Determining Social Media Best Practices to Educate and Inform the Public

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is

set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the

language, ideas, expressions, or writing of another.

Signed: *Bechi White*

Date: October 12, 2016

Abstract

In an era of social media and rapid information distribution via mobile devices, having research-based best practices to educate and rapidly disseminate information to the public is a critical need for the fire and emergency services. The problem was that the Eden Prairie Fire Department did not have guidance developed on using social media platforms to educate and inform the public. The purpose of this action research project was to develop a social media outreach strategy, based on social media best practices, for a Midwest combination fire department, to better communicate with their local, national, and global community. Research questions focused on identifying social media platforms used by similar emergency response agencies, how they used social media to educate and inform the public, and what policies the other agencies had in place in reference to the information they published on social media. A survey of emergency response agencies representing 43 states and two other countries was conducted and compared with the best practices identified in the literature review. The combined research drove the recommendation for the creation of a social media task force, the development of a standard operating guideline for social media use on behalf of the Department, and the establishment of a strategic plan for social media outreach. These changes allow the Eden Prairie Fire Department to inform and educate the community it serves on a daily basis and in the event of a crisis.

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The Eden Prairie Fire Department (EPFD) is a fire and emergency medical services (EMS) based agency, which responds to emergencies, big or small, continually striving to meet the ever-changing needs of the community. One significant area of change is in the way community members receive and process information. Emergency response agencies must package safety and prevention messaging to better align with the regular consumption of information (Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Identifying the information-gathering platforms most used by target audiences is the first step in determining what strategies should be used to disseminate information. Capitalizing on new methods increases the potential to educate the community and expand communication channels with citizens during large-scale emergencies. These efforts have the ability to reduce injuries to residents and visitors as well as lower operational costs for responding agencies.

How people acquire day-to-day and emergency information has changed dramatically over the past decade and continues to evolve at a staggering pace. The implementation of social media websites contributes to this shift. Social media refers to websites and applications that assist users in communicating with others by creating, sharing and reacting to content. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center report, 62% of the adults in the United States turn to social media for news, which is up from 49% in 2012 (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016, p. 2). Once used to drive sales of newspapers, headlines have now become the news. People receive their information by way of 140-character statements on Twitter, linked posts on Facebook, captions attached to photos on Instagram, and the like.

Published fire safety education and prevention messages developed and disseminated by the EPFD were solely in the form of flyers and handouts. The City of Eden Prairie has an

informational website which allows EPFD, as a Department of the City, to provide information

about the organization. Consumers drove the establishment of the website; they were using the

computer more and expected to be able to access information through that medium. Websites

are static, consumers of information need to be motivated to search for information before they

receive it. Usually, the target audience of fire safety education and other prevention information

are not the people browsing fire safety websites, looking to be informed. In an article written for

Fire Engineering, traditional fire prevention education methods were likened to fishing and

SCUBA diving. Instead of placing fire safety information on static websites, like the angler

throwing out the bait and waiting for the fish, fire departments need to dive in where their target

audience is, understand the terrain, and disseminate information in those places (White, 2014).

Instead of waiting for community members to seek out information on static websites,

emergency service agencies need to go to where they spend their time, on social media, to

disseminate safety and prevention messages.

By not having a stronger social media presence, EPFD is missing out on an opportunity

to educate and inform the community and others on fire and life safety information. The EPFD

needs to continue to evolve its message delivery by creating a strong social media presence to get

in front of the target audience on day-to-day issues so that they turn to the fire department as a

credible source for timely information in emergency situations.

The problem is that the Eden Prairie Fire Department does not have guidance developed

on using social media platforms to educate and inform the public. The purpose of this research is

to develop a social media outreach plan that will allow the fire department to better serve the

community. Action research methodology will be applied to this research resulting in the

development of a strategic plan for social media outreach for the Eden Prairie Fire Department.

The following questions will be answered in this research: a) What social media platforms are being used by similar emergency response agencies to inform the public? b) How are other agencies using social media to educate and inform the public? c) What policies or directives do similar emergency response agencies operate under regarding the information they post to social media?

Background and Significance

The Eden Prairie Fire Department (EPFD) was founded in 1967 to provide fire and rescue services for the City of Eden Prairie, a 32.45 square mile, second-tier suburb in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area with a 2013 estimate of 62,603 residents (U.S. Census Bureau State and County Quick Facts, Eden Prairie, MN n.d.). The EPFD is a combination department with nine full-time and 95 part-time staff. The full-time staff consists of the fire chief, two assistant chiefs, an administrative assistant, a radio technician, and four fire inspectors; all of whom respond to calls for service during the daytime hours. On the weekends and the early mornings and evenings of the weekdays, the response staffing consists of two stations staffed with three firefighters at each station. In the overnight hours, three stations are staffed with a combined total of eight firefighters (Fire Department, City of Eden Prairie website, n.d.).

The mission of the Eden Prairie Fire Department is, "We lead and strive to minimize risk, increase safety, and improve the quality of life in our community through education, code compliance, and emergency response" (Fire Department, City of Eden Prairie website, n.d.). To meet the fire department's mission to minimize risk and increase safety, specifically through education, the Department is hoping to capitalize on the use of social media for fire prevention and emergency response messaging. The department has relied on reaching the community

during in-person open houses, small group educational and informational sessions, a static

website presence, and flyers and hand-outs. Though these avenues have provided contact with

the community, dissemination could be expanded by utilizing social media platforms.

The EPFD has a blog page that is used intermittently and the department occasionally

contributes fire safety-related posts to the City of Eden Prairie's Facebook page. Access to that

account is through the Communications Division within the City and has a general audience

including residents and non-residents. The fire department messaging has appeared minimally

over the eight years the Facebook page has been in existence. There is no consistency to the

posting of information or the timeliness of events as they relate to the dissemination on the page.

