

CASE STUDY: The American Red Cross Embraces Social Media and Improves Its Image with Key Audiences

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The Red Cross' social media program has enabled the organization to track sentiment about Red Cross-related issues, respond to misconceptions when they emerge, and support praise for the Red Cross where it exists.

Conversations across social media were not on the American Red Cross' radar until Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. After taking stock of the disaster, the Red Cross realized that social media played a big role in giving ordinary people the ability to communicate their perceptions of the relief organization. Some criticism of the Red Cross in social media was fair, some was not. But the Red Cross was at a disadvantage in discovering criticism early, because it did not have an online monitoring process in place to review what people were writing and saying via social media. The Red Cross was therefore unprepared to respond directly to these criticisms online because it had not established a presence in social media.

Maura Kennedy, a 21-year veteran speechwriter for the Red Cross, described how the Red Cross commented, "We discovered that there was a lot of misinformation about the Red Cross being spread via social media, but we didn't quite know what to do about it. We then figured out that social media allowed for two-way communication and that we didn't just have to sit back and see this misinformation spread, especially misinformation that might hurt people affected by Katrina. We figured out that we could respond and correct the record. That's very different from dealing with traditional media."

After Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross decided to hire a new media specialist to monitor online conversations. Wendy Harman was hired as the Senior Associate, New Media Integration for the American Red Cross in November 2006. Wendy's first goal was to study online conversations about the Red Cross. "I think the goal was to have someone stay on top of any bad news that was leaking out so that we could address it right away before it became a big news story," says Wendy. The monitoring did reveal negative comments, but the process also unearthed many positive comments. The large volume of positive comments about the Red Cross quickly came to light, and the Red Cross set a new goal of engaging people by connecting with them online.

Wendy was charged with not only monitoring, but responding to blog posts by introducing herself: "Hi this is Wendy from the American Red Cross and I just wanted to reach out to you and let you know" Each comment is a chance for Wendy to build a relationship with a blogger. If a blogger has a problem with or criticism of the Red Cross, Wendy worked with her colleagues at the organization to address the issue. Oftentimes the bloggers will acknowledge this and thank the Red Cross with a blog post. "We've had great response and people have turned around and written additional

entries that have said, 'Thank you so much for contacting me. It was such a small gesture but it meant the world to me that the Red Cross is listening and reached out to me.' So in that respect I think we're doing a pretty good job."

Identifying Key Influencers

Monitoring hundreds of blog posts about the Red Cross is a key component of Wendy's work to identify influencers in online communities. Every day she uses online search engines like Technorati to find blog posts and comments about the Red Cross. Technorati has a ranking system, where a blog with a higher ranking indicates that the blog has many other blogs linking back to that blog. Yet, for the Red Cross, even a blog with just a few links can be important and influential. Wendy describes how the nonprofit gauges the influence of bloggers: "The Red Cross is mentioned hundreds of times a day, so I try to read every entry — from the ones that have the Technorati Authority Ranking of one or zero to those that have 30,000+. Many times posts with just two links have the best stories because the blogger has written about the CPR class she just took, or the swimming lesson he just had. Those are really powerful stories."

Wherever people are publishing, be it a blog post, Facebook or Flickr, there's a lot of passion about the Red Cross. Whether what is published is negative or positive, Wendy focuses on those who are passionate about the Red Cross to identify key influencers. Measuring passion is complex and requires more focus than just a ranking number.

Wendy describes how one blogger who writes about the Red Cross influences another and their readers, "Some bloggers are far more powerful than others but they're all important, whether they have an authority ranking of 2 or 27. Almost everyone who has a blog and donates blood is — I'm convinced of it — guaranteed to blog about their blood donation experience. I read so many of those and they're really great stories. I think people who are giving blood and writing about it have their friends read that and they are either inspired and think about donating blood for themselves. That's influence."

Culture Shift

Wendy also developed an internal presentation to educate Red Cross employees about social media. Her presence has helped to increase the

understanding of the value of social media as a way to for the Red Cross to listen to its stakeholders such as volunteers, donors and others.

Learning how to communicate in the online world where stakeholders have a voice has meant a big cultural shift for the Red Cross. "All of these social media tools are so different from the way that the Red Cross is used to communicating," notes Wendy.

How Social Media Changed Public Relations at the American Red Cross

Social media is changing the way communications professionals within the American Red Cross are conducting public relations. This new media channel gives the Red Cross the ability to connect directly with the public in a two-way conversation. The ability to set up their own blogs and other social media websites is especially important for the Red Cross when working on disasters or more mundane matters. Maura Kennedy explained how social media is a great opportunity for the nonprofit, "We no longer have to rely exclusively on traditional media to get information out to people about where they might be able to find shelter or specifically which services we provide. We now set up a blog for every disaster and people can go there to get information directly." However, the use of social media by the Red Cross requires an even faster reaction time than traditional media cycles, as the public wants immediate answers.

