

**EMA Web Site Speech
Medical Reserve Corps of Kansas City
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Welcome to the Digital Age

Please let me start by saying that for the purposes of tonight's presentation, I am planning to use the term *emergency management* as a generic term that covers all aspects of public safety and emergency response.

In the 1980s and 90s we had to adapt to a brave new world, one with a 24/7 news cycle fueled by cable television. Now we are in the era of the "citizen journalist" where anyone with a smart phone or an Internet connection can spread his or her version of the truth to the entire world. And now, thanks to Twitter, that information comes in bite-sized bursts of information 140 characters or less.

For emergency managers, this new technology brings both opportunities and challenges. In many ways, you face the same challenges that confront today's marketers – getting your messages heard in an increasingly crowded marketplace of ideas. And frankly, because of a public disenchantment with government, it can be hard to get people to listen to you even if they hear you above the din.

Hurricane Katrina

For those of you of my generation – a generation to whom the names of Alan Shepard, John Glenn and Neil Armstrong have special significance – we can remember at time when NASA was the darling of the American people. To many, it represented the best our government had to offer. It was an agency that expressed the hopes and dreams of the American people. It was the "can-do" agency that helped us beat the Russians to the moon.

Unfortunately, that changed in January 1986 with the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. NASA's poor handling of that incident – especially in the area of public communications -- led to investigations and recriminations. It didn't take long for the luster to come off of NASA's public image. For many people, the space agency had become just another bunch of bumbling bureaucrats. And while NASA has since restored much of its reputation, it will never enjoy the same level of public admiration it had before Challenger.

For those of us in the emergency management community, Hurricane Katrina was our Challenger. It didn't take long for us to move from "heroes" to "heels" in much of the public's eyes. And it doesn't really matter that much of the criticism was unfounded...based on false assumptions...or fueled by speculative reporting by journalists trying to satisfy the unquenchable thirst of the 24/7 news cycle. The fact remains that some of the criticisms were justified. And the poor handling of public

communications at the time of the event contributed to the public's negative perceptions.

Resource Dependency Theory

At this point, I have an admission to make: I am an academic. (I am sure that conjures up a variety of images – some positive and some negative.) However, before I became an educator, I was a journalist and a government public information officer. “Plain speaking” is in my D-N-A. I also prefer “real world practical” instead of the theoretical – although theory does have its place.

With that in mind, I'd like to talk with you about one theory: Resource Dependency Theory. The idea is fairly simple, but important. Every organization has a number of stakeholders important to its success. Those stakeholders possess resources the organization needs -- such as financial and political support. In turn, each organization possesses resources those stakeholders need. In your case, the various mechanisms of government designed to keep them safe. This realization that organizations and individuals need each other – are resource dependent – opens a variety of opportunities for cooperation and understanding.

With this in mind, I'd like to state a simple truth: We are in the business of public safety. That means we have to effectively communicate with one another – especially with the people with whom we have been charged to protect. However, technology is constantly changing the world. While the traditional means of communicating with the people are still valuable, they are not as effective as they used to be. The key to communicating effectively with people is to use the channels of communication they prefer. And the reality of the Digital Age is that more and more people are best reached through nontraditional media.

Background: Web Site Study

Last year, I conducted a survey analysis of the 51 state emergency management agency Web sites. (The study included the District of Columbia.) I catalogued the content of each site to determine what I have called its content-richness. This was an attempt to measure the presence of information. It was not an attempt to determine the quality of the information. I also looked at these Web sites from a journalist's eye. How “media friendly” were they? Did they have active on-line newsrooms? How easy was it to directly contact the Public Information Officer?

In addition to the content analysis, I invited the 51 public information officers to answer a short questionnaire. Twenty-three PIOs – 45 percent – responded. While that was not as good as I hoped, it was an exceptionally good response rate for an online survey. As it turned out, the survey respondents were fairly representative of the nation, as a whole. In the end, I developed 13 findings and six recommendations. They are spelled out in detail in the report I have brought with me today. I would like to summarize just a few of them.

Findings

Perhaps the most significant finding was that the state EMA Web sites are not really targeting whom the PIOs said they are. The PIOs said the primary target of these Web sites were the people of their states. However, the most-prevalent information found on these sites was training information for local and state EM officials. There's nothing wrong with this. A beauty of the Internet is that it is possible to target multiple stakeholders at the same time. However, the numbers don't lie – these sites pay more attention to the needs of internal audiences than they do those of the public at large.

In agencies where the PIO reports directly to the director or agency head, the Web sites tended to be more content rich than those where the PIO is located lower in the chain of command. However, the person who actually maintains the Web site appears to have more effect on its content-richness than the person actually charged with overseeing site content. What these findings tell me is that the more managerial and Web-savvy PIOs are, the more content rich their Web sites will be.