The City of Eden Prairie, in its Crisis Communications Handbook, lists the

communication tools available for Public Information Officers and Incident Commanders,

including both internal and external communications platforms. The external platforms include

social media pages on Facebook for the City as a whole and the police department, as well as a

Twitter account for the police department. There is no reference to communication tools

specifically targeted for the fire department. The handbook also categorizes the types of

emergencies into two levels. Level one includes localized flooding, missing people, emergency

road closures, and other similar types of localized emergencies for public works and police

department response and excludes call types related to the fire department (City of Eden Prairie,

2013).   The level two crisis examples include large-scale fires, along with severe weather and

other emergencies that would affect the community as a whole (City of Eden Prairie, 2013).

Since the fire department is included minimally in the Crisis Communications Plan for the City

of Eden Prairie, there is a need to develop a fire department plan that would integrate into the

overall city-wide plan.

The research put forth in this paper will identify and analyze how other emergency response agencies capitalize on social media to educate and inform their communities. It will assess how the public consumes information, and provide guidance on best practices for managing social media platforms and packaging information for dissemination. A strategic plan will be developed for integrating the use of social media by the fire department to educate and inform the public. This plan will include the designation of a coordinator position overseeing the use of social media to expand our audience. A recommendation for a Standard Operating Guideline (SOG) on social media use on behalf of the Eden Prairie Fire Department for the purpose of informing the public, which aligns with the City of Eden Prairie Crisis Communications Handbook, will be submitted for review by the Fire Chief.

This paper aligns with the Executive Fire Officer Program's Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management course content, specifically units 6-10. Each unit covers a specific natural disaster, in order: flood, tornado, earthquake, wildland fire, and hurricane (US Department of Homeland Security – FEMA, 2015). In each of the units, one of the common problems in emergency response was the ability to communicate effectively with the community and the public at large related to the disaster response and recovery. The use of social media, which was not an option in any of the specific case studies, would have enhanced the communication dissemination in each of the disasters. The purpose of this research is the creation of an outreach strategy using social media to communicate with the public who has an interested in emergency response within the City of Eden Prairie. The strategy will be developed by answering the following questions: a) What social media platforms are being used by similar emergency response agencies to inform the public? b) How are other agencies using social media to educate and inform the public? c) What policies or directives do similar emergency response

agencies operate under regarding the information they post to social media? The problem this

research focuses on is that the Eden Prairie Fire Department has not used social media platforms

consistently to build an audience to disseminate timely, effective information in emergency

situations. With the development of social media platforms, designated members of the Eden

Prairie Fire Department will be able to use the platforms to distribute risk reduction, emergency

preparedness, and response information. These three United States Fire Administration strategic

framework goals align with that problem: "1: Reduce fire and life safety risk through

preparedness, prevention, and mitigation. 2: Promote response, local planning, and preparedness

for all hazards, 3: Enhance the fire and emergency services' capability for response to and

recovery from all hazards" (U.S. Fire Administration [USFA], 2014, p. 10-12). By developing a

program that allows for broad-based information dissemination, the EPFD will be able to

communicate in a timelier manner on fire and life safety related information and in preparation

for, and response to, emergencies and natural disasters.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

According to a 2016 study from Gottfried and Shearer, 62% of Americans turn to social

media to get their news, which is up 13% from a study done four years before. The paper cites

that Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit users are more likely to get their news from those sites than

other social media sites (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). The motivation of the consumers is a major

factor in the use of social media platforms. A 2012 research paper turned to the Uses and

Gratifications Theory of Katz published in 1973, to provide context to social media use; the

theory identifies four categories of human need: emotional, cognitive, social and habitual. The

research states that social media use is driven by all four categories (Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012).

There have been several reasons uncovered for why the public turns to social media during

disasters; they include convenience, timely or unique information, a sense of community, and for

emotional support and healing. People will actively seek out the platform that will gratify those

needs for them (Fraustino et al., 2012). Fraustino et al. (2012) go on to say that people targeted

their use of social media depending on their needs; Twitter was sought out for breaking news,

YouTube was used to view and share disaster images, and blogs satisfied emotional release and

support. Disasters may bring those who are inactive on social media to social media platforms

during a disaster, as was the case in 2011 during the Joplin, Missouri tornado response

(Williams, Williams, & Burton, 2012).

Social media websites are plentiful now, but they started with the first networking site

called Six Degrees in 1997 (History Cooperative, June 16, 2015). Six Degrees was based on the

"Six Degrees of Separation" theory and allowed users to set up a profile and connect with other

users. The website continued suggesting connections for their users until 2001. Weblogs, now

referred to as blogs, followed Six Degrees in the early 2000s. MySpace was the first large social

media site in 2003, followed by Facebook in 2005 and Twitter in 2006 (History Cooperative,

June 16, 2015).

Businesses started turning to social media to market their products and services around

2010 (History Cooperative, June 16, 2015). Government agencies were slower to adopt social

media. Social media has proven to be a way to get information out to the masses. However,

social media remained underutilized by emergency management professionals because

responders were reluctant to share information in that manner (Simon, Goldberg, & Adini,

2015). Government agencies focus on verifying information before releasing it, which slows the

distribution and propagation speed of dissemination (Olteanu, Vieweg, & Castillo, March 2015).

Sometimes the delay is caused by levels of approval needed before posting is allowed, coupled

with the belief that the message must be just right (Buller, 2015). This slowdown is not unique

to the United States; Australia (Dufty, 2015) and China (Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012) noted

similar lags in social media use by emergency response agencies.

