

The Impacts and Opportunities of Social Media on Mass Notification

Executive Summary

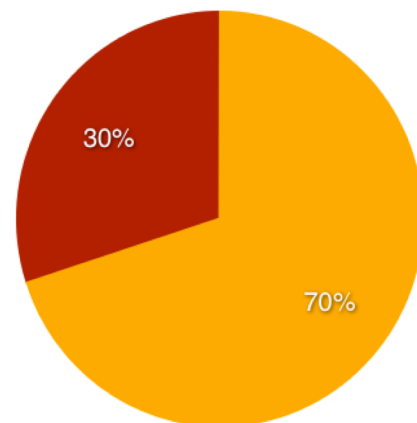
People across the globe are adopting social media as a means of communication and publication at a rapid rate. With growing numbers, social networks are rich with real-time information on events, topics and trends that can be extremely valuable to many organizations. Beyond simply a means of broadcasting, many communities, businesses and organizations are looking to social media as a source for data that will help improve situational and operational intelligence to successfully manage incidents across the entire lifecycle of the event.

According to InSites Consulting, over 1 billion people use social networks worldwide (70% of the internet population) and nearly two-thirds of those use social networks on a daily basis. Combined with the mass adoption of smart phone and mobile technology, people both have the ability and the inclination to share and receive information more than ever before.

People are sharing information in real time as social networks like Facebook and Twitter become household names around the world. In fact, in the past year, breaking news from deposed governments to active shooters and weather disasters has spread across social networks before any other traditional communication pathway.

Global Social Network Usage Among Internet Population
Source: InSite Consulting

● USES SOCIAL MEDIA ● DOESN'T USE SOCIAL MEDIA



This white paper will explore:

- The evolution of social media
- How social media is shaping communications expectations
- How social media can improve situational intelligence
- How to successfully leverage social media in communication strategies

The Evolution of Social Media

While the term social media has come to prominence in recent years, social media as a means of communication and sharing information has been evolving for much longer. Alpha numeric pagers, which were capable of short phrases, soon gave way to mobile phones, which could send text messages and access basic mobile websites. Around this same time, social networks were emerging and gaining popularity with the university-aged population. It wasn't long before phones evolved to smart phones and tablets and social networks became household names.

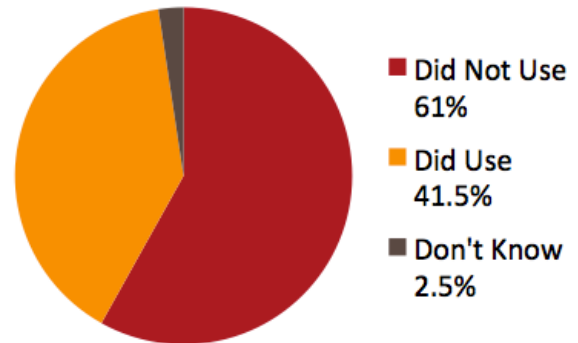
Now, over 70% of the population with internet access has a profile on a social network. According to InSites Consulting, over 1 billion people use social networks worldwide and nearly two-thirds of those use social networks on a daily basis. It becomes increasingly easier to share rich media updates as smart phones become ubiquitous and people are constantly connected to the networks they care about. As more and more people share photos, videos and text updates, social networks have become giant repositories of information. Much of this information could be beneficial to organizations, if they were able to properly filter through it and find the relevant data among the mass amount of background "noise".

New Communications Expectations

In many incidents during the past year, breaking news has spread across social networks before any other traditional communication pathway. Social media usage is growing exponentially, with users over 50 years old being the fastest growing demographic after a near saturation among younger age groups. Social media is certainly a valuable tool that can be harnessed to great benefit. However, it is a significant force in public opinion and the spread of information, and if it is ignored can become a liability to your organization. The general population now expects real-time news with updates throughout an event.

A large university in Canada recently experienced the unfortunate results of ignoring social media when they decided not to alert the campus population of a shooter in the late hours of the night. Because the suspect had left the campus, officials chose not to send a mass notification regarding the event. Unfortunately for the university, students took to social networks such as Facebook and Twitter and before daybreak the Internet was buzzing with confusion about what had taken place, as well as negative press and sentiment against the University.

Use of Social Media in Business Continuity



* From The use of social media in business continuity management systems

Essentially, the decision by the university not to send a message using their ENS (emergency notification system) or through social media channels put the control around the incident management in the hands of the students. The university's faculty and students expected to have real-time information and timely updates about the incident on campus and when the university didn't proactively provide, their natural instinct was to look to social media. A more proactive approach regarding both mass notification and reputation management on social networks would likely have saved their image in this instance.

Social Media as a Source of Situational Intelligence

Ignoring social media won't always cause harm; however there are incidents in which harnessing the information it can provide would greatly improve situational real-time intelligence. The University of Colorado Hospital recently experienced an unexpected surge of visitors, crowding emergency rooms and reception areas, complete with local news helicopters hovering the sky.

Unfortunately for hospital officials, they had no idea why their hospital had just become so crowded with people who seemed not to need any medical care. This complicated their ability to continue to provide services as expected, however this was an unnecessary and potentially dangerous distraction. If they had been properly monitoring social media and filtering the data, they would have seen the rumors circulating that a

celebrity was planning to visit the victims of the Aurora movie theater shooting hours in advance and been able to properly prepare.

London police forces experienced a much more serious incident involving social media. The Summer 2011 riots in London, UK caused great damage to buildings and property around the city, and the rioters are widely known to have used Twitter to organize. If London officials had been monitoring Twitter traffic in real time, they would have had greater situational intelligence that could have allowed them to respond in a faster more efficient manner, potentially avoiding much of the damage that occurred.

How to Successfully Leverage Social Media

Oftentimes, when we think of how to use social media as part of a communications strategy, we are inclined to consider only outbound messaging capabilities. When harnessed correctly, the power of social media can provide great insight before, during and after major incidents.. One county in Washington State recently realized the benefits of social media during a forest fire, which affected thousands of people. In this case, the county was able to obtain images and status updates in real time from citizens in the midst of the affected area because they were using social networks to share information and photos about their own predicaments. Additionally, because the county had a mass notification system in place with a trained user base they were able to communicate effectively and efficiently across the entire lifecycle of the emergency.

While social media used to be simply a supplementary outbound communication tool, it has grown to be both an outbound tool and an inbound source of valuable information. This is the first step in the evolution of mass notification which to be more effective has to evolve into real-time interactive communications. While administrators and organization leaders cannot be everywhere at every time, the general public has fast become valuable eyes and ears on the ground voluntarily sharing valuable information in a public forum (social networks). While this presents a great opportunity, social networks are noisy with a great amount of data that is not useful as well, so it is critical to know how to filter the data you need from the noise in the background.

Conclusion

With growing numbers, social networks are rich with real-time information on events, topics and trends that can be extremely valuable to many organizations. Beyond simply a means of broadcasting, many communities, businesses and organizations are looking to social media as a source for data that will help improve situational and operational intelligence for the successful management of incidents across the entire lifecycle of the event.

Combined with the mass adoption of smart phone and mobile technology, people both have the ability to share and receive information more than ever before. They are sharing information in real time as social networks like Facebook and Twitter become household names around the world.

A social media strategy is now necessary for all organizations. If social media is ignored, it could very well backfire and potentially delay an organization's response time when every minute could matter. At the very least, there could be valuable information that would greatly benefit organizations that otherwise goes unnoticed. When leveraged correctly, however, social media can provide greater situational and operational intelligence and help organizations better manage incidents across the entire lifecycle of the event.