Crisis Communications 2014: Social Media & Notification Systems

A survey of 270 organizations to determine how social media platforms are being used, the functionality of notification systems and mobile technologies, and the content of associated crisis communications plans.
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Executive Summary
Introduction

The Continuity Insights Crisis Communications: Social Media & Notification Systems survey has collected three years of data, providing unique insight into recent trends and notable changes in the ways that organizations use social media and notification systems to communicate both internally and externally.

In 2012, Continuity Insights published its first report into the use of social media as a crisis communications tool. The report uncovered mixed feelings. On one hand, respondents largely felt that social media was not an effective way to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis; on the other hand, over half intended to gather information from social media during a crisis.

In 2013, the survey expanded, allowing us to not only benchmark against the 2012 figures, but also learn more about respondents’ social media strategies, how they viewed the risks associated with social media, and whether sentiment towards social media’s effectiveness had changed. Notification system features and mobile technologies remained secondary focal areas.

This year, we made an effort to expand the survey even further, incorporating questions about how organizations are testing their social media strategies and whether organizations have specific social media management plans for disasters.

Using the 2012 results and 2013 results as a baseline, we identified several industry trends, namely a continual shift away from using social media to communicate with employees, increased corporate social media following by the public, and a shift away from certain platforms.

A total of 270 organizations participated in the survey; a respondent profile can be found on page 5.
Key Findings

• Increases in social media usage: Facebook up 3% this year, and up a total of 6% since 2012; Twitter up 9%, and up a total of 14% since 2012; and YouTube up 8% since 2012.
• A clear drop in the number of organizations using social media to communicate with employees: Facebook down 7% this year, and 14% since 2012; Twitter down 7% this year, and 13% since 2012; and YouTube down 13% this year, a drop of nearly 21% since 2012.
• Corporate Communications is still primarily responsible for social media in organizations; Business Continuity controls social media in less than 3% of organizations.
• Over half of respondents (52%) feel that the benefits of using social media as a crisis communications tool outweigh the risks.
• An increase in the use of certain modern notification system features, namely geospatial mapping, which is up 4% since 2013.
• Nearly 62% of respondents plan to use social media to gather information during a crisis, up from 52% in 2012.
• Over half (58%) rated mobile technologies as absolutely vital in carrying out crisis communications plans, up 5% since 2013.
• 42% use mobile applications that make business continuity and/or crisis communications plans available on mobile devices.
• While 40% of organizations have a social media strategy to be used during a disaster, 60% have no such plan.
• 35% of organizations report that they incorporate social media injects into tabletop or functional exercises.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The use of social media as a communications tool continues to grow. Organizations are reporting an increased presence on most social media sites, as well as an increased following by the public. This means that plans for monitoring your brand both during normal operations and during crises are crucial.

When asked about the risks of social media, many respondents noted that they were afraid of releasing incorrect information or private information. These concerns can be mitigated by securing a strategy to vet all messages before they are released, ensuring that the team agrees on the message. Additionally, testing your social media strategies and plans in your tabletop and functional exercises ensures that your team will be better prepared to initiate strategies, even when under pressure.

Finally, as in previous years, notification systems reign supreme as the most popular way to communicate with employees during a crisis, and rightly so. Take advantage of the plethora of available features, including geospatial mapping. As with social media strategies, test your notification system and train employees so that they are comfortable both sending and receiving messages.
Respondent Profile

The vast majority (42%) of survey respondents list their primary job function as Business Continuity Management, with a significant number selecting Consultant/Analyst (10%), Emergency Management (9%), Corporate Management (8%) and Risk Management (7%). Just under half (43%) work in organizations with over 5,000 employees.

The majority of respondents work in Banking/Financial (16%), followed by Insurance, Manufacturing and Professional Services/Consulting (all accounting for 10%).

A very large number (87%) use LinkedIn for personal or networking purposes, with 71% using Facebook, 44% using Twitter and 42% using YouTube.
As mentioned, this year’s results clearly show across-the-board increases in the use of social media. Facebook is now used by 63% of organizations, up 6% since 2012. The number of organizations using Twitter saw an even stronger gain, increasing to 58% (2012 showed 44% and 2013 showed 49%). The use of YouTube edged up 7% since 2013, with 30% of organizations now using the platform.

“Video is a compelling story-telling medium, yet it is not widely used for crisis communications. Almost 90% of respondents viewed YouTube as ‘Not Useful’ or ‘Somewhat Useful’ as a medium to get the message out during a crisis event. This is understandable as most organizations do not have dedicated resources to monitor and actively engage on social media, let alone produce video content.”