The public is spreading information as soon as it happens or as soon as they hear it,

whether their version is valid or not (Ferraro, 2013). On average, only 4-5% of the disaster

information available on Twitter originates from emergency response agencies (Olteanu et al.,

March 2015). Weather-related disasters or other similar events with a pre-warning period

showed preparedness messages posted early on. In contrast, documented crises with little or no

warning showed the messages came out much later in the flow of disaster information (Pittman,

2015; Olteanu et al., March 2015). In 2007, when wildfires were spreading across Southern

California, the public turned to social media because of the perceived lag on the part of the

journalists and public officials (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008). The first reports of the

Sichuan Earthquake in China in May 2008 came from Twitter users, not the Chinese

Government (Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Social media will impact all aspects of disaster

responses; it is up to responding agencies on their level of involvement and ability to play a hand

in whether the effect is positive or negative (Ferraro, 2013). A view of social media was offered,

changing the role of community members from content consumers into content producers,

creating a link between response agencies and the public to not only inform, but involve,

collaborate with, and empower them (Dufty, 2011).

The implementation of social media platforms should be treated like other operational

initiatives. Policies, procedures, and personnel guidance should be created, along with

identifying the level of resources or financial obligations (Smith, 2010). Government

organizations that want to use social media as a tool in crisis response communication should

establish their policies and procedures, gather support from the management level, and determine

what level of information should be shared (Simon et al., 2015). A good social media policy is

important because it guides staff and the public on an agency's approach to social media (Dalton,

2015; Simon et al., 2015). Dalton (2015) goes on to say that policies should strive to be positive

and encouraging, rather than sounding like an agency is against the use of social media. It should

also only broadly define social media rather than using specific terminology because platforms

frequently change, thus using language about specific platforms like Facebook and Twitter could

exclude similar platforms that are created after the policy has been established. The policy

should instead use terms like social network sites, video sharing platforms, and microblogs

(Dalton, 2015).

When considering a social media presence, one article suggests researching social media

platforms and planning out the process rather than just jumping in will lead to an ability to

capture the success or challenges of using social media (Greenberg, 2011). Starting small is the

best way, mastering the use of one social media platform and expanding, rather than committing

to multiple social media platforms all at once. The first step should be an investigation of which

social media platforms are appropriate for an agency and the messages being posted (Greenberg,

2011; Pfeiffer, 2013). Having a presence before an emergency is critical, and keeping the flow

of information current is essential. Starting a page and leaving it stagnant may give the

impression that the page is no longer active or the agency is not invested in informing the

community (White, 2012; Murphy, 2013). There are additional negative consequences to weigh

as well: malicious use, pranks or false information, technological limitations, administrative and

training costs, and privacy issues should all be considered and assessed (Lindsay, 2011). A

benefit of the use of social media is that it humanizes response agencies, giving them a voice and

providing a platform to educate and inform audiences that may have been inaccessible in the past (Ferraro, 2013). The humanizing component has been used by corporations for decades. It comes to companies by way of brand recognition or brand loyalty; corporations often take to social media with a clear vision, mission and strategic plan (Schoppman, 2012).

Use of social media in disaster recovery requires constant monitoring and mining of social media sites, which does not end when the initial response is over since disaster recovery can take months (Williams et al., 2012). There is a likelihood that agencies will have to sift through hundreds or thousands of posts an hour. On November 7, 2013, Typhoon Haiyan, one of the deadliest typhoons recorded, made landfall in the Philippines. An analysis of the tweets from November 7-11, 2013, found that more than 111,600 tweets were recorded from 66,980 unique users, but only 478 of those users were geo-located in the Philippines (Wolcott, Pollack, & Tran, 2014). Some emergency management agencies are reaching out to Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOSTs) to tackle the enormity of the task of social media mining. VOSTs are made up of volunteers who are in many different locations who can connect over the internet, versus needing to be in the same room at the same time, which allows responders to focus on other tasks (Raths, 2015). Information sorting has to go beyond identifying trends; it needs to also address correcting errors in the information that has been shared. Individuals who are tasked with mining social media need to be empowered to correct and respond to errors that are posted by response agencies and the general public (Buller, 2015). Another concern during emergencies is the shift of expectation by the population that response will be coming if they request aid through social media platforms, making information monitoring crucial (Becker, 2010). Response speeds and capabilities need to be communicated to the community on day-to-day emergencies and events that overwhelm normal staffing (Holdeman, 2013). Holdeman, 2013 cites a Red Cross

survey of 1,058 adults, conducted in 2011 that found that 75% of respondents expected help to arrive within an hour of posting a request for help.

An educated and informed community is likely to be more resilient in disaster situations. Finding ways to inform and educate communities on disaster preparedness and typical responses will benefit both the safety and well-being of the people and the effectiveness of the response (Houston et al., 2014). Social media can assist by connecting individuals and organizations before, during and after emergency events (Houston et al., 2014). A congressional report stated that social media use in emergencies can be sorted into two categories, passively by distributing information and receiving user feedback, or systematically as a conduit to the situation itself: issuing emergency communication, receiving requests for aid, providing situational awareness, and conducting damage assessments through uploaded images (Lindsay, 2011).

Systematic use of social media may provide situational awareness reports during disaster management. Those reports can be generated by residents, local news outlets, responders, and other sources. Social media provides access to information and the ability to disseminate information to a wide audience in a timely manner and to get a better idea of what is happening during a crisis (Yasin, 2010; Simon et al., 2015). A study on social media and disasters found that "Effective disaster communication may prevent a disaster or lessen its impact, whereas ineffective disaster communication may cause a disaster to make its effects worse" (Houston et al., 2014, p. 1).

