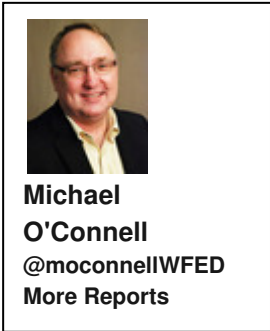


Agencies turn to social media to engage public in an emergency

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In an emergency, would you call someone or text them? Maybe you would just tweet or post to Facebook to get the word out to a lot of people quickly.

"Social media offers that unique ability in order to engage and listen in real time to the needs of citizens," said Justin Herman, the social media lead for the Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies at the General Services Administration.

Herman told *The Federal Drive with Tom Temin and Emily Kopp* Tuesday that happens across the board in all agencies.

"We saw this in Sandy," he said. "The president of the United States went to the American public and said that if your power goes out, if you need critical information from the government, look to social media."

During an emergency, the federal government interacts with the public in three ways:

1. It distributes information to the public via social media platforms;
2. It monitors emerging situations as they happen; and
3. It communicates directly with members of the public.

"They're both listening and also putting out information and then engaging directly to dispel rumors and put out correct information when it matters," Herman said.

Since the public accesses social media on a variety of platforms, the government tries to get the information to the public wherever they are.

One of the difficulties exposed during Hurricane Sandy was that some people were distributing false information. To make it easier for citizens to verify the source of a social media posting, the government operates the Federal Social Media Registry.

"What that does is it allows any social media platform in the government, from any agency, to register, and the American public can go to USA.gov to verify that it's a legitimate account," Herman said.

Twitter has also verified many federal government accounts, so citizens can look for the blue verification check mark to ensure that an account is operated by a legitimate government agency. Those agencies that haven't been verified by Twitter yet can still register at the Federal Social Media Registry.

"One thing we can control is that social media registry," Herman said. "That's why we ask agencies to use it and let the people know what's a legitimate account or not."

During an emergency, it's important for federal employees to remember that while they may be responsible for the content of their personal social media accounts, official accounts should be used only to distribute official information.

"While you're not supposed to be tweeting official things or posting official statements from your private accounts, know that when the people are looking to you that you want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem," Herman said.



Impressive work in an emergency

For the most part, Herman said he was impressed by the way the agencies handled its social media output during Hurricane Sandy.

"I got to watch it and see the fact of how agencies around government coordinated," Herman said. "I think that's the key word that happens here. You have this response from NOAA, FEMA, USDA, many different agencies all had a role to play in both the response to Sandy when it was happening, the preparation for it, and agencies came together, made sure they were sharing information in real time and that the information the public needed got out. The coordination effort that went out, I felt, was really incredible."

Performance metrics is one area the government is passionate about, Herman said, and that's the case with measuring the effectiveness of social media use in distributing information during an emergency. The government has to be able to measure the effectiveness so that it can improve services or cut costs if needed.

"There's a lot of mechanisms that we have to gauge what the reach is, what the effectiveness, more importantly, is of messages that we put out, so that if something, perhaps, isn't as effective as we need it to be, that's why we can change our strategies, rewrite things very quickly, to get the mission done," Herman said.

As far as lessons learned from Hurricane Sandy go, Herman said agencies should continue to work on finding ways to get information to citizens without them having to go look for it.

One of the best ways to distribute information to the public is "short media service" or texting.

"Always, SMS is a great frontline tool to be able to organize people and get people information during crisis situations, even when they don't have the Internet," Herman said.

Once a message is sent out, the agency's next priority is to listen.

"Through social media, the government is able to listen to the needs of the public and citizens and find out what's going on in emerging situations," Herman said. "And the second biggest thing is engaging, to be able to dispel rumors, put out information, answer questions, that's really the benefit."