Brian Gray, Chief, Business Continuity Management Unit, United Nations
The results show a gradual decline in the number of organizations using social media to communicate with employees. Rather, organizations are shifting toward using social media to communicate with the public and customers.

While the use of internal social media tools such as Yammer increased 6% from 2012 to 2013, this year shows an increase of only .09%, bringing the total percentage of organizations that use internal communication tools to nearly 30%. Despite the minor increase this year, it’s important to note that in 2012, less than 22% of organizations used closed/internal social media tools.

“This is a trend that should not surprise anyone. Social media is not about direct communication, it is about sharing information broadly. It is difficult for a company to insist that employees have — and check — a social media site for corporate information when a group text is fast and efficient.”

Daniel Hahn, Plans Chief, Santa Rosa County Emergency Management
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Reach

As mentioned, organizations are increasingly using social media to communicate with the public and customers, rather than with employees, and it seems that their public audience is also increasing. When asked to state how many Likes, Follows and subscribers they have on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, respectively, organizations reported higher numbers than they indicated in the past two years. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to Facebook and Twitter.

Since 2012, there has been a steady increase in the number of organizations reporting that over 10,000 people were tracking them on social media.
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Engagement

This year’s survey shows increases in daily Twitter engagement, with 55% of organizations reporting that they post to Twitter daily, and 29% reporting that they post to Twitter weekly. Note that in 2012, 47% posted daily and 41% posted weekly.

The frequency of Facebook posts has also increased.

While Twitter and Facebook engagement increased, YouTube engagement frequency dropped. In 2012, 10% posted daily, 29% posted weekly and 40% posted monthly. This year, only 3% reported that they post daily, 26% said weekly and 35% said monthly. The percentage of organizations that answered *a few times a year* jumped from 15% in 2012 to 33% this year — more than doubling.
Monitoring

Nearly 62% of respondents said they plan to use social media to gather information during an event or crisis, up from 52% in 2012. Unsurprisingly, Twitter and Facebook are clearly the top two sources of information.

How do respondents plan to use the information they gather from social media? As in previous years, only a small portion (17%) have a centralized group such as virtual operations support team (VOST) in place to process and distribute relevant information.

“This is a new twist on an old technique perfected during the Gulf War called ‘Ground Truthing,’ You need to be able to quickly establish what is happening ‘out there’ and social media, used correctly, gives that ability.”

--Daniel Hahn, Plans Chief, Santa Rosa County Emergency Management
Monitoring (cont.)

Of all the respondents who plan to gather information from social media during a crisis, fewer than half (43%) have strategies in place to verify the information.

The 2014 results indicate a decline in the number of organizations that plan to gather information using social media monitoring tools. Last year, over half (57%) claimed to use social media monitoring tools; this year only 49% percent report using such tools. Google Alerts continues to be the most popular monitoring option. Yet, during a crisis, the once-daily Google alert is not useful for real-time monitoring and situational awareness. It seems that the free and very useful TweetDeck and HootSuite applications are gaining ground, and are now used by 28% and 35% of respondents, respectively.

What will you do with the information you gather from social media during a crisis?

- Use it to help coordinate the response: 72%
- Act on it if it directly affects staff safety: 61%
- Act on it if it directly affects operations: 57%
- Give it to those who might need it: 56%
- Give it to leadership: 55%
- To be determined by the virtual operations support team (VOST): 17%
- Depends on the nature and origin of the information: 67%
- I'm not sure: 8%
- Other: 3%

Which one or more of the following social media monitoring tools do you use or plan to use?

- Sysomos: 3%
- TweetDeck: 28%
- HootSuite: 35%
- Social Mention: 4%
- Omniture: 0%
- Google Alerts: 38%
- Engagor: 0%
- Not sure: 36%
- Other: 16%
Risks

Respondents were given an opportunity to describe the risks they associate with the use of social media. Several recurring themes emerged, most of which were also cited in years prior. These risks include:

- **Reputational risks:** Damage to reputation • The public would see mistakes • Brand could be tarnished
- **Misinformation:** Propagation of incorrect/false information • False media could be created to slander company • Information could be misinterpreted • Lack of context
- **Security:** Accounts could be hacked • Gateway for spam and malware • Fear of identity theft • Information security concerns • Breaches of privacy possible
- **Lack of control:** Little control over message and sentiment • Widespread notification beyond intended audience possible • People could misrepresent the company/brand • Inability to retract misinformation • Rumor control difficult
- **Congruity issues:** Once it is used to disseminate information, must continue to use it and update often • Followers grow accustomed to looking for information on certain channels • Concerns about not communicating quickly enough
- **Employee issues:** No employee designated or available to control social media • Release of sensitive information • Loss of productivity • Inappropriate messages • General lack of understanding of how to use social media • Runaway gossip by disgruntled/former employees

By far, the most common concern was reputational risk. However, despite concerns, respondents generally felt that the benefits of using social media as a crisis communications tool outweigh the risks.