While the respondents see some value in the Internet, they do not see the Internet as the equal to more traditional media outlets. They appear to overlook the role that non-traditional media played during and after Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, and California wild fires.

Less than half of the state EMA Web sites is media-friendly. By that, I mean that the PIO was identified by name...telephone/e-mail contact information was provided...and the Web site's newsroom was within one mouse click of the home page. One out of every five Web sites did not identify the PIO by name. These findings appear to run contrary to value of transparency to which public agencies must adhere. Conversely, the more content-rich the Web site, the more likely it is that the PIO feels that the news media are doing a good job of covering his or her agency, and that the agency, overall, has a good relationship with the media.

In case you are wondering, Maryland has the most content-rich state EMA Web site, followed by Virginia and Pennsylvania. Kansas is tied with five other states for fourth. Missouri is 31st. Mississippi and South Dakota are tied for last. Again, I will stress that I measured the presence of information, not necessarily the quality of that information.

The top 10 hazards mentioned on these Web sites (in order of ranking) are: Floods, Hazardous winter weather, chemical and hazardous materials accidents, terrorism, fire, tornadoes, health-related issues, extreme temperatures, radiological/nuclear power plant accidents, and earthquakes.

Recommendations – Based on this research, I have made six recommendations:

Recommendation 1 – State emergency management agencies must do a better job of defining the purposes and targeted stakeholders when designing and administering their Web sites.

Because of the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, it is easy to understand why some may believe that one size fits all. It hardly seems to be a medium appropriate for targeting individual audiences. Its ability to target multiple messages to multiple publics have led some to use the “splatter theory” when determining Web site content: Just throw everything onto the Web and see what sticks. There often does not seem to be a strategic (goal-driven) reason for the material posted.

It also is important to remember that the Internet is a medium and not the message. It is not enough to have an Internet presence. Web sites are portals for reaching multiple audiences. However, messages should be tailored to meet both the strategic needs of the EMAs and the information needs of the individual publics.

Recommendation 2 – State emergency management planners must recognize that the Internet and emerging social media are as important in public outreach – even during emergencies – as more traditional media.

While traditional mass communication sources of information – radio, television and newspapers – continue as important channels for reaching the American public, the nontraditional Internet and wireless social media must also be considered. According to a 2006 Pew Internet and American Life Project study, 45 percent of Internet users – about 60 million Americans – said that the Internet helped them make big decisions or negotiate their way through major episodes in their lives. An earlier Pew report noted that half of online Americans turned to the Internet for news and information about Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Three out of four dispersed New Orleans residents who went online during the crisis reported visiting an online discussion forum. More than half said they posted messages.

Following the Virginia Tech shootings and California wildfires in 2007, researchers found that social networking Web sites such as Facebook, blogs and instant messaging were better at warning affected individuals than traditional media sources. Charlie Bryan shared with me the results of a recent survey of Kansas City area residents. It confirms these trends. While television and radio remain the preferred sources residents turn to for emergency information, the Internet came in third – ahead of newspapers and local emergency officials. And if you think about it – among the top three choices, the Internet is the only communications outlet over which you have complete message control.

The focus of this research was the Internet. However, the growth of wireless communication has also led to advances in emergency notification through text messaging to cellular telephones.

While that technology is outside the scope of this research, it is certainly among the social media presenting emergency managers with new opportunities for public outreach. While some may express concerns about the fragility of the Internet and social media infrastructure during calamities, the fact is that all digital age communications face similar vulnerabilities. The Federal Communications Commission has noted that some social media systems, such as text messaging, cell phone and personal data assistants (PDAs), may continue to function while other systems fail. It is true that the Internet is least reliable during periods in which electricity is disrupted and there is severe infrastructure damage. However, the same can be said of almost all emergency communications. Nor does this diminish the value of social media in the areas preparedness (pre-disaster) and recovery (post-disaster).

In an era when mass communications channels are becoming more and more diffused with the passage of time, the need to reach the public through the media they prefer is increasingly critical. While the traditional mass communication media will continue to play a vital role in the near future, the evidence suggests that emergency planners should place the Internet and emerging social media on an equal footing.

Recommendation 3 – The content of state emergency management agency Web sites should be under the direction of public information officers who have direct access to an agency’s top manager.

The United Nations’ International Strategy for Disaster Reduction defines emergency management as “the organization and management of resources and responsibilities for dealing with all aspects of emergencies, in particularly preparedness, response and rehabilitation.” Inherent in that – or any – definition of the term is the mastery of communications between the various entities and individuals in a position to effect solutions. That is why it is ironic that many Web sites – increasingly important links between the agencies and the publics they serve – are administered by those not trained as professional public communicators. It is ironic that the first “voice” people “hear” is often that of a Web designer or an HTML coder.

