

# Social Media

## Powerful Tools for SH&E Professionals

By Pamela Walaski

**O**ver the more than 100 years that SH&E professionals have been actively engaged in protecting people, property and the environment, roles and responsibilities have evolved to meet the needs of changing times. Many have assumed expanded roles that include environmental and security concerns; some long-held postulates about injury causation have been debunked; a fundamental change in paradigms that mandate the focus on prevention through design has emerged; and sustainability as a key driver in organizational strategy is part of ongoing discussions. Now it is time for SH&E professionals to embrace a new way of communicating with their audiences—social media.

It is no longer a matter of whether a company should utilize social media to communicate with audiences, but rather how and with what platforms. Social media is becoming such an integral part of business operations that its use is now commonplace for product launches, developing consumer loyalty and sharing news. Citizen journalists use social media to instantly provide information to their followers and the general public, often hours ahead of traditional media. A recent survey by American Red Cross (2012) found that social media sites are the fourth most popular sites for obtaining information during an emergency.

ASSE Foundation Chair and self-proclaimed “digital whisperer” Fay Feeney (2012) summarizes the current situation: “Do you know someone who brags that they don’t text, tweet

or care about social media? I like to diplomatically tell these folks their digital zipper is down, and it is not helping them look relevant.”

Savvy SH&E professionals understand the power of communicating with their audiences, whether the internal workforce, organizational management, vendors/suppliers, community members and other groups that rely on fast, frequent and accurate messages to relate to and understand the organization they represent. Given that their audiences and the organizations they work for are using social media at an increasing rate, SH&E professionals must do the same as they strive to continually add value.

SH&E professionals have welcomed and embedded technology into their day-to-day duties; from software that tracks training and injuries to audit formats that provide a snapshot of continuous improvement to customized dashboards that show multiple data streams on one screen.

This article advocates for the integration of social media into many facets of organizational activities, most notably in crisis communications. It addresses how social media provides an accessible format for communicating in real time with the types of messages audiences are seeking. It offers a balanced overview of the pros and cons of using social media and discusses a sensible social media policy that will help guide organizational activities. Examples of social media successes and failures highlight lessons learned as well.

### Social Media & Its Benefits

There is no simple answer to the question “What is social media?” The overwhelming prospect of trying to join the conversation and where to start likely inhibits many people. Additionally, many would-be users see its usage as a waste of time along with being the purview of younger generations who fit the stereotype of being connected more to their devices than they are to people. Social media encompasses many different types of opportunities to engage and may not suit everyone. Some classification systems identify 23 different platforms (Practical Law Co.) and, as of late 2012, more than 330 different applications were available. Common and familiar examples include:

**1) Blogs.** Blogs represent a method of communicating information and opinions in a short, web-based form rather than appearing in more traditional forms of print publications.

### IN BRIEF

- **Social media is gaining widespread acceptance as a strategic means of communicating about risks and during emergencies, making it an ideal platform for SH&E professionals to use.**
- **Traditional crisis communications concepts lend themselves to use via social media. During crises, an audience may be reacting emotionally, and rapid information can ease stress and help them make informed decisions.**
- **Organizational integration of social media into risk and crisis communications requires a strategy developed well in advance of a crisis event and hinges on developing trust and credibility with the audience. Once SH&E professionals have mastered basic social media usage, they can add value to their organizations by assisting in all of these activities.**

**Pamela Walaski, CSP, CHMM**, is president of JC Safety & Environmental Inc., a consulting firm in Pittsburgh, PA. The firm specializes in a broad array of compliance and consulting services, including risk and crisis communications, and safety program evaluation and development. She is a professional member of ASSE’s Western Pennsylvania Chapter, Administrator of the Society’s Consultants Practice Specialty, and served as coleader of the ASSE delegation to China in 2010. In addition, Walaski is an advisor to the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Safety Sciences Department. Her book, *Risk and Crisis Communication*, was published in 2011. That same year, she received an ASSE President’s Award and was named to Women in Safety Engineering’s 100 Women in Safety list.

**2) Microblogging.** These sites allow for short blogs unlike typical blogs that are much longer. The most familiar is Twitter, whose 140 character limit was based on the use of telecommunications to send text messages.

**3) Social networking sites.** These sites promote building relationships among people with similar interests and activities. The most familiar one currently is Facebook, although for years MySpace was the leader.

**4) Professional networks.** The counterpart to social networks, these sites are intended for professional networking, allowing interaction, sharing of information and discussion of issues relevant to work settings. LinkedIn leads the pack in this category; Plaxo is another site with a growing number of members.

**5) Video sharing.** These sites allow users to upload video content. YouTube is the most common of these sites. While it started as a venue for personal videos, its use by organizations has increased dramatically in recent years.

**6) Content-driven communities.** These sites are less about interacting and more about sharing content. The most common of these is Wikipedia, a site that allows any user to edit content by enhancing it or disputing content believed to be inaccurate.