“*The survey makes it clear that respondents view social media as the source of limitless reputational risk, resulting from the spread of inaccurate or embarrassing information. The only thing you need to remember is, ‘don’t do anything stupid.’*”

Brian Gray, Chief, Business Continuity Management Unit, United Nations
Ownership

The department responsible for social media in respondents’ organizations is most often Corporate Communications (41%), followed by Marketing (20%) and Public Relations (12%). The Business Continuity department controls social media in less than 3% of organizations, down over 1% since 2013.

“I don’t see a problem with [Corporate Communications being responsible for social media]. However, this means that the BC team needs to have good rapport with the communications department. Something in writing would be nice.”

Daniel Hahn, Plans Chief,
Santa Rosa County Emergency Management
Part 2: Notification Systems

Channels

70% of respondents use a notification system. These notification systems primarily use email (95%), phone (83%) and SMS (78%) as channels for message deployment. Almost half (47%) use dedicated mobile applications, up 10% since 2013.

“...The use of social media before, during and after disasters has quickly proven to be one of the fastest and most effective ways of getting emergency information out to the public during a crisis or disaster. Having an effective emergency social media plan is now a must for any credible company, organization and community. As business continuity professionals, we have a responsibility to adopt and adapt to help us better respond and communicate during critical events.”

Suzanne Bernier, Principal, SB Crisis Consulting
Two-way communications are used by over three-quarters (77%) of notification system users, up 7% from 2012 but remaining unchanged since 2013. Almost half (45%) use targeted broadcast areas and 37% use geospatial mapping to visually represent the location of employees, assets, incidents, etc. Targeted broadcast areas have declined since 2013; geospatial mapping has increased.

Only 16% of users import data from social media, down 2% since last year.

“There is value in taking advantage of free social media platforms, and the knowledge of staff in how to use them, but it is a common challenge that organizations are not staffed and organized to fully capitalize on the potential of social media for situational awareness and crisis communications, especially as it applies to mobile.”

Brian Gray, Chief, Business Continuity Management Unit, United Nations
A very large portion of notification system users have documented protocols for the content and deployment of notification messages (82%). Another 78% report using notification message templates.
Part 3: Perceived Effectiveness

Respondents who feel Facebook and Twitter are very useful ways to push information out to the public increased since 2013 and 2012.

Most feel that social media is useful to gather information during an event or crisis, whereas notification systems, and to a lesser extent private/closed social media platforms, are the most effective way to disseminate information to employees. While only 0.6% of respondents said notification systems were “not useful at all” when communicating with employees during crises, 27% said Facebook was not useful and 24% said Twitter was not useful. These figures are not surprising, but they do point to important distinctions between the use cases for social media and the use cases for notification systems.

Organizations that find the social media “very useful” when communicating with the public

![Pie chart showing the usefulness of different social media platforms.]

How useful is your notification system in getting messages out to employees during an event or crisis?

- Somewhat useful: 47%
- Very useful: 17%
- Invaluable: 35%
- Not useful at all: 1%
Part 4: Plans, Documents & Mobile Technologies

Crisis Communications Plans

For the 84% of respondents that have documented crisis communication plans, 36% use a stand-alone document while the rest (48%) house it in a larger document.

Over one-third (39%) of crisis communications plans are updated on a yearly basis, with 44% of these plans addressing the use of social media. The number of plans addressing social media has increased 3% since last year.

“IT seems that more companies would want to not only have a disaster strategy, but also incorporate a process for reputation management (which is really just good PR) during times of disaster.”

Daniel Hahn, Plans Chief, Santa Rosa County Emergency Management
Mobile Importance

We also asked respondents whether their organizations have a specific social media plan/strategy to be used during a disaster. 40% said yes; 60% reported no such plan.

Over half (58%) rate mobile technologies (smartphones, tablets) as absolutely vital for carrying out crisis communications plans, an increase of 5% over last year. With 42% using mobile applications that make business continuity/crisis communications plans available on mobile devices.

Social Media Guidelines

Nearly two-thirds (66%) of respondents have documented social media guidelines for employees. The same percentage of organizations have an employee or employees designated to handle all inbound/outbound communications in the event of an emergency.
Social Media Guidelines

When asked whether they incorporate social media injects into tabletop or functional exercises, 35% of respondents said yes, while 65% said no.

Do you incorporate social media injects into any of your tabletop or functional exercises?
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More Information

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