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Crisis Communications, Social Media and Hamlet

By Jean Bolduc

To tweet or not to tweet? That is one question never posed by William Shakespeare, but he did have a thought or two (several plays actually) about the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

“Outrageous fortune” in the modern age has a different name—“crisis”—and it presents in all shapes and sizes. Those of a personal nature include a car accident, a heart attack or a missing family member. On the larger scale, there are major storm events, earthquakes, rockslides, mass transit accidents and chemical spills.

Actuaries can play a major role in one of the pillars of managing major crises: communications. For tornado victims, for example, there are critical pieces of information that the public at risk and those affected afterward need to know. These include warnings in advance of the event and damage reporting in the immediate aftermath, when more conventional means (television, telephone land lines) are down due to power disruptions and infrastructure damage.

Enter social media.

In the Society of Actuaries (SOA) 2016 report *Social Media Analysis of Catastrophic Response: Twitter Data Analysis of Tornadoes*, authors R. Dale Hall, Steven Siegal and Kailan Shang examined Twitter data from three major tornado events: Joplin, Missouri (2011); Washington, Illinois (2013); and Rochelle, Illinois (2015).

Because Twitter would typically still be functioning as long as cellular phone service existed, residents and first responders were able to use the social media network, not just as a redundancy in issuing public warnings before the storms, but also after the events to locate victims, warn of unsafe conditions and direct the public to safety. This is often hyperlocal information—for example, that a Red Cross van is at the corner of Elm and Main

Streets offering assistance to anyone who can get there or which schools are in use as shelters.

As risk managers examine these events, they learn more and more about how damage is done, who survives and, to some extent, why they survive. Communicating these key pieces of life-saving information in the short form of social media can be an art form all its own—perhaps more art than science.

TIPS FOR USING TWITTER AS A PROFESSIONAL TOOL

- Reserve your own name as your “handle,” even if you don’t use it. (Mine is @JeanBolduc—follow me!)
- Add your Twitter handle to your email signature and your business cards to gain more followers.
- When you set up your account (just go to www.twitter.com and follow the instructions), you’ll be asked about your interests and advised about some of the ins and outs of using Twitter. It’s best to set it up on your primary computer’s desktop, then add the app to your smartphone for mobile use.
- Learn some of the ways of abbreviating your messages to get the most out of the 280 characters you’ll have for each tweet. For longer messages, you can keep your message going by adding subsequent tweets as replies to your first tweet. This is referred to as a “thread” of tweets.
- Hashtags are what users call it when they mark a word or phrase with the pound sign (#). This is used both for emphasis and for creating a tag for searches. For example, “The @SOActuaries will hold its Annual Meeting in Hawaii this fall. #golf #beaches #BestConferenceEver.” Be sure to use no spaces between words in a hashtag.
- When you’re first using Twitter and have very few followers, one of the best ways to have your tweets seen is to respond to users who do have lots of followers.
- When you refer to other Twitter users, include their Twitter handle and they will automatically be notified of your tweet. You can work it into your tweet, as in the SOA annual meeting example, or just drop it in at the end.
- Tweets with photos get more attention. The picture doesn’t have to be related to your tweet. Use a photo of a puppy (especially if it’s *your* puppy) and then tweet about reserves. Have some fun with it: “Now that I have your attention, let’s talk about completion factors.”



In managing risk and preventing loss of life and property, the more forensic information we have about such disasters (causes of death and injury as well as which buildings failed structurally and why), the better we can do in advising the public on how to be safe during the most dangerous periods of any event.

If you choose to offer your analytical expertise to your followers on Twitter, who can be located anywhere in the world, it's important that they understand who you are and why they should listen to you.

A great example of this is a little-known attorney who had spent most of her career in public service, but not in the highest profile. Jill Wine Banks was a prosecuting attorney with the Special Counsel's Office in the Watergate investigation. In the past two years, she has spent a lot of time explaining the law to the American public on television and on Twitter, where she has developed

a following for her smart insights and for the distinctive pins that she wears on television appearances. Her tweets are often accompanied by photos of the pin she's wearing on that day and the hashtag #JillsPins.

That may seem trivial, but it achieves an important communications objective: It's her brand; it humanizes her and makes her relatable to the audience.

How would an actuary achieve something similar? Is there an area of our culture (Baseball? Golf? Football? Music? Cat behavior?) where your hobby interest is well served by your statistical expertise? Start tweeting about that, something you enjoy, just for fun. You'll find like-minded folks pretty quickly. Follow them. They'll likely follow you in return.

Identify industry leaders and organizations (like @SOActuaries) and follow their feeds. You'll discover fascinating links to all manner of resources: studies, videos, presentations and more.

In the next 20 years some of the hottest topics of public policy debate will require us to better understand the role of risk management. As we live longer and manage our finances to sustain us, protect business assets from cyber crime and see our mortality and quality of life profoundly affected by climate change, all of these areas require a reexamination of risk. Actuaries can help explain it.

If you choose to offer your insights on Twitter, you need to be aware that this is a platform with very, very few restrictions. Some people on Twitter want nothing more than to insult total strangers, set new records for rudeness and be generally destructive to others using the platform. Twitter provides you the ability to block these users from seeing your tweets, and you will be better off blocking them than engaging in debate. There's a difference between a free exchange of ideas, some of which you may not agree with, and offering yourself for abuse.

Social media can provide you with connections all over the world and a quick, easy way to share documents, audio and video worldwide.

So, what do you have to say to the world? ■



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