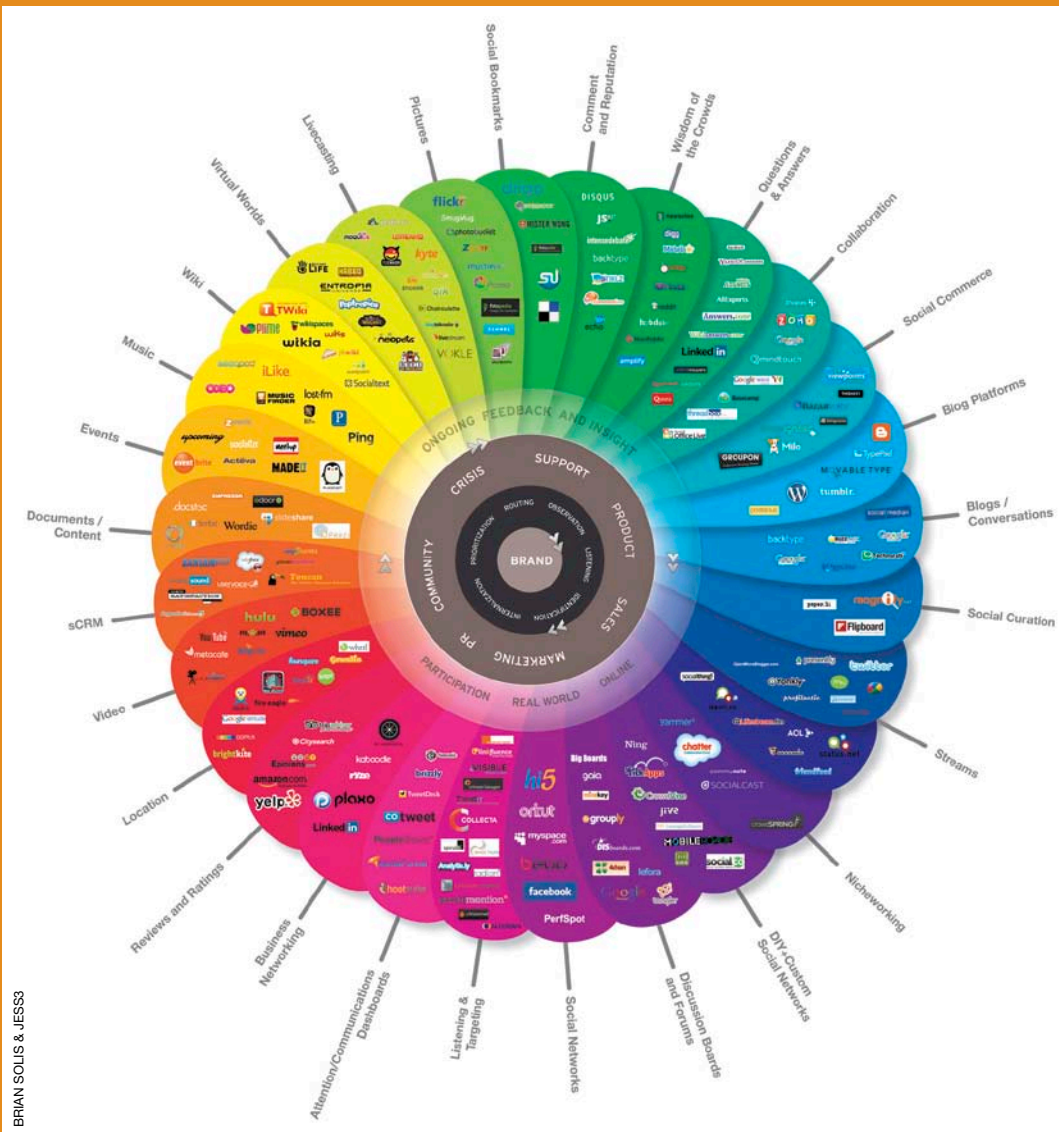
In addition to identifying the platforms available for individual engagement, users should distinguish between those that favor personal interactions and those that lean toward professional. Facebook has traditionally been an arena where personal interactions occur, while LinkedIn has favored professional networking. (Note that al-



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As Figure 1 (below) shows, social media is an integral part of business operations. Its use is now commonplace for product launches, developing consumer loyalty and sharing news. Citizen journalists use social media to instantly provide information to their followers and the general public, often hours ahead of traditional media.

**Figure 1**  
**The Conversation Prism**



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## Table 1 Twitter Usage

Percentage of Internet users within each group who use Twitter.

<b>All adult Internet users (n = 1,729)</b>	<b>15%</b>
Men (n = 804)	14
Women (n = 925)	15
<b>Age</b>	
18 to 29 (n = 316)	26 <sup>a</sup>
30 to 49 (n = 532)	14
50 to 64 (n = 521)	9
65 and over (n = 320)	4
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White, non-Hispanic (n = 1,229)	12
Black, non-Hispanic (n = 172)	28 <sup>a</sup>
Hispanic (n = 184)	14
<b>Annual household income</b>	
Less than \$30,000/year (n = 390)	19
\$30,000 to \$49,999 (n = 290)	12
\$50,000 to \$74,999 (n = 250)	14
\$75,000 and over (n = 523)	17
<b>Education level</b>	
No high school diploma <sup>b</sup> (n = 108)	22
High school graduate (n = 465)	12
Some college (n = 447)	14
College+ (n = 698)	17
<b>Geographic location</b>	
Urban (n = 520)	19 <sup>a</sup>
Suburban (n = 842)	14 <sup>a</sup>
Rural (n = 280)	8