Communication is a vital tool to emergency management as weather or other foreseeable disasters approach, during an event and after. Social media use was cited as a factor in response and recovery for many disasters. The month following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in New York brought in more than $100 million of disaster relief online; and the 2005 relief

efforts after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana were spurred

significantly with 13 million Americans donating through relief organizations online (Fraustino

et al., 2012). Fraustino et al., (2012) went on to say that social media went beyond fundraising

and became more emotional for Katrina survivors creating connections and a sense of

community for those who were forced to relocate across the country. On January 12, 2010, Haiti

suffered a catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake. Shortly after the earthquake, many pre-

established groups were able to combine their efforts and collect data and create maps that were

shared with the Haitian government, emergency workers, and the United States Army to enhance

their response efforts (Simon et al., 2015). From January 12-14, 2010, there were an estimated

2.3 million posts on Twitter, containing the words "Haiti" or information to donate to the Red

Cross (Fraustino et al., 2012; Pfeiffer, 2013). In 2011, Tuscaloosa, Alabama and Joplin,

Missouri were extensively damaged by tornados. Social media played a large part in the

response and recovery providing public information, location information for survivors, as well

as donation and volunteer information and opportunities (Fraustino et al., 2012). After the

landfall of Hurricane Sandy on the Atlantic coast of the northeastern United States in 2012, more

than 20 million tweets related to Sandy were posted, even though there was cellular service loss

in the immediate area (Fine Maron, 2013; Pfeiffer, 2013).

　　　　There are other uses for social media outside of disaster response. Besides straight

dissemination of information, social media can be used for prevention education, public

relations, public information, customer service, collaboration and networking, loyalty-building,

and customer acquisition, to name a few (Duvall, 2012; Spoons, 2012). Gary Keith, from the

National Fire Protection Association, suggests that social media is a tool that can be used to

spread fire and life safety legislation information not only locally, but around the world (Keith,

2012). In a separate article, Keith suggests that social media provides access to a far wider audience for fire and life safety education messages, including residential fire sprinklers (Keith, 2011). In the United Kingdom, South York Fire Rescue Services is using Facebook and Twitter for emergency and non-emergency messages; they have cultivated a following on social media and through partnerships with a community supermarket providing an opportunity to incentivize their online home fire safety program (Mills, 2012).

Procedures

The procedures enlisted for this applied research project consisted of a review of relevant literature to develop background knowledge applicable to the following questions, "What social media platforms are being used by similar emergency response agencies to inform the public?," "How are other agencies using social media to educate and inform the public?" and "What policies or directives do similar emergency response agencies operate under regarding the information they post to social media?" The information gained is listed in the literature review section, and spring boarded the research recorded in the sections following.

Emergency-based agencies have a vested interest in educating the public on prevention and safety initiatives as well as reaching the public in emergency situations. The fire service's typical partners in emergency and disaster response are police, emergency medical services (EMS), and emergency management agencies. A feedback instrument targeted at emergency response departments (Appendix B) was conducted using the website Survey Monkey, an online survey website, to address the research questions. Respondents were asked via email to complete the feedback instrument during the week of September 11-18, 2016. The request was shared via email to 44 statewide contacts and an additional 23 out of state contacts. Each of the 67 contacts was selected based on their participation in emergency services and geographic

location. Of the 44 statewide contacts, 38 were fire and fire/EMS response agencies, one police

agency, two joint police and fire agencies, three EMS-based agencies, and one emergency

manager. The 23 remaining contacts were personal contacts outside of Minnesota, spread across

the United States representing fire and fire/EMS response agencies. Each of the contacts

emailed was asked to complete the feedback instrument and share it with their emergency service

contacts. Since the feedback instrument was based on social media use, a request to complete

the feedback instrument was posted on three fire-related Facebook groups; a National Fire

Academy Executive Fire Officer 2014-2017 class page with 126 members, a closed female

firefighter group called Triple F, with 2,407 members, and a training group called the Northland

FOOLS, with 212 members. It was also posted to the researcher's personal Facebook page and

personal Twitter account. A blog post request was posted on the Fire Engineering Community

blog site, which was viewed 261 times from September 12 to September 18. A link to the blog

request was posted to the Facebook and Twitter sites of Firefighter Nation and the Facebook

page of Fire Engineering on September 13. Because of a wide release of the request, an accurate

count of the number of people exposed to the request is impossible to measure. The feedback

instrument included 12 multiple-choice questions and one fill-in answer question. There were

four demographic related questions, identifying the type of emergency-based agency, the size of

the community, and the fill-in answer question asked the name and location of the agency. A

fourth question in the introduction section was targeted at identifying the rank of the person

completing the feedback instrument. There were two questions directly related to research

question #1, which asked about social media platforms being used by similar emergency

response agencies to inform the public; one question asked about social media use and the other

listed seven of the most common social media sites and an open-ended comment field to list

more. There were three questions directly related to research question #2, which asked how

other agencies are using social media to educate and inform the public; these questions asked

whether the agency has a social media coordinator, the type of information shared, and how

often information is posted to the various social media sites. There were three questions directly

related to research question #3, which asked what policies or directives similar emergency

response agencies operate under in relation to information posted on social media; the questions

asked if the agency had a policy or guideline that specifies what information can be posted to

agency social media pages, personal social media sites, and whether personnel can identify

themselves as a member of their agency on their personal social media platforms. The final

question on the feedback instrument asked respondents whether they believed their agency

utilizes social media appropriately to educate and inform the public. These questions were

developed based on the best practices identified in social media use in the literature review,

presence of standard procedures, audience building practices, and understanding the value social

media could have on the operations of the fire department.

       There were minor limitations faced during this research. The use of social media to send

the request for responses on the feedback instrument made it difficult to identify a completion

rate. However, the use of social media did significantly increase the dissemination of the survey

and provided responses from farther reaching locations than a personal request would have. The

8% overlap rate of responses was a limitation to accurate data. The overlapped agency data

resulted from multiple responses within one agency where each respondent supplied different

answers to the survey questions. The overlapped data was left in the overall summary results. A

determination could not be made which of the respondent's answers correctly reflected the

practices of overlapped agencies.

Results

A feedback instrument (Appendix B) targeted at gaining information from other emergency response agencies was created using the Survey Monkey website and was shared via email to 67 fire and emergency service contacts across the United States. The request for feedback instrument completion was also shared on social media. A total of 356 respondents from 43 states throughout the United States (U.S.), five from Canada, and one from South Africa completed the feedback instrument. See Appendix B for the detailed breakdown of the response locations.

