

PREPARING SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSES BEFORE A CRISIS HITS

When a crisis hits, your city's residents will quickly turn to the Internet for answers to their most-pressing questions. So how can city government prepare in advance for problems that may emerge around the corner?

ACKNOWLEDGE EARLY

In the 'social age' of crisis communications, time is of the essence. Local government will be expected to respond to questions and concerns in a prompt manner. By staying silent, you can easily lose control of the situation, letting speculation and guesswork take over. Instead, use your social media outlets to acknowledge the situation early on and inform the public that you are looking into it and/or working to resolve it as soon as possible.

Even if your statement doesn't include any facts or significant content, the mere mention that you are aware and alert to the situation can help you earn your citizens' trust. This can help position you as the leader who they can turn to for timely, accurate information.

DEVELOP "HOLDING" RESPONSES

While it's impossible to foresee every eventuality, having a prepared set of early or "holding" social media responses will help you stick to your key message points and maintain a consistent voice on social media in the midst of all the chaos. You'll also want to consider keywords and potential "hashtags" to help your residents find crisis-related messages on Twitter and similar outlets.

Create a list of potential crises by cataloguing dozens of common scenarios that could evolve into a crisis for your community. No matter how outlandish or unlikely the scenario, include it on your potential crisis list. Once you have developed your list, create a set of key messages that address the various stages of a crisis; these will serve as a foundation for your social media responses. Consider common questions that may be asked and think about how your responses will be perceived by the public and the media.

While many of the responses may not be directly applicable to the crisis at hand, it's easier to edit preliminary responses than it is to create new ones from scratch – especially when you're racing against the clock with just moments to spare. Share your crisis list and responses with various stakeholders (e.g., community outreach, emergency management, legal) to prevent issues of voice, policy and law that could pop up during a crisis.

Here are some examples of effective initial social media responses, which can carry you until more detailed information becomes available:

"Our crews are assessing the damage. We'll provide an update as soon as possible. Remain in a safe place and wait for further instructions."

"Our hearts go out to the victims. We are working to gather information about exactly what happened, and expect to have an update shortly."

“We're aware of the allegations and are looking into the matter. We'll provide updates as soon as we have additional information to report.”

“Due to the high volume of questions, we can't respond to individual requests at this time. For immediate assistance, call ###-###-####.”