital Volunteers across the U.S.

In addition to helping the American Red Cross build its three DigiDOC command centers, NTT DATA Services social media and digital marketing consultants helped to scale its social media team beyond the Red Cross staff with what are now known as Digital Volunteers. Their certification training program is based on their Social Media and Community University, which is designed to educate corporate team members on the company’s social media strategy, governance and

principles.

Digital Volunteers are individuals — now more than 150 across the U.S. — who want to help the American Red Cross monitor the social web, and who officially communicate on behalf of the organization with people needing assistance during a disaster. In addition to formal training, Digital Volunteers go through the standard American Red Cross background check and volunteer registration process.

“We knew we couldn’t, as a nonprofit, hire a bunch of new people to staff a social media department,” Harman says, “so we began to think about what it would look like if we allowed our volunteers to help us monitor and engage in social web conversations. We came to learn that different people feel comfortable engaging in different ways online, so we have to train to their specific needs. NTT DATA Services, formerly Dell Services helped us understand that.”

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