Since the majority of the email requests were sent through contacts in Minnesota, the high representation of responses from Minnesota shows a favorable response rate. There were 252 responses representing 43 states outside of the state of Minnesota, showing a favorable response rate based on the 23 direct out of state requests sent. There were no direct email requests sent outside the U.S., yet six responses were received. In the case of this feedback instrument, response rates cannot be accurately measured due to the use of social media for feedback instrument dissemination.

A majority of the responses, 94%, came from fire-based agencies, this can be attributed to the direct email requests, which were sent to 60 fire affiliated contacts, one police agency, two joint police and fire agencies, three EMS-based agencies, and one emergency manager. The social media outreach was also focused on pages whose audience predominately represents the fire service. The demographic information also shows a majority of the responses coming from communities from 10,000-50,000, which is common for communities near Eden Prairie, Minnesota and therefore relevant to the application of this research to EPFD. Table 1 shows a summary of the demographic responses received through the feedback instrument.

Table 1
Demographic Responses Collected by External Feedback Assessment

Question & Answers		
Type of Agency	Responses	Percentage
Fire	*335*	*94%*
Police	*3*	*1%*
Joint Police & Fire	*4*	*1%*
Emergency Management	*6*	*2%*
EMS	*8*	*2%*
Size of Community	Responses	Percentage
Less than 1000	*18*	*5%*
1,000-10,000	*89*	*25%*
10,000-50,000	*126*	*35%*
50,000-100,000	*52*	*15%*
Larger than 100,000	*71*	*20%*

There were 28 feedback repeats over 23 agencies; this represented 8% of the feedback

instrument respondents. The overlapped responses were left in the data because it was difficult

to determine which of the overlapped responses correctly represented the agencies' practices.

Question #1 of this action research asked, "What social media platforms are being used

by similar emergency response agencies to inform the public?" Two of the feedback instrument

questions directly related to this research question. The first asked whether their agency was

using social media and the second asked for the respondent to define the specific social media

sites that were used, including an open-ended response section for other sites not listed. Table 2

shows the responses to the questions referencing social media platform use.

Table 2
Social Media Use by Responding Agencies

Question & Answers		
Does your agency utilize social media?	Responses	Percentage
Yes	*321*	*90%*
No	*35*	*10%*
What social media platforms are used?	Responses	Percentage
Facebook	*309*	*87%*
Twitter	*183*	*51%*
Vimeo/YouTube	*65*	*18%*
Instagram	*46*	*13%*
None	*33*	*9%*
Other	*39*	*8%*
Blogs	*21*	*6%*
LinkedIn	*19*	*5%*
Periscope	*16*	*5%*
Pinterest	*6*	*2%*
Snap Chat	*5*	*1%*

As you can see from Table 2, a majority of the responding agencies use social media, at 90%. The use of different platforms does coincide with the Pew Research report from 2015, which focused on the demographics of social media users. The report found similar responses to the overall use of the platforms listed. The study found the 72% of American adults who are online use Facebook, 23% use Twitter, 26% use Pinterest, 25 % use LinkedIn, and 24% use Instagram (Duggan, 2015). The study did not assess video based platforms like Periscope, Snap Chat, YouTube or Vimeo. Pinterest use was an outlier when comparing the Pew research and the feedback instrument conducted as part of this research.

The respondents who selected the "other" option listed platforms such as the neighborhood-based applications Next Door and Nixle. GroupMe and GovDelivery – both of which are targeted group messaging applications – were also noted by individuals. Ten responses cited their department website, and one person said his department spreads information through the local newspaper and radio. Three respondents used the other section to note that their department does not have a social media presence, but their local union disseminates fire and life safety information and department events through social media.

In reference to research question #2, "How are other agencies using social media to educate and inform the public?" there were three related questions on the feedback instrument. When asked whether the agency had a designated social media coordinator, 85 agencies, 24%, have a single person in charge of social media and public information. Over half of the departments, 62%, have the role of social media coordination wrapped in with other duties; 139 agencies have someone handling social media among other duties, and 80 have many people sharing the social media responsibilities. Only 52 respondents, 15%, said there is no one assigned to manage social media. This is an interesting note because only 35 departments

responded that they were not using social media. If those numbers are overlapped, there are

approximately 17 departments who are using social media and have no one assigned to manage

it.

The main focus of the emergency services' social media presence seems to be aligned

with public education and dissemination of information. Over half of the respondents use social

media to notify about upcoming events, provide fire and life safety information, send out severe

weather notifications, and educate after fires. Table 3 shows what type of information is shared

by the responding agencies, in order of the frequency of information shared.

Table 3
Social Media Information Sharing

Question & Answers		
What type of information does your agency share on social media? (*In order of reported use*)	Responses	Percentage
Notification of upcoming community events (car seat clinics, open houses, etc.)	*281*	*79%*
Fire safety and fire and injury prevention information	*272*	*76%*
Information/notifications about severe weather or other emergency preparedness type event preparation	*220*	*62%*
Educational information after fires (fire causes and related prevention info)	*178*	*50%*
Call/run information as its happening or shortly after (fires, crashes, etc.)	*157*	*44%*
Information/notifications about disaster recovery resources and other similar info	*151*	*42%*
Information about agency and its personnel (agency history and bios of employees)	*142*	*40%*
Other	*41*	*12%*
Not applicable / No social media use	*32*	*9%*

As noted in the literature review, a large part of having an audience during disasters is

building an audience initially and keeping them engaged (White, 2012; Murphy, 2013). That

rests on whether your social media platforms have fresh content and whether that content is

showing up in your desired audience feeds. The feedback instrument showed that many

responding fire and emergency services agencies, 39%, post once or twice a week. This is

followed by a near tie with responding agencies who post daily or a couple of times a month, at

22% each. Only 8% of responding agencies post multiple times a day.