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Significant difference compared with all other rows in group. <sup>b</sup>Due to a small number of respondents in this group in the May 2011 survey, Pew did not report individually on the “no high school diploma” group in its 2011 report on Twitter usage. Original table source: Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project Winter 2012 Tracking Survey, Jan. 20 to Feb. 19, 2012. N = 2,253 adults age 18 and older, including 901 cell phone interviews. Interviews conducted in English and Spanish. The margin of error is +/-2.7 percentage points for Internet users. Data from “Twitter Use 2012” (Technical report), by A. Smith and J. Brenner, 2012, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website: [www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP\\_Twitter\\_Use\\_2012.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Twitter_Use_2012.pdf).

Table 1 provides a snapshot of Twitter usage by varying demographics including gender, age, income and education. While usage among younger age groups, particularly 18 to 29 year olds, is far and away higher than older groups, those in the 30 to 49 age group represent a significant portion in their own right. As the population using Twitter and other social media platforms continues to age, usage can be expected to become embedded in the culture.

though Facebook has become a platform where organizations engage their audiences with group pages that promote products, provide for feedback and encourage interactions, these are group pages and not individual profiles.)

Although for some users the lines are blurred, many prefer to keep their professional and personal social media realms separate for obvious reasons. For example, even though they may have interactions with professional colleagues on Facebook, the interactions are more personal, discussing weekend plans, musical tastes and similar topics. Twitter users often have a personal handle and a professional one to separate the realms.

Specific pros and cons of using social media are discussed in detail later; however, a brief summary

of the more common generic benefits includes several common themes (Gray, 2012). The collaborative nature of social media allows users to connect with people they might not otherwise meet. This sharing of information, ideas and resources ultimately creates an increased level of productivity among users because their learning and knowledge base expands as does their ability to complete work tasks. (It should be noted that the opposite position of this benefit taken by many managers is that the time spent on social media is unproductive, but this author would argue this is more a result of the lack of discipline among users to stop themselves from continuing to explore and share beyond the bounds of necessary usage.)

A related benefit is that harnessing collective knowledge through collaboration increases the ability of an employee to identify and craft best practices. Finally, but not to be discounted, is the natural desire and need of human beings to interact. Says Gray (2012), “Human beings are social animals and are hardwired to connect.”

Allowing employees to have a method to fulfill this need creates more satisfied employees who in turn are more creative and productive. While some organizations discount the value of social media in the workplace, no less than the U.S. Army (2012) recognizes its importance in its *Social Media Handbook*, which encourages soldiers to use the platforms to become its best messengers, to stay connected, and to spread the Army’s key themes and messages.

### Who Uses Social Media & Implications for SH&E Professionals

The answer to who is using social media to communicate is not a simple one, but it is a mistake to assume that it is only young people. While they are the predominant users, recent studies confirm that more older groups are engaging, in part because the original users of social media are aging and continuing to use it. Studies also show that 66% of all adults use one or more social media platforms. Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project (Smith & Brenner, 2012) says “it took radio 38 years to reach 50 million listeners. Terrestrial TV took 13 years to reach 50 million. But in 4 years after it became available to the general public, the Facebook social networking site had over 500 million users” (Practical Law Co.).

According to recent reports from the Internet & American Life Project (Smith & Brenner, 2012), 92% of Americans use multiple platforms to get their news—60% get their news both online and off. The same study found that the proportion of online adults who use Twitter on a typical day is now 8%, double the amount since a May 2011 survey, quadrupling since data were first collected in late 2010. Twitter use is highly correlated with the use of mobile technology; as the usage of smartphones and tablets has increased among all adults, Twitter use has grown similarly (Smith & Brenner; Table 1).

Beyond the data that demonstrate increased social media usage is the question of what this shift means for SH&E professionals. At the very least, SH&E professionals seeking to help their organizations communicate with their audiences would do well to understand and master the use of at least a few common platforms, namely Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter. Further, since more adults use social media for communicating, it follows that they would also use these same outlets to obtain information about risks in their lives and/or when a crisis is imminent, and what they can do to protect themselves and their families.

American Red Cross has performed several studies on the information-seeking behaviors of people in an emergency. Its 2009 study found that social media sites are the fourth most popular source for emergency information. The 2010 survey found that roughly half of respondents said they would sign up for e-mails and text alerts or other types of emergency information. In addition, the study found that younger people are more likely to ask for help via social media and have high expectations that agencies will respond to their requests (American Red Cross, 2012). These studies provide a clear path to the use of social media by organizations to deliver their crisis communications.

In 2011, Congressional Research Service (CRS) published "Social Media and Disasters: Current Uses, Future Options and Policy Considerations," a report that identifies two different paths for organizations to choose when dealing with social media: passive and active. Passive use, the report says, is the route emergency management organizations select most often; it involves disseminating information and getting basic feedback via messages, wall posts and polls.

