Best Practices for Traveler Information During Inclement Weather

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What We Do

• Work year-round to establish credibility as the first and best source of information.

• Look for ways to educate the public on best practices for winter preparedness, where to get information and safe driving techniques in snow and ice.

• Use traditional tools and those on the cutting edge to find people where they are now to make sure they are prepared and informed.
YouTube is considered the 4th most used search engine.

The Stats

- On a busy day (snow in the Puget Sound) we see up to 500,000 people on the WSDOT website

- On a normal day 75,000 people visit the website
Why We Do It

- Transportation arteries carry passengers/freight - keep the economy moving.

- Provide timely information so people can make the best travel decisions.
2006 and 2007

- Wind, flooding, snow and ice and resulting in numerous roadway closures
- When those storms hit, it was clear planning efforts paid off.
- Media outlets came to WSDOT first, and we were able to get public safety information out.
2010/2011….Challenges

• Multiple, unseasonably heavy and widespread snow and ice storms hit a region unaccustomed to snow and ice.

• Drivers were not prepared and had high expectations of WSDOT to deliver up-to-the-minute information and keep thousands of miles of road clear.
Taking it to the next level

- Filled in gaps to deliver and exchange information, manage expectations and rumors and put a human face on a government agency.
- In short, WSDOT used the miserable storms to take social media to the next level.
Make New Friends

• Social media tools such as Twitter, Twitpics, Flickr, Skype and mobile phone applications, led the way with three-way conversations.

• The dynamic, pro-active, informational exchange with drivers, the media and WSDOT painted a dynamic picture of storms that seemed to be different in every community and on every mile of state highways.
But keep the old

- Silver can be the “shiny toy” but don’t forget the value of “gold”
- Success of social media push, combined with traditional communications techniques – radio/TV/Newspapers
Tools and Tactics: Twitter

- Two-way conversation with drivers gave us hundreds of eyes and ears that WSDOT could never afford.
- Drivers were invaluable in helping state snow fighters identify the worst trouble spots and help other drivers avoid them.
- Hashtag: #Wasnow
- Proof of Performance: KOMO feature
Twitpic: A photo is worth?

- The public often calls media to complain that they haven’t seen a snow plow “in hours”.
- New software allowed communications staff to snap and send real time photos with the location, date and time of plows in action.
- We answered, “We are working and we are there.”
- Proof of performance: Media retweeted our pictures and our comments
Twitpics
Mobile Applications

- The public wants information on mobile devices.
- When the first storm hit and WSDOT publicized the mobile applications, downloads dramatically increased.
- Thousands of drivers stranded for hours in plunging temperatures hit the download button. In 36 hours (Nov 22-24), the applications registered 1,339 new downloads on the iPhone alone and climbed steadily in subsequent storms.
SKYPE: We are the Media

• While local media busily covered human interest stories, WSDOT delivered facts the same way: live video feeds.

• Media, unable and unwilling to send television crews to a warm and dry emergency operations center, relied on Skype as a visual connection to WSDOT. The government agency now had a face, not a bureaucracy.

• Why this worked: A real WSDOT person answering real questions live on camera quickly put the brakes on rumors and misinformation.
And live from Shoreline…
Don’t forget the groceries

• We had the tools to reach travelers and commuters. Who was missing?
• WSDOT developed a specific email alert system to communicate road closures, construction delays and emergency notifications that impact the freight community.
• Can now reach an estimated 10,000 freight contacts
The WSDOT Outreach Perspective

- 6.6 million - # of citizens in WA state
- 500,000 – # of people who go to WSDOT website in emergency
- 200,000 – # of people who we reach via email
- 75,000 – # of people we reach daily, via website
- 7,000 – # of real people following us on Twitter
- 2,700 – # of “likes” on Facebook
Trends we are seeing

- Social Media channel updates key to emergency situations
- Increasing competition for eyeballs
- High ROI for networking with hyperlocal news orgs
- Civic education curve is shifting slightly to more informed
- Huge uptick in usage to website from mobile devices.
Monitor, monitor, monitor

- Many types of platforms for social media monitoring
- Helps with rumor control and AAR
- Must first set a standard/average to measure against
- Choose your tools that will help tell your story to public and exec staff
- Analytics, SEO, find out what they mean
In the end…

- Find the people where they are – don’t force them to use your tools
- Don’t forget about the website as that’s what you control
- Remember it’s not free – anticipate staff time and expertise to make sure it’s done right
- In other words, don’t just give it to the Intern
- If you have questions, ask them.