In reference to research question #3, "What policies or directives do similar emergency response agencies operate under regarding the information they post to social media?" there were three related questions on the feedback instrument. The three questions asked about whether agencies had policies or guidelines specifying what can be posted on agency and personal social media pages. The third question asked if the agency had policies or guidelines regarding whether individuals can identify themselves on their personal social media pages as an employee of their agency. The answers to those three questions are listed in Table 4. Over half of the responding departments do have a policy in place for both their agency pages and their employees' personal pages. Less than 30% have a policy in place regarding whether their employees can identify themselves as a member of the organization.

Table 4
Policies Related to Social Media Posting

Question & Answers		
Do you have a policy/guideline that specified what can be posted on department /organization social media pages?		
	Responses	Percentage
Yes	*204*	*57%*
No	*124*	*35%*
Unsure	*28*	*8%*
Do you have a policy/guideline that specifies what agency personnel can post to their personal social media pages?		
Yes	*188*	*53%*
No	*144*	*40%*
Unsure	*24*	*7%*
Do you have a policy/guideline that specifies whether agency personnel can identify themselves as an employee of your organization?		
Yes	*105*	*29%*
No	*212*	*60%*
Unsure	*39*	*11%*

When asked whether their agency was utilizing social media appropriately to educate and inform the public, 29% of all respondents believed they were doing a great job. A majority of respondents, 58% believed they could do more or do a better job. Only 13% believed their

agency was missing the mark completely. The percentages stayed fairly consistent regardless of

the rank of the person completing the question. Table 5 lays out the responses by rank.

Table 5
Social Media Effectiveness by Rank

Question & Answers						
Do you believe your agency is utilizing social media appropriately to educate and inform the public?						
	Chief Officer		Captain/Lieutenant		Firefighter	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
Yes, I think we do a great job.	*51*	*27%*	*22*	*28%*	*30*	*33%*
I think we could do more/better	*116*	*62%*	*40*	*51%*	*50*	*55%*
I think we are missing the boat	*20*	*11%*	*16*	*21%*	*11*	*12%*

Discussion

According to the "News Use Across Social Media Platforms" research study from the

Pew Research Center, 20% of social media users who get their news from those sites also tune in

to national television news networks and 30% tune in to their local television news channels

(Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). That would suggest having a multiple layered approach would be

necessary, tapping into both traditional media outlets, like local radio and television, as well as

using social media platforms.

Social media allows for a flow of information from official and unofficial sources during

disaster response (Simon et al., 2015), proving that it is important that emergency responders not

only use social media as an outlet for their information, but that agencies also monitor the

information that is going out by other responding agencies, media sources, and the public.

Damage control and content management is an important piece of ensuring the correct messages

are disseminated.

Local and national bodies of government, from fire and emergency response to

emergency management, have a history of validating information prior to disseminating. This is

an important practice, but proved to be a large hurdle for social media use by these agencies. As

Olteanu et al., (2015) discussed, information out was slowed due to the verification piece. A

Public Information Officer (PIO), or designated agency representative, needs to provide the best

possible answers, or someone else may make up the answers that suit them. When a mere 4-5%

of the average disaster-related information available on Twitter comes from emergency response

agencies, it calls into question the validity of the information people are consuming (Olteanu et

al., March 2015). The emergency services need to have a plan for validating information in a

way that gets the information out as soon as possible to meet the needs and expectations of the

information consumers and to ensure that victims, media, family and others do not instead turn to

unreliable sources and further propagate bad information.

Social media use is driven by human need, the Uses and Gratifications Theory of Katz,

originally published in 1973, states that people will actively seek out the media that will gratify

those needs for them (Fraustino et al., 2012). There are many social media platforms to choose

from, and use is based on the needs each demographic is looking to fulfill. As discussed in the

literature review, understanding the main demographics targeted by each platform before

deciding which to use is fundamental (Greenberg, 2011). This knowledge will allow emergency

response agencies to reach the audience they are hoping to target.

The emergency services have realized that the day of a disaster is not the time to meet

local partner agencies. It is difficult to assess their value to the response or their skill level after

they show up on a scene, it should be understood and planned for going into an event. This

theory applies as well to the use of social media. Some agencies believe that they can turn to

social media when they are faced with a need to get information out. There are several issues

with this theory. One is that there will be no audience base for their message. If an agency hasn't

been established and amassed an audience, there will be no one there to receive their initial

messages. Another issue is that if someone is not familiar with social media as a tool, they will

be less likely to use it in an incident (Williams & Burton, 2012). Social media has become part

of the cultural norm. It is not something that can be discounted or avoided. As Ferraro so

plainly states in her article, "If we don't learn to use it, it's going to use us" (Ferraro, 2013, p.

14).

In two separate articles, Neil Dufty addressed the need to evaluate social media use and

effectiveness. Dufty stated that the evaluation tools should be addressed in strategic plans and

addressed in all engagement and education programs (Dufty, 2011; Dufty, 2015). Having clear

goals before setting up a social media presence will help in the evaluation stage. Assessing

whether a social media strategy is working or not may seem like a daunting task, but most social

media platforms provide intuitive analytics that can measure an agency's connection to the

public and having clearly established goals and objectives will make it easy to assess whether

those goals are being met.

The literature review raised the issue of a shift of expectation by the population that aid

will come if they request it through social media platforms (Becker, 2010). Having a person

assigned to social media as one of many responsibilities during standard operations may prove

difficult in emergency situations. The assertion could be made that their operational duties

would take precedence in an emergency and the social media sites would be left unmonitored

and unattended. Because requests for aid may come in through established social media

platforms, it would be necessary to have non-response personnel as part of the social media team

so that the social media platforms are not abandoned during emergency response situations. The

use of Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOSTs) would help with keeping the responders

focused on response and the social media information mining experts focused on social media

sifting (Raths, 2015). There would need to be a clear line of communication between the

response operations and the VOST team leads. This could be accomplished in the current

structure in Eden Prairie, with the day-to-day post creation being shared across a team of

individuals, including response personnel, prevention specialists, and the City of Eden Prairie

Communications Department staff. During an emergency incident, operations-based personnel

can post from the scene, if possible, and the City Communications staff. The EPFD Community

Emergency Response Team (CERT) representatives can assist with social media mining, post

and comment credibility, and links to other agencies or resources.