Active use, advocated in the CRS report, sees social media as tools to be used to conduct emergency communications, issue warnings, solicit victim requests for assistance, establish situational awareness by monitoring users and use uploaded images to create disaster estimates. While these types of uses are not yet commonplace among emergency managers, recent successful opportunities have led to a rethinking of strategic uses. The report references the U.S. Army's use of Twitter to provide news and updates during the Fort Hood shootings as far back as 2009 (Lindsay, 2011). The report's author argues that social media should be considered for use by emergency managers and officials to develop situational awareness during an emergency as the real-time information it provides can help officials determine how to respond and how to deploy resources.

From a blog posted on Social Media 4 Emergency Management ([www.sm4em.org](http://www.sm4em.org)) on July 23, 2012:

It is time that emergency managers all receive training in marketing and risk communication principles. The revolution that is occurring is the fact that we are no longer able to delegate public information to a single communications officer. We all need

to understand how public information works and be confident to understand the impact of what we are trying to say at all times. When every second counts in life safety issues, being ready to navigate social communications requires us to be both social and excellent communicators.

Social media usage introduces some disadvantages, which management may cite to justify its hesitation or unwillingness to engage. One common stumbling block is the inability to control the message. Indeed, the very foundation of social media is the ability of anyone to engage, with limited restrictions on what is said. Social media use historically has been about the ability of these platforms to remain free of onerous restrictions, even as some use the platforms to spread information they know to be incorrect and/or to use it for malicious intent. And some users are simply not reasonable or rational and use the anonymity as a means to see how outlandish a message they can post (NPR, 2012).

Since traditional messaging by organizations attempts to be scripted, controlled and one-way, particularly crisis communications, social media would appear on the surface to be at odds with this fundamental goal. However, organizations should not let the perception that they have no ability to monitor and even restrict certain content be a reason for not engaging. As has been settled in numerous cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, freedom of speech does not mean that anyone can say anything s/he desires at any place and/or time. There are both prohibitions on some speech (advocating illegal activity) and restrictions (obscenity and profanity) (Hawkins, 2012).

In addition to the lack of control, privacy and security of some platforms are other management concerns (Gray, 2012; Lindsay, 2011). How data can be collected, retained and mined for other purposes is not coordinated or controlled, and an oft-repeated warning is that something posted on the Internet remains there forever. Errors can be recalled, but are not erased.

Inaccurate messages can also be problematic with social media, given the sheer number of people disseminating information with virtually no limits. A study on the use of Twitter following the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan found the existence of "numerous unreliable 'retweets' (RTs), where users of the service repeated inaccurate information and that this was one of the biggest information-related problems facing those involved" ("Twitter and Natural Disasters," 2011). In other cases, basic information was inaccurately reported such as the location of the disaster and the number of victims (Lindsay, 2011).

Other common concerns include an overreliance on technology that can have functional limitations, particularly during an emergency. During natural disasters when power outages are common and can last well beyond the battery life of a typical smartphone or tablet, social media can be cut off requiring that a back-up system be developed.

**Table 2**

## Risk Communication vs. Crisis Communication

Risk communications	Crisis communications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Event that is the focus of the communications is in the future.</li> <li>•Ongoing process between communicator and audience is time-consuming</li> <li>•Focus of efforts is on the dialogue generated between the two parties.</li> <li>•Most communications are two-way events.</li> <li>•Goal is to reach consensus with audience regarding activities and solutions to presenting hazard.</li> <li>•SH&amp;E professional functions include assisting in risk assessment process to qualify and quantify the risks and assisting in the development of the messages. In some organizations the SH&amp;E professional will also deliver the messages, typically to the workforce.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Event that is the focus of the communications is about to occur or is already occurring.</li> <li>•Shorter process between organization and audience due to the immediacy of the crisis event.</li> <li>•Focus of the efforts is the delivery of messages to the audience.</li> <li>•Most communications are one-way events.</li> <li>•Goal is to inform and compel the audience to action, intended to keep them safe.</li> <li>•SH&amp;E professional functions include assisting in the understanding of the severity of the crisis and assisting in the development of the messages. In some organizations the SH&amp;E professional will also deliver the messages, typically to the workforce.</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from *Risk and Crisis Communications: Methods and Messages*, by P. Walaski, 2011, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

### Social Media & Crisis Communications

Despite these drawbacks, social media's potential for use in risk and crisis communications continues to be explored and utilized by many SH&E professionals. In many respects, the increasing use of social media is changing the business of risk and crisis communications not only because SH&E professionals are actively engaging in its use, but also because the sheer volume of messages and widespread popularity makes it happen with or without them. Citizen journalists are everywhere and can be anyone with a video camera and/or smartphone.

Traditional definitions of risk communications and crisis communications share the overarching purpose of providing information to audiences so that they can be informed. However, they tend to differ in many other respects (Table 2).

For example, risk communications involve engaging the audience in the process so that a consensus regarding solutions and activities regarding the risk event can be generated or so that an organization can use audience input to make decisions and establish procedures that factor in the audience's perspective and needs. The risk event being discussed is not occurring, but is being planned for and one of the key goals of the process is dialogue and engaging the audience. Crisis communications are those messages delivered when the crisis is about to occur or is already occurring. The messages are almost entirely one way—from organization to audience—and are designed to help the audience act in ways that provide for their immediate safety or longer-term welfare (Walaski, 2011).