Now, unlike pre-Hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross is prepared to use social media when disaster strikes. The organization has a disaster portal at <http://redcross.wordpress.com>. This is where the Red Cross will create all of its disaster-focused RSS feeds. An individual chapter may set up a blog and update the blog, but the feeds are aggregated at the disaster portal. Wendy explains how the national office helps local chapters with Web support, "If the disaster is larger and covers a regional or national area, it may be a team of volunteers brought in to update it. They're not so much chapter-generated as disaster generated." The Red Cross has also launched a blog called Red Cross Chat at <http://redcrosschat.org/>, and hopes that the blog will become a community space where people will be encouraged to tell their stories about the Red Cross. Wendy is also developing a Flickr community at <http://www.flickr.com/groups/americanredcross/> where people can share their photographs online.

In addition to the national organization's blog initiatives, several Red Cross chapters also have their own blogs.

Examples include:

- Santa Cruz Chapter: <http://sccredcross.wordpress.com/>
- The Centre Daily Times <http://community.centredaily.com/> in State College, PA hosts a Red Cross blog called Paint the Town Red <http://community.centredaily.com/?q=blog/450>
- The Oregon Trail Chapter <http://redcrosspdx.blogspot.com/>
- The Galion Chapter is blogging in Ohio. <http://galchaprc.blogspot.com/>

Twitter, a popular microblogging social media technology, is also being put into use by the American Red Cross. People can subscribe to the American Red Cross Twitter feed. The feed is updated with alerts during a disaster. Wendy describes some of the reasons for the Twitter channel, "If there is a major disaster, we will start Twittering shelter locations and whatever important information we have. I'm sure you've heard that cell phone text messaging is the only thing that seems to continue to work in catastrophic situations, so now you will be able to receive Twitter text from the Red Cross. We also have a site called "Safe and Well." The Red Cross will receive people's Twitters letting us know that they are safe and well, so we can enter them onto our Safe and Well Web site and their families and friends will be able to search and find them. So if they have texting capability, they will still be able to write in and say, "I am safe and well."

Wendy described the future social media goals for the organization, "Our goals are to be able to offer these new media tools to do everything in the traditional PR sense in a bunch of different ways; via podcast, online videos, photos and text. Using these tools is definitely going to become a much bigger part of the overall PR strategy in the years to come. We have many annual campaigns that we will now be adding new media aspects to."

Social Media Technologies and Communities Technorati, Google, online forums, Facebook, and Flickr are all social media technologies Wendy visits to monitor what's being said about the Red Cross. Facebook alone has 180 groups that are dedicated to the Red Cross, and at least 500 groups in Facebook mention the Red Cross. Facebook is providing some productive ways to connect to more people who are passionate about the Red Cross. Wendy is also

excited about the opportunities with Flickr, and believes that there is great power in the compelling photos found on the site that are associated with the Red Cross. There are more than 10,000 pictures on Flickr tagged.

"I think Flickr is potentially a really powerful tool. A picture tells a thousand words and there are so many pictures that are tagged 'Red Cross.' We are working on a couple of campaigns. We did one for Malaria Awareness Day with people holding pictures that said, 'Fight the Bite' in front of them, and tag them 'Red Cross.' I think there are a lot of opportunities to have stakeholders connect with one another and support each other and get more excited about the mission of the organization via Flickr."

Over time, Wendy has identified key influencers by discovering important conversations. She described the process for finding those influencers and a short cut to reaching out to them, "I keep track of these people who are talking about their Red Cross experiences and I reach out to them. There is one main group on Facebook called American Red Cross and lot of causes and chapters that have their own Facebook sites now. I think that is going to become a central place where we can reach out to people and learn about what they're doing and thinking."

Metrics

Finding and measuring conversations is a key metric for the Red Cross, Wendy sees trends emerging, and reports on those trends and themes. "It's almost raw data that we can tag and come up with trends on what people are talking about. That has been really powerful for people to see what the public actually cares about — as opposed to what we think they care about. Sometimes it's the same and sometimes it isn't." Wendy also uses del.icio.us <<http://del.icio.us>>, a social bookmarking technology, to tag every blog post she considers important at <http://del.icio.us/AmericanRedCross>.

Conclusion

The Red Cross' social media initiative has more than met its initial goals. Online conversations are monitored and tracked, and the Red Cross has found its voice online and not only regularly engages in conversations, but also has paced itself at the hub through proactive social media campaigns and initiatives. The organization's social media program

has enabled the Red Cross to track sentiment about Red Cross-related issues, respond to misconceptions when they emerge, and support praise for the Red Cross where it exists. Today if you write about the Red Cross on a blog, the organization will read and be aware of your comments and concerns, and if necessary the Red Cross will respond and engage someone within days if not hours. It now recognizes that everyone is potentially an important influencer. The American Red Cross, like many other nonprofits, corporations and other organizations, is increasingly recognizing that they cannot take the commitment, participation, and support of their employees, donors, and the general public for granted. The Red Cross also realizes the importance of knowing what is being said about the organization and to what degree key constituents and influencers are active in the new social media environment.

The Red Cross' social media awareness strategy, made up of a variety of communication and collaboration techniques, is resulting in new levels of success with its stakeholders. By adopting a policy of connecting with interested and engaged influencers, the Red Cross is maximizing the public relations value of new social media tools.

"It just seems like it's human nature to reach out and be in touch with the people who support you - our donors, our supporters, our volunteers. We have to connect with these people in order to remain a viable organization," concludes Wendy.

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To read the complete final report, visit <http://snrcr.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/new-influencers-study.pdf>.

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