In response to the research findings, it was discovered that the Eden Prairie Fire

Department would benefit from the creation of a Social Media Coordinator position, to act as a

point person for collecting and vetting information that will be shared on our social media

platforms during day-to-day operations. The Social Media Coordinator position posting is

included in Appendix C. A social media task force will be created, including the Social Media

Coordinator, a full-time Fire Prevention Specialist, a representative from the City of Eden Prairie

Communications Division, and a representative from the EPFD Command Staff. The task force

will meet to discuss the strategic plan for the Fire Department as it relates to public information

sharing and social media presence. A strategic plan will be developed, similar to the social

media outreach plans of large corporations which focus on brand recognition and brand loyalty

(Schoppman, 2012). Establishing a clear vision, mission, and strategic plan prior to

implementation will be important to the success of the social media outreach plan. The goal

would be to establish a fire department social media presence with content that can be shared by

the City's parent page. Social media posting should be consistent and timely to build a base of

followers and be known as a credible source of information on a day-to-day basis as well as in an

emergency.

Based on the information gathered in the literature review and the associated information outlined, a meeting with the Fire Chief will be scheduled to discuss the social media task force, the social media outreach plan objectives and evaluation criteria. A drafted Standard Operating Guideline (Appendix A) will also be submitted to the Fire Chief for consideration.

Recommendations

The problem was that the Eden Prairie Fire Department did not have guidance developed on using social media platforms to educate and inform the public. The purpose of this research was to develop a social media outreach strategic plan that allowed the fire department to better communicate with the residents they serve. The results of the literature review and answers to the research questions led to three recommendations to the Fire Chief.

Recommendation #1 is that the EPFD should create a Social Media Coordinator position, staffed by a part-time firefighter. This person would be responsible for collecting and vetting information submitted by other firefighters. The duties of this position would be in addition to emergency response and day-to-day shift responsibilities of the part-time firefighter.

Recommendation #2 is the formation of a social media task force that will include the Social Media Coordinator, a full-time Fire Prevention Specialist, a representative of the City of Eden Prairie Communications Department and a representative from the EPFD Command Staff. The task force will convene to create a strategic plan identifying the mission and purpose of the social media presence. The strategic plan will address who will be responsible for posting, what type of information is allowed, and objectives which can be evaluated to ensure the social media platforms being utilized are meeting the intent of the strategic plan.

Recommendation #3 is the establishment of a standard operating guideline (SOG) for social media use specific to the fire department messaging. The SOG will be drafted in a positive

and encouraging manner and not specific regarding the use of current social media platform

names. Guidance on social media use by individuals has already been addressed by the City of

Eden Prairie policies and should be reviewed by all EPFD personnel to ensure their

understanding of the policy and its consequences.

      The changes resulting from the implementation of the recommendations will allow the

EPFD to effectively inform and educate the community it serves more effectively on a daily

basis, and in the event of a crisis.

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Appendix A

City of Eden Prairie Fire Department
Standard Operating Guideline

3.21 Social Media

Guideline

Social media provides a valuable means of assisting the Fire Department in meeting community education, community information, fire prevention, and other related organizational and community objectives. The Department also recognizes the role that social media tools may play in the personal lives of Department personnel. The personal use of social media can have an effect on Fire Departmental personnel in their official capacity as firefighters. Therefore, it is a guideline of the Department that social media be used and managed in an appropriate manner.

Procedure

Department Sites
- Department social media pages shall include an introductory statement that clearly specifies the purpose and scope of the Department's presence on the website.
    1. Social Media page(s) shall link to the Department's official website.
    2. Social media page(s) shall be designed for the target audience(s) such as the community, civic leadership, employees or potential recruits.
- All Department social media sites or pages shall be approved by the Fire Chief or designee and shall be administered by the departmental designee(s).
- Social media pages shall clearly indicate that they are maintained by the Fire Department and shall have the Department logo and contact information prominently displayed.
- Social media content shall adhere to applicable laws, regulations, and policies, including all information technology and records management policies of the City of Eden Prairie and the Fire Department.
- Social media content is subject to open public records laws.
    1. Relevant records retention schedules apply to social media content.
    2. Content must be managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with open records laws and e-discovery laws and policies.
- Social media pages should state that the opinions expressed by visitors to the page(s) do not reflect the opinions of the Department.
- Social media pages shall clearly indicate that posted comments will be monitored and that the Department reserves the right to remove any content deemed offensive or inappropriate.
- Social media pages shall clearly indicate that any content posted or submitted for posting is subject to public disclosure.

Department-Sanctioned Use

Department personnel representing the Department via social media outlets shall:

- Conduct themselves at all times as representatives of the Department and, accordingly, shall adhere to all Department standards of conduct and observe conventionally accepted protocols and proper decorum.
- Identify themselves as a member of the Department.
- Not post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate confidential information, including photographs or videos, related to Department training, activities, or work-related assignments without express written permission from the Fire Chief or designee
- Not conduct political activities or private business.
- Observe and abide by all copyright, trademark, and service mark restrictions in posting materials to electronic media.

Violations

- Any employee becoming aware of or having knowledge of a posting or of any website or webpage in violation of the provision of this policy shall notify his or her supervisor immediately for follow-up action.
- Violation of this social media policy may result in suspension or termination.