However, crisis communications that employ social media platforms are changing those definitions. For example, Gerald Baron, a 30-year veteran of public relations and crisis communications, suggests that "crisis communications, in a time of hyperen-

agement and hyperconnectedness, is becoming more like proactive communications except the volume, urgency and engagement levels are much higher because of intense external audience focus" (William, 2012). In other words, crisis communications are now becoming more like the traditional risk communications—two-way events, focused on audience participation. The key difference is the speed at which they occur, owing in large measure to the proliferation of social media messaging.

Baron encourages the use of social media for two-way crisis communications by reminding that traditional media such as newspapers and other forms of print media as well as televised newscasts that audiences passively watch without engagement continues to utilize the one-way messaging approach, but fewer audiences use them to obtain news and information. While he does not advocate dismissing this approach entirely, he reinforces that social media facilitates direct engagement with audiences. Communicating in methods audiences choose is more likely to connect with them in productive ways during a crisis. He also argues that traditional media turn to social media to find out what is happening and use those sources to "amplify to their audiences. So if you are not there and communicating at hypernetwork speed, you will likely be out of the story" (William, 2012).

### Using Social Media for Crisis Communications

As noted, social media platforms lend themselves nicely to the delivery of crisis communications, even though they utilize a two-way format, which has not been the traditional mode of delivering such messages. However, an organization should not simply assume it can enter social media in the midst of a crisis and do so successfully. Effective use requires advance planning, a targeted approach and a bit of legwork.

To simplify the process for this article, the author assumes an organizational presence in social media, whether it is for marketing, soliciting customer opinions and reactions, or for engaging employees. (If no presence exists, note the references in the sidebar on p. 45.) SH&E professionals can add value to their organizations by becoming adept at understanding these and involve themselves in working with other departments in the organization such as marketing, public relations and human resources to establish the groundwork. Once that has occurred, a more targeted approach toward using these tools to deliver crisis communication messages can occur with SH&E professionals taking the lead among organizational departments.

According to Agnes (2012b), three core principles for successful utilization of social media during a crisis include the message, the channel, and the frequency. The message is more than just the words delivered; it is critical that the words be delivered to the targeted audiences. Given the vast number of social media platforms available, an organization needs to know what channels its target audiences use. It is more likely that an organization will know the answer if it has conducted research

## Resources for Organizational Involvement in Social Media

in advance of the crisis and has been using several channels to gauge what is and is not effective. An organization can employ several tools to listen to and monitor target audiences, as well as to identify trending messages by constituent groups. These tools include Crowdsourcing, Radian6, Attensity and Visible Technologies (O'Malley, 2012).

An important corollary to an organization's ability to locate and communicate with its target audiences is the ability to establish trust and credibility with those audiences, which has always been the foundation of risk or crisis communications, even for messages delivered prior to the emergence of social media (Peters, Covello & McCallum, 1997; Sandman, 2005; Walaski, 2011). Baron says, "The most important thing in crisis communications is not what we say, it's what we do. Trust is based upon character, the character of the leaders which [is] most clearly demonstrated in what actions are being taken" (William, 2012).

Therefore, trust and credibility must be achieved in social media channels as well, either because these elements were already in place before engaging via social media or because they have been developed via social media interactions. Trust and credibility can be established through precrisis audience identification, identifying the platforms they are using and engaging in those platforms to build relationships and rapport.

Once an organization knows and understands its audiences and has established relationships built on trust and credibility, then and only then can the channels be used to effectively communicate in a crisis. As with any crisis communications, the message must be crafted based on a select audience and modified accordingly for other audiences. For example, messages to the internal workforce about a chemical spill might be different from those delivered to vendors or the immediate community of businesses or residences.

One value of using social media is that it lends itself easily to the use of various channels to deliver messages that are unique to the audiences who frequent those channels. Different audiences have different expectations in terms of content and frequency. If an organization understands these expectations in advance and is prepared to meet them, it will be better able to reinforce a positive reputation since the audience will stay tuned for frequent messaging. Four common channels are listed here. All of them, with the exception of YouTube, work best with advance engagement and development of followers (Twitter) or likes (Facebook):

1) Twitter. If a crisis is being followed by a specific hashtag (prefaced by the # character), an organization can monitor it closely to see what is being said and respond regularly to applicable posts. In addition, a follower who sends an organization a direct message (DM) or mentions it (through the use of the @ character) expects direct replies. Fortunately, by applying the relevant hashtag to responses, those following the crisis will also see it; this will not only give them the same information, but also will provide answers to similar questions.

Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of the steps for a generic entry by an organization into social media. The resources below will assist in basic research into organizational use of social media.

**Social Media Usage Toolkit:** Practical Law Publishing Ltd. and Practical Law Co. Inc. <http://us.practicallaw.com/0-501-1201>. This site provides a comprehensive set of documents, checklists, policies and standards that provide information and guidance on nearly every topic an organization will face.

