Social Media in Crisis:
How Social Media Created a NPO and Relief during a Wildfire Crisis

Lauren Bacon Brengarth
University of Colorado Colorado Springs, USA

Edin Mujkic
University of Colorado Colorado Springs, USA

Meg A. Millar
University of Colorado Colorado Springs, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines how social media tools were used by a Nonprofit Organization (NPO) to raise money during a catastrophic fire in the Western United States. The fire claimed over 18,000 acres of forestland, nearly 350 homes, and 2 human lives. When it occurred, it was the most catastrophic fire event to hit this community. This case illuminates specific ways in which social media provided the key tools that enabled the creation of this NPO, the sale of hundreds of thousands of tee shirts in one month, and ultimately dollars donated to aid the victims of the fire. This case is unique because it is the story of an organization that was created overnight because individuals in the organization's social system rapidly evaluated and adopted their innovation. Additionally, opinion leaders (particularly those in traditional media) within the social system aided the NPO in rapidly establishing legitimacy with its followers.

INTRODUCTION

Social media have transformed communication and opened new possibilities for individuals and organizations to reach their publics. The instantaneous, two-way communication enabled by social media technology has changed virtually all communication. Modern day crisis communication is notably different as a result. Since the proliferation of social media in the beginning of 21ˢᵗ century, crisis management is constantly changing to adopt new techniques. Communication during crisis situations has notably transformed in the last two decades. Publics no longer solely use traditional media, such as newspapers and TV broadcasts for their news. Social media offer varied sources of information for publics, especially in times of crisis (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012). First responders also utilize social media formats such as text messages and social web sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to communicate with greater flexibility with the general public, disaster management command centers, and with each other.

More and more, individuals turn to social media in times of disaster to learn about ways they can connect, help, and assist in relief efforts. Austin et al. (2012) found that people seek out information on social media after a crisis in order to obtain insider information. This provides NPOs with a unique opportunity to not only disseminate timely information after a crisis, but also to garner more attention to their social media sites than their traditional media counterparts. In the case of the Western Fire, social media enabled the creation of a new nonprofit effort, Tees for A Cause (a pseudonym used for participant anonymity). Credible endorsement was key in fueling its tremendous success.

Social media allow NPOs to lower the cost of coordinating group action and delivering key messages to the public (Salamon, 2003). This was the case for Tees for A Cause, as the organization incurred virtually no expense to market the tee shirts to the public. Nonprofits, much like all other organizations with a social media presence, are able to use these channels to create a direct connection with their constituents. This allows them to carefully and strategically control messages delivered instead of having to rely on a journalist's interpretation of a story (Fineberg, 2002; Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Pavlik, 2001). In establishing a direct connection with various publics through social media, NPOs use more positive emotional appeals in order to foster a relationship. On the other hand, traditional media often use negative emotions to augment readership (Muralidharan et al., 2011). These positive changes put more message control in the hands of NPOs and are especially helpful in a critical moment of crisis.

This study focuses on the case of Tees for A Cause, a NPO that used social media tools to aid victims of the 2012 Western Fire. This case highlights the ways in which social media are transforming crisis response and the communication that

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