Original Effective Date:	
Last Reviewed/Revised Date:	
Annual Review Month:	
Approved By:	

Appendix B

External Feedback Tool Results

Question 1: What type of public safety agency do you represent? (select one)

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Fire	335	94.10%
Police	3	0.84%
Joint Police and Fire	4	1.12%
Emergency Management	6	1.69%
EMS	8	2.25%

Question 2: Agency Information

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Country: State/Province	Responses	Country: State/Province	Responses
United States	**350**	**United States continued**	
Alaska	1	New Mexico	1
Arkansas	7	New York	11
Alabama	2	North Carolina	7
Arizona	2	North Dakota	1
California	14	Ohio	16
Colorado	7	Oregon	6
Connecticut	5	Pennsylvania	38
Delaware	1	Rhode Island	1
Florida	9	South Carolina	7
Georgia	2	South Dakota	2
Idaho	1	Tennessee	4
Illinois	8	Texas	3
Indiana	6	Utah	1
Iowa	3	Virginia	8
Kansas	7	Washington	12

Kentucky	3	West Virginia	2
Maine	4	Wisconsin	8
Maryland	6	Wyoming	1
Massachusetts	6	**Canada**	**5**
Michigan	9	British Columbia	2
Minnesota	98	Nova Scotia	1
Mississippi	2	Newfoundland	1
Missouri	6	Saskatchewan	1
New Hampshire	3	**South Africa**	**1**
New Jersey	9	Gauteng	1

Question 3: What is the size of your community?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Less than 1000	18	5.06%
1,000-10,000	89	25.00%
10,000-50,000	126	35.39%
50,000-100,000	52	14.61%
Larger than 100,000	71	19.94%

Question 4: What rank are you within your organization?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Chief Officer – Top level administrator	187	52.53%
Captain / Lieutenant – Line supervisor	78	21.91%
Firefighter – Non-supervising employee	91	25.5%

Questions 5: Does your organization utilize social media?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Yes	321	90.17%

No	35	9.83%

Question 6: What social media platforms are used by your agency? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
None	33	9.27%
Blogs	21	5.90%
Facebook	309	86.80%
Instagram	46	12.92%
LinkedIn	19	5.34%
Periscope	16	4.49%
Pinterest	6	1.69%
Snap Chat	5	1.40%
Twitter	183	51.40%
Vimeo/YouTube	65	18.26%
Other (please specify)	39	8.43%

"Other" Responses	
Website	10
Next Door	7
Local/Union Facebook page	3
Nexle	2
City Facebook page	2
Online magazine	1
GroupMe	1
Tumblr	1
Local newspaper/radio	1
App	1
GovDelivery	1

Question 7: Does your agency have a designated social media coordinator?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Yes, we have a social media coordinator / PIO	85	23.88%
Yes, we have one person who does social media among other job duties	139	39.04%
We have many people who manage that responsibility together	80	22.47%
There is no one assigned from my agency to social media	52	1.61%

Question 8: What type of information does your agency share on social media?

(Check all that apply)

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Not applicable – no social media use	32	8.99%
Call/Run information as its happening or shortly after (fires, crashes, etc.)	157	44.10%
Information/Notifications about severe weather or other emergency preparedness type event preparation	220	61.80%
Information/Notifications about disaster recovery resources and other similar	151	42.42%
Notification of upcoming community events (car seat clinics, open houses, etc.)	281	78.93%
Information about agency and its personnel (agency history and bios of employees)	142	39.89%
Fire safety and fire and injury prevention information	272	76.40%
Educational information after fires (specifying previous fire causes and related prevention information)	178	50.00%
Other (please specify)	41	11.52%

"Other" Responses with Multiple Answers	Frequency
Fundraising	6
Training or event photos	6
Recruitment	3
Road closures	3

Press releases / PSAs / Emergency notifications	2
News and announcements from partner agencies	2
What's happening at the department, if interesting	2
General community news and information	2
General safety or EMS safety	2

Question 9: How often does your agency post to its social media platforms?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Not applicable – no social media use	33	9.27%
Multiple times a day	28	7.87%
Daily	77	21.63%
Once or twice a week	140	39.33%
A couple times a month	78	21.91%

Question 10: Do you have a policy/guideline that specifies what can be posted on department / organization social media pages?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Yes	204	57.30%
No	124	34.83%
Unsure	28	7.87%

Question 11: Do you have a policy/guideline that specifies what agency personnel post to their personal social media pages?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Yes	188	52.81%
No	144	40.45%
Unsure	24	6.74%

Question 12: Do you have a policy/guideline that specifies whether agency personnel can identify themselves as an employee of your organization?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Yes	105	29.49%
No	212	59.55%
Unsure	39	10.96%

Question 13: Do you believe your agency is utilizing social media appropriately to educate and inform the public?

Answered: 356   Skipped: 0

Answer Choices	Responses	%
Yes, I think we do a great job	103	28.93%
I think we could do more / better	206	57.87%
I think we are missing the mark completely	47	13.20%

Appendix C

Social Media Coordinator Position Posting

Fire Department Social Media Coordinator
Position Profile

Status: Duty Crew Firefighter on the Eden Prairie Fire Department.

Salary: Hourly rate for shifts, training sessions, meetings, and special details at $11.00 per hour.

Benefits: Eligible for benefits offered according to the Eden Prairie Fire Department Relief Association.

Hours: Duty crew shift hours, plus on-call 24 hours a day 7 days per week for general alarm response; regular training sessions, details, and meetings which might include nights and weekends. Time spent on social media coordination work will be entered as "Details."

Reporting Relationship: Reports to the Assistant Chief of Training & Prevention

Position Details
Works with City of Eden Prairie Communications Division and Training & Prevention Chief to create social media outreach plan.

Coordinates scheduling of posts to social media and Fire Department blog site with communications Division.

Solicits and collects social media content ideas.

Writes and/or edits social media posts.

Work Experience: Must be a firefighter of the Eden Prairie Department in good standing.

Application Process
Please submit a cover letter and promotion application to the Fire Department Administrative Assistant by deadline date listed below.

Candidate Selection Agenda	
Application Posting	
Application Deadline	
Applications will be processed according to the policy and procedures listed in Section 2.3.5 Appointment Review Board	
Length of Term	Four-year term