**U.S. Army Social Media Handbook:** Version 3, June 2012, available for download at <http://armylive.dodlive.mil/index.php/2012/06/social-media-handbook-edition-3>. Although this resource is geared directly to Army uses of social media by departments and individual enlistees, it addresses substantive issues regarding how to develop standards for use, increase security, developing a social media presence, Army branding and other topics that can easily be modified to suit a nonmilitary operation.

**6 Steps to Preparing Your Business for a Social Media Crisis:** Published by Melissa Agnes, 2012. Available for download at [www.melissaagnes.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Special-Report-6-Step-Guide-to-Preparing-Your-Business-For-a-Social-Media-Crisis.pdf](http://www.melissaagnes.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Special-Report-6-Step-Guide-to-Preparing-Your-Business-For-a-Social-Media-Crisis.pdf).

It also shows the organization's ongoing engagement with the audience (followers).

2) YouTube. This community can be highly critical in its comments, but more often than not, users do not read the comments in great depth prior to sharing the video with their network. Of the various social media platforms, YouTube is not known for its two-way interaction, but its usage in a crisis is growing as it allows for posting a critical press conference and other informational briefings or messages from key personnel.

3) Facebook fan pages. Fan page users expect quick response to their comments. This will require rapid and personal responses and frequent updates.

4) Facebook groups. This platform is more of a forum with an interaction between members rather than between an individual and the organization. Still it requires monitoring, responding and reacting on a regular basis.

Agnes (2012a, b, c) recommends a few guidelines to establish frequency, but it is critical to remember the hyperactivity of social media has fundamentally changed the idea that a three or even four times per day press briefing is sufficient at the height of a crisis. Given the real-time nature of social media, choosing an interval relative to the phase of the crisis makes sense, but at its height, messages every 15 to 20 minutes are the minimum. Even messages that indicate nothing has changed keep followers informed and keeps them monitoring the situation through the organization's channels rather than through someone else's. Similar to the corollary that responding to a request for information with "no comment" is a serious error in engaging audiences, allowing too long a period of time to elapse between social media messages frustrates the audience or may drive them to another information source.



One value of using social media is that it lends itself easily to the use of various channels to deliver messages that are unique to the audiences who frequent those channels.

## Controlling the Message

As noted, many organizations hesitate to utilize social media to engage audiences due to concerns about lack of message control, honest errors in posting by employees or others, and malicious messaging from others. However, an organization that develops a social media presence for delivering crisis communications (e.g., creating a Facebook page, establishing a Twitter profile) should not assume that its presence opens the door to unfettered slanderous remarks or creates a liability for honest errors. Online reputation management is a critical part of the use of social media and, although a much more complex topic than can be discussed in this article, a few basic requirements are noted (Agnes, 2012b, c, d; Brown, 2011; Hawkins, 2012; Parker):

- Prior to launching a social media presence, an organization's crisis communications plan should be revised to include a social media component that specifically addresses online reputation management and crisis response. This includes specific procedures for addressing internal and external erroneous postings, controls on employee posts (as part of a comprehensive social media policy that is discussed in the next section) and malicious postings. It can also include the use of prepared message templates that can be modified for the specific event.

- Constantly monitor internal sites and external reputation through use of the tools noted earlier. This will necessitate dedicated employees with sufficient training and expertise or external consultants.

- When erroneous messages are posted on an organization's site(s):

- 1) By employees. Take immediate steps to correct or clarify them. There is some debate within the online reputation management expert community as to whether errors should be removed or corrected. Each organization will need to determine which path it will take, hence the importance of a social media component to the crisis communications plan. The liability for such errors online can be significantly reduced through a written policy that provides direction to employees but also through swift and public action to correct them. Finally, employees charged with posting organizational content should always be advised to check and double check the profile they are using before they post a message.

- 2) By others. The social media policy should provide guidance on the response process, but immediate action of some type is critical. Options include correcting the post, warning the poster of its violation of the organization's posting rules or removing the post entirely, with or without an explanation. Additional legal action should be considered if the behavior persists.

- When external erroneous messages are posted outside of an organization's site(s), management must determine whether the post was intentional. If it is not, reaching out online to the message originator and respectfully requesting a correction not only provides a correcting message but also engages the original poster in a manner that improves the chances the message will be removed or corrected.

If the error is intentional, it may be one message or it may be the sign of a coordinated attempt to damage an organization's reputation. In this event, an organization may need to seek outside assistance from an online reputation management expert if in-house expertise is not available. Again, however, the crisis communications plan should provide some guidance on the response process.

- Create pages on the organization's website dedicated to rumor control when needed and use other platforms to direct users there for current information. For example, during Hurricane Sandy relief efforts, Federal Emergency Management Agency did just that to address rumor control surrounding what appeared to be false sites being created to confuse victims about what assistance might be available to them.

- Create "dark" crisis websites and/or "dark" crisis status blogs that are prepared in advance and go live when the crisis hits (Parker, 2012). These tools make it easier for an organization to respond with the necessary speed in the event of a reputation crisis. (They also are highly effective when dealing with general crisis communications.)

## Developing a Social Media Policy

According to Agnes (2012b, c, d), the success of such efforts is increased if an organization has an effective crisis communications plan in place that specifically addresses social media usage. Traditional plans delineate roles, responsibilities, key players and procedures.

