HOMELAND1 News

Homeland1 Desk
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EMA 2.0: Does your Web site stack up?

Although people increasingly rely on the Internet for news and information, according to a new study from the University of Kansas, state emergency management Web sites aren't keeping up with demand. Despite post-Hurricane Katrina calls for improved communication, the study shows that state EMAs across the United States have been slow to adopt Internet-based resources to reach out to the public.

"Untapped Potential: Evaluating State Emergency Management Web Sites 2008" analyzed 51 state emergency management agency Web sites, as well as the results of an online survey of state EMA public information officers. The 48-page report outlined 13 findings of the research and made six recommendations to the nation's emergency managers.

"I hope this report will spark serious discussions nationwide about the role of Internet communication before, during and following crisis situations," said David W. Guth, Associate Professor at the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications and the author of the study.

Worlds collide

Guth's background in both emergency management and mass communications provided a natural initial impetus for the study. Having worked for the government of North Carolina as a member of a state emergency response team for seven years, Guth has a great deal of admiration for EMAs, as well as a solid understanding of what their mission is.

"With emerging social media and wireless communications becoming more prevalent, I was curious to see how much emergency management agencies were tapping into it," he said.

The study also examined the relationship between EMAs and the media, because "the media is an important conduit through which EMAs communicate with folks," Guth said. He was particularly interested in the accessibility of their online newsrooms and the usefulness of the information found there.

Ready.gov is a good example of the study's recommendation to simplify Web site URLs to facilitate public outreach.

(Photo/Rachel Fretz)

Recommendations

"Untapped Potential" offers many important takeaways. First, it shows that Web designers, not managers, typically have the most input as far as site content. To Guth, this sounds like the difference between the people running the printing press, as opposed to the editors, deciding what goes in the newspaper.

"Designers are more into the whistles and bells, and not necessarily the content," Guth said.

And while it's not realistic to expect public information officers to know HTML or JavaScript, Guth argues that they should be familiar enough with web technology to tell a site designer what they want.

The University of Kansas study also suggests that contrary to most agencies' stated mission of providing information to the public, the most frequently identified content is internally focused. In fact, the public is not as highly targeted as they say.

"[Colleagues] are incredibly important stakeholders, but the nice thing about the Internet is it's ubiquitous. You can target a whole number of folks."

While Guth is very sympathetic to resource-strapped agencies and their PIOs (who are occasionally brought in from other regions and states to help out during an emergency), he says that EMAs are government-funded, and as such, owe accessible information to citizens, as well as the media.

"This is a democracy," he said. "Transparency is our highest value."

To gauge a site's usefulness to members of the media, Guth applied a three-question test:

1. Is the PIO's name on the site?

2. Is there a direct email link?

3. Is the newsroom accessible within one click of the home page?

On these counts, most sites received a failing grade. In fact, Guth and his associates had a hard time finding the basic info they needed to send out the initial online survey.

Who's the winner?

What state has the best Web site? It turns out the answer is not straightforward.

While "Untapped Potential" does provide a Content Richness Index ranking of each EMA Web site (pg. 39), it's important to note that sites were measured for the quantity of content, not the quality, which, Guth said, is far more subjective.

The researchers based their numbers (p.14) on the presence of features on the each site (e.g., newsroom, document downloads, podcasts), as well as specific hazards they provided information on (e.g., nuclear war, flooding).

Guth applied these criteria in two separate studies,

Six Recommendations

From Untapped Potential: Evaluating State Emergency Management Web Sites 2008 pdf

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

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

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.

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

5. State emergency management PIOs should be knowledgeable in the use of Internet technology.

and found that Maryland had the highest rating in the amount of content, "But that's just one measure," he said.

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

For instance, the Texas EMA site falls in the middle as far as "content richness," but has implemented a something unique: password protection. This functionality serves as a gatekeeper during high-volume call times, when the PIO needs to be able to communicate with reporters without a barrage of interruptions from John Q. Public.

Guth calls the password protection a "nice compromise."

Perhaps, he says, the best design elements from EMA Web sites can be rolled into one template to be made available to all agencies, along with a uniform and easy-to-remember standard for URLs. For instance, Texas's http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/dem seems unwieldy next to the concise www.Ready.gov.

Taking a page from NASA
Guth believes that Hurricane Katrina was to emergency management what the space shuttle Challenger was to NASA. Both, he believes, were public relations nightmares for the government agencies held accountable for them.

After the Challenger exploded, NASA learned that they had to more effectively and interactively communicate with the public they serve. Today, he says, emergency managers are in much the same position.

"The men and women of emergency management are heroes, but unfortunately during Katrina, they were made out to be just another bumbling government agency," he said. "I think it's incredibly important that [online] outreach happen now, because they can't take for granted that people understand what they're doing and why they're doing it."

The information highway
The Internet, meanwhile, moves at breakneck speed, and Guth admits that it's been almost a year since he's looked at many of these sites. In that time, he said, a few have probably revamped, "and that's a good thing."

What gives him pause is hearing managers say they can't trust the Internet, that it's "too technology-dependent." To this, he says, "What isn't?" We all rely on wireless technology to get through a day.

There's a potential for crisis communication breakdown, no matter what the medium. But that doesn't mean Internet technology can't still be incredibly important before, during the anticipation of the event, and after, during the recovery.

→ **Full report:** Untapped Potential: Evaluating State Emergency Management Web Sites 2008

Back to previous page