The essence of management – and leadership – is communication. Emergency managers do not build sandbag levies against rising floodwaters or serve as staff in shelters after natural disasters. They *communicate* with people who make those things happen. Considering that the public is likely the most important stakeholder in any crisis scenario – after all, they are *public* agencies – it is logical to assume that communication with this important audience should be in the hands of persons most experienced in both public relations practice and its tools.

Recommendation 4 – State emergency management officials must make agency Web sites more accessible to the public and the news media.

Perhaps the most disheartening finding of this study had to do with the lack of transparency and accessibility to agency public information officers. While most (74.51 percent) had online newsrooms directly linked the agency's home page, less than half (45.9 percent) identified the PIO by name and provided direct telephone numbers and e-mail links. Even that number is somewhat misleading. In preparing the e-mail address list for the survey, this information was frequently dispersed, requiring researchers to scour different sections of the Web site to glean that information. In an ideal situation, PIO contact information should be placed in one convenient spot, such as in the online newsroom.

Reporters face deadline pressures as demanding as those faced by emergency managers. And both, in their own ways, are serving the public interest. So why would anyone assume that journalists have the time to search an agency Web site for important contact information? Of course, the answer is that no one really assumes that. It is not an error of commission as much as it is one of omission. This situation exists because many agencies have not been as proactive in media relations planning as they have with other aspects of their mission.

I understand that there is a legitimate need to control direct media and public access to the public information officer and his/her staff. They could be easily overwhelmed by public inquiries at the times they are busiest. Some states such as Texas have solved this problem by providing password-protected access for journalists. However, in an era where emergency response has become a political touchstone, there is a need to place the value of transparency over that of expedience.

Recommendation 5 – State emergency management public information officers should be knowledgeable in the use of Internet technology.

The study concluded that the person maintaining the agency Web site appears to have a higher influence on its content richness than the person actually entrusted with that responsibility. If we were discussing newspapers, this would be the equivalent of the printing press operator having more influence over content than the reporters or editors. Another finding was that Web sites using a state government mandated template were more content-rich than those designed in-house. This also suggests a greater need for in-house Web design skills.

This recommendation does not suggest that the public information officer should be the Web designer. In many situations, that is just not practical. However, the more public information officers understand Web capabilities, the better they can instruct Web designers in how to use them. Even a basic understanding of Web

design and architecture could prove beneficial at times staff resources are strained.

The dairy and beef industries demonstrated the value of the Web in crisis communications in 2003, when the first case of mad cow disease was reported in the U.S. Having learned from the mistakes Europeans made when confronted with an outbreak of the disease in 2001, several industry associations developed emergency Web sites with a wealth of information designed to inform the news media and comfort consumers. Those Web sites – sometimes referred to as *dark sites* - remained off-line until the first mad cow report surfaced. At that moment, they were immediately posted on-line. These and other tactics helped to minimize what could otherwise have been a catastrophic economic disaster for the cattle and dairy industries.

Recommendation 6 – State emergency management agencies should simplify their Web site URLs to facilitate public outreach.

State EMA Web addresses, URLs, may be a barrier to Web site accessibility. Only 13.7 percent of state emergency management agencies had Web sites with easy-to-remember URLs. While the existence of state government Web portals and search engines mitigate this problem, it doesn't entirely eliminate it.

The telephone company understood this concept from its earliest days. By assigning letters to each number on the dial, customers were able to create memory aids to increase business traffic. An example of this concept in action is the North Carolina Department of Commerce's 1-800-VisitNC telephone number. The federal government has taken the lead with easy-to-remember Web addresses such as Ready.gov, Floodsmart.gov and Disasterhelp.gov. As noted in the report, several states also have adopted user-friendly Web addresses. As Charlie Bryan has pointed out to me, this region's emergency preparedness web site, www.preparemetrokc.org, is a good example of an easy-to-remember URL. (I might add that I like this Web site a lot. It is user-friendly and clearly targeted to the people of the KC-metro area.)

Not only are the URLs for these Web sites easy to remember, they are also easier to promote in agency communications. In the example already noted, North Carolina tourism officials promote their state by using a Web address, www.visitnc.com, that is similar to their promotional telephone number.

If some are wary of using marketing tactics in emergency management, it is good to remember that the two disciplines have similar goals – reaching the most people as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Concluding Remarks

As I noted in the preamble to my report, state emergency managers have always approached their jobs with the highest levels of professionalism and commitment to public safety. In the best of times, theirs is a difficult job. However, their challenge has become more difficult because of the factors I have already cited.

My goal is not to criticize, but to analyze. I hope this report serves as a catalyst for improved Internet practices that, ultimately, will aid emergency managers in fulfillment of their critical mission. My experience has been, and will continue to be, that despite whatever flaws this or other studies may uncover, that the overwhelming majority of local, state and federal emergency management officials and first responders are professionals dedicated to public safety. For that, they have earned our undying gratitude.