They often include predeveloped messages or message templates that can be easily crafted for the unique situation and are based on a team process that begins with a risk assessment to address those areas needing preplanning (Walaski, 2011). Organizations with existing plans should broaden their scope to include social media, prepared messages and message templates in addition to developing a presence in various platforms and engaging the audiences in advance of any crisis.

In addition, an organization should develop and implement a social media policy to establish basic guidelines for employees who engage in social media outside of their direct roles in crisis messaging. Like many such policies, the human resources department often takes the lead in this process, but SH&E professionals can lend their social media expertise.

However, many organizations are wary of developing a social media policy. In a recent survey conducted by BLR, more than 40% of respondents indicated that developing a social media policy posed the biggest challenge for their organizations; the next closest response was a cell phone/distracted driving policy, coming in at slightly more than 20% (BLR, 2012). Also troubling for many organizations are questions concerning just what types of behavior can be legally addressed in such policies without affecting an employee's free speech rights and the open forum nature of most social media platforms.

While case law will no doubt continue to set parameters that answer these questions over time,

National Labor Relations Board (NLRB, 2011) has weighed in regarding policies it deems to be overly restrictive and broad. For example, NLRB intervened in a 2010 case involving an employee who posted disparaging remarks about a supervisor on her Facebook page. The company's social media policy prohibited employees from making defamatory remarks about the company, their supervisor, coworkers or competitors, and the posts were used as the basis for the employee's termination. The case was eventually settled based on the organization's potential violation of Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act that protects activity by an employee that involves discussion of working conditions (in this case the supervisor) (BLR, 2012).

Despite the difficulties of crafting such a policy, numerous organizations are opting to address at least some basic tenets of social media usage. For the 2012 Olympic Summer Games held in London, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) distributed a social media handbook to all athletes, stipulating what athletes could share electronically. Some mandates included a prohibition against posting videos of events or from the Olympic Village. They were also prohibited from mentioning their corporate sponsorships or using the Olympic symbol of five interlocking rings (Smith, 2012).

Baron reminds all organizations that changes to risk and crisis communications concepts due to the influence of social media have also affected how social media policies can be crafted. Requiring that media receives its information from only one spokesperson is no longer possible—reporters will interview anyone who will talk, including the organization's employees. Social media policies that are too restrictive may tempt employees to punish their employer by speaking negatively at the first opportunity. Better results might be achieved by reminding employees that anything negatively affecting the company affects their own self-interests. Baron also argues that having good employee relations at the start is ultimately the best defense (William, 2012).

Numerous resources offer templates for social media policy content and each organization should ensure that its policy is customized. However, several elements appear fairly consistently among those who recommend content (BLR, 2012; Nelson, 2012; Boudreaux):

- Ensure that the policy does not interfere with an employee's ability to utilize various social media platforms when off duty.
- Request that employees use common sense, good judgment and personal responsibility when posting on social media while off duty.
- Indicate that the company assumes employees are trusted to exercise personal responsibility while participating in online activities if permitted while on duty.
- Require that any permitted on-duty usage be done in such a way that does not interfere with performance of work duties. The policy should also stipulate that on-duty use be directly related to work, approved by their manager and monitored.
- Prohibit the sharing of privileged or confiden-

tial information or speculating about the company's future activities if publically held.

- Ban the use of company trademarks and copyrights on a personal website/social media platform.
- Require that disclosures accompany any employee who uses personal sites to identify themselves as an employee of the company, indicating that any positions are personal and not the views of the company.

#### Recent Lessons Learned

Nearly every day, opportunities for social media engagement during a crisis occur. Some events are large enough or serious enough to warrant national media coverage. Under these watchful eyes, valuable lessons have been learned from errors and examples of effective social media usage abound. Two recent events are described, one demonstrating an organization unprepared to engage its audience via social media and another that gets it.

#### *Penn State University & the Jerry Sandusky Scandal*

A desire to control the situation would appear to be the hallmark of how the entire scandal involving Jerry Sandusky was handled from its inception until the major news story broke on Nov. 4, 2011, when Sandusky was indicted by a grand jury. At the time Penn State Football had an intern named Kelly Burns, who from 2009 until 2012 was instrumental in developing the program's Facebook page, acquiring more than 350,000 likes and its Twitter feed (@PennStateFball) to which she personally responded.

In summer 2011, Burns was told to remove Sandusky's photo from the Facebook page. After the indictment she, along with anyone in the university system, was prohibited from posting anything about the scandal. Seven days later, the university required some ironic postings about the university-sponsored Blue Ribbon Campaign Against Child Abuse and 5 days following that, she was permitted to post general information about football. However, as of this writing, nothing about the scandal and its enormous impact has ever been posted on Penn State social media by the university (Meerman Scott, 2012). (Obviously, fans were able to indicate their thoughts on existing posts, although, comments were moderated and removed if deemed inappropriate or rude, as is common practice at many organizations.

The strategy was a failure says Burns. "I think in our day and age of social media, that silence was not the right response. Keeping information private is not the way to go when people are talking 24/7 on social media and need reassurance. . . . I think it is crucial for organizations to have crisis management plans with a social media component" (Meerman Scott, 2012). (As an anecdotal aside, the author is good friends with several professors and other university staff whose children attend Penn State. When the story broke and the students were engaging in supportive actions for former coach Joe Paterno along with overall protests about its im-

**Prior to launching a social media presence, an organization's crisis communications plan should be revised to include a social media component.**



## Social Media Can Enhance Reputation

From the compilation of e-mails sent to jeffcosherriff@gmail.com:

- We do not own a TV.
- We both work an hour away from Conifer.
- We could see the fire from our house along Foxton Road on Monday.
- We depend 90% on social media for these types of emergencies.
- This blog has been tremendous! Both my husband and I live in Denver and having to leave every day has been stressful. Having this constant source to check on has kept us calm and in touch.
- I finally got myself a Twitter account and started following your feed just because of this fire.
- I have to say I have never seen such effective communication with the public in Jefferson County as I did with this fire, thanks to your use of Twitter and the Jeffco Sheriff's blog. I even saw some local media put up your Twitter feed in their stories.



Helping organization move forward in understanding the importance of participating in social media is a way to share knowledge and add value.

pact on their college lives, many outsiders saw their actions as condoning the abuse and how it was handled, along with being typical of young, irresponsible college students. However, the comment heard most often from the author's friends was that the students were in the dark about what had really happened and were reacting on emotionally based in part on lack of information, owing in some respects to their reliance on social media to get their news, rather than traditional print outlets.)

The most common criticisms by observers of social media are echoed in Burns's comments. First, silence (also known as "no comment") rarely works. It makes an organization appear guilty or supports the perception that it is actively hiding unpleasant facts. That did not work before social media and it does not work now. Silence has always fueled the fire; social media views it in the same light.

Second, the adage "failing to plan is planning to fail" is true for crisis communications and as importantly for social media use during a crisis. Syme (2011) acknowledges that it took courage for university officials to keep their Facebook pages open, particularly when the news was not positive and the comments were derisive, even though it did not sufficiently counteract the mistake of not getting in front of the message.

Finally, "If information is transparent, honest and empathetic, sentiment will eventually sway in favor of an organization" (Syme, 2011). Initial posts deriding the entire university system and focusing on the officials who controlled the situation from the beginning have become less common, but the damage to Penn State's reputation will linger for many years, in areas well outside of football. Had the university been more transparent and empathetic at the beginning, perhaps the public's ability to separate the good of the university from those who acted inappropriately and probably illegally would have improved.

### *The Lower North Fork Fire & Jefferson County's Response*

On March 26, 2012, the Lower North Fork Fire broke out in Jefferson County, CO, about 15 miles

west of Denver on the front range of the Rocky Mountains. While wildfires in this part of the country are not unusual in the spring, what was unique about this event was how the county's emergency managers used social media to inform the public. A fully prepared public information campaign that relied heavily on social media had been developed and was ready to be launch when the fire started, including an emergency response blog, a Twitter account with 400 followers, and collaboration with other local online communities including Pinecam.com and 285bound.com.

When the fire was fully contained 8 days later, 130 posts had been published in the emergency blog ([www.jeffcosherriff1.blogspot.com](http://www.jeffcosherriff1.blogspot.com)), more than 450 interactive Tweets were sent (@JeffcoSheriffCo) and Google maps was used extensively to alert the public to the current hot spots and firefighting efforts. In addition, many media outlets linked directly to the emergency blog and interactive map.

Statistical tracking tools were also in place so that postincident data could be reviewed. There were 450,000 blog visits with more than 300,000 reposts and more than 2.5 million views of the interactive Google map. In addition, the Twitter account grew to more than 1,800 followers and Tweets were estimated to have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

The impressive data were matched by positive feedback directed to the Twitter account and to the main e-mail account (sidebar above) by residents, business and online communities as well as observers throughout the U.S. (including this author) (Lower North Fork Fire Department).

### **How to Move Forward With Social Media**

Readers who are new to social media can find their way by engaging in just one platform to start. Facebook is the simplest for those readers who have not yet tried anything. Those who are proficient with Facebook should consider LinkedIn. For those with a LinkedIn profile, engaging in discussion groups can help broaden the understanding of the power of online connections. For the bravest, Twitter is a great chance to practice online collaboration once the basics are mastered. Since even recently retired Pope Benedict joined the Twitter community, SH&E professionals should feel confident about their entry into it. Smarta's Twitter eBook is a great resource to learn how to Tweet and follow Twitterverse etiquette.

Once proficiency with the platforms is achieved, helping to move one's organization forward in understanding the importance of participating in social media (or joining the organization's current efforts) is a way to share knowledge and add value. From there, engaging internal and external audiences in various opportunities, including risk and crisis communications, brings it all full circle.

In addition, SH&E professionals can utilize their social media knowledge and expertise to assure their organizations' policy and procedural frameworks are in place and functional, including the development of social media policies and inclusion of

a social media component in the crisis communications plans.

While SH&E professionals have kept protection of people, property and the environment at the forefront, most realize the need to try different strategies and techniques to achieve these goals. Social media represents nothing more than another method to fine tune our efforts. Embracing it will expand SH&E professionals' abilities and opportunities to engage audiences to achieve fundamental goals. **PS**

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