

users taking a preferred action, such as requesting an appointment or signing up for a class) grow by double digits. It just works.

Do the basics

If you aren't handling these basic components well, then adding new and exciting features to your site may not have the impact you seek.

You can't argue with success, and these four elements have shown consistent and substantial success. **eH**

Scott & White Turns to Twitter During Fort Hood Tragedy

by Lin Gensing-Pophal

Maj. Nidal Hasan, an army psychiatrist who was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan, is accused of opening fire in a common area at the Fort Hood army base in Texas on November 5, and is now charged with 13 counts of premeditated murder. In addition to those killed during the attack, more than two dozen others were wounded. Following the shootings, 10 of the wounded were transported to Scott & White Hospital in Temple. About 26 miles from the army post's main gates, Scott & White is one of 14 Level I trauma centers in Texas. Despite its Level I status, Scott & White was immediately challenged not only to care for the injured, but to respond to inquiries from around the world. Inquiries came from the media, the community, and friends and family of those injured.

Quickly incorporating social media during a crisis

For years, healthcare organizations around the country have been challenged to deal with similar high-profile incidents that generate international media interest. What is different today, though, is that healthcare organizations can leverage social media to manage the communication process.

Steven Widmann is director of Web services at Scott & White Healthcare. Although Scott & White management had recently approved the use of social media to communicate with the health system's audi-

ences, a program was not quite ready for prime time. Suddenly placed in a position that allowed the use of the social media tools under consideration, Widmann and others initiated a team effort, which went fairly smoothly, to effectively meet this challenge.

"We knew we wanted to go down that trail eventually, but at the time [social media] was more of a way to connect with our customer base and the general public," says Widmann. Because Scott & White had already been experimenting with social media at a few of its sites for these purposes, it very quickly recognized social media's application in a crisis management situation.

Widmann was attending a healthcare Internet conference in Las Vegas when the tragedy occurred. "When I landed back in Austin, I received a call from a staff member telling me what had just happened and what [the organization] was planning on doing," he says. "Fortunately, we had been in contact with our PR department about how we were going to integrate blogs and Twitter and, at that time, we were able to put those plans in place."

Audiences appreciate ease of access, timeliness, and accuracy

"We were able to tweet a number of messages during the crisis, which pointed people to our Web site. It really worked out very well for us," he says. The data proves Widmann's point — another big benefit to the use of social media.

From September 11 to November 4, Scott & White had 225 followers on its SWHealthcare Twitter site. From November 5 to November 8, it had 400 followers, experiencing a 78 percent increase in just three days.

During this time, the site became a top trending topic on the Twitter.com home page, which receives about 5 million views each day. Trending topics are quick snapshots of the most tweeted topics on Twitter and appear on the right side of the Twitter.com home page.

"We were surprised at how smoothly things went because we didn't have a [formal] plan in place," says Widmann. "There was a crisis plan, which the hospital has always had, but as far as a written social media plan and how that would integrate with PR, that had not been formalized yet on paper," he says.

There are big benefits to the use of social media in crisis management situations, says Widmann, most notably the tool's immediacy. With a Twitter account, he points out, healthcare organizations basically have their own broadcast station — the ability to immediately share their messages *directly* with their intended audience.

The media appreciated the ability to access up-to-date, real-time, accurate information as well. "We had a lot of comments from the media specifically about how much they appreciated being able ... to see what

was new. When something happened, they knew there would be an alert and they would be pointed to our Web site," he says.

In addition, using a tool like Twitter to share readily accessible updates can help manage what might otherwise be an uncontrollable influx of calls. In this case, inquiries came not only from across the United States, but from Britain, Australia, Japan, and other countries. Scott & White was able to direct those inquiries to the Twitter account for updates, serving the needs of both the hospital and reporters.

Moving forward

Widmann says Scott & White will continue to use social media as a communications tool with its various audiences. Its first step, however, is to develop a written document that outlines the role and use of social media in a crisis situation.

In addition, says Widmann, he will ask that the Web services department become part of the crisis team and that the department participate in the drills that are conducted each

year. That integration is important as technology becomes an increasingly critical factor for communication. "One item that was brought up by PR team members was that during drills they did not actually use their equipment as they would during a crisis," he notes. "During the Fort Hood incident they found that they had limited connectivity in the command center. This included a wireless Internet connection and bad cellphone reception. If this [connectivity] had been tested during the drills, they would not have run into this problem during a real crisis. It slowed things down a little."

In a debriefing, the team also found that having an additional person from the Web services group in the command center would be helpful in relaying information during a time when PR staff members are especially busy with other demands. "We have also been looking at using a tool like Yammer for internal communications," says Widmann. Yammer is a microblogging tool, like Twitter, for use within organizations and available only to the organization's internal audiences.

One critical point, he says, is that while social media represents an important communications tool, it is not a replacement for other communications tools. "There's a big buzz about social media and everybody wants to jump on board," he says. "It's a great tool, but you still need to have your traditional resources in place."

Crisis communications hasn't changed, Widmann observes. Only the tools have changed. "With social media tools, we have the capability to get information out quicker and to a larger audience. As long as hospitals already have a good crisis communications plan in place, there is no reason why they need to reinvent the wheel and do anything different when using social media, other than having the resources to make the updates," he says.

Lin Gensing-Pophal is a business journalist and marketing strategist located in Chippewa Falls, WI. You can reach her at llpophal@charter.net. **eH**

eNEWS PULSE ...

WEB SITES

Online Resource for HIV/AIDS Community launched at www.MindBodyHAART.com. The site provides tools and tips on how to maintain mental, physical, and emotional well-being when dealing with the daily challenges of the disease.

RESOURCES

Fashion Retailer's Use of Twitter Has Application to Healthcare Providers. Metropark, a Los Angeles-based specialty store, directs

Twitter comments mentioning Metropark (<http://twitter.com/MetroparkUSA>) to the numerous plasma television screens located in each of its stores.

Top 10 Health Technology Hazards for 2010 released by ECRI Institute, an independent nonprofit firm that researches best patient care practices. The list of hazards is based on the prevalence and severity of incidents reported to ECRI. The complete list and its recommendations can be downloaded for free at www.ecri.org/Forms/Pages/2010_Top_10_Technology_Hazards.aspx.

Study Finds No Cost Savings or Administrative Efficiencies from Health IT. Harvard Medical School researchers looked at computerization at some 4,000 hospitals from 2003 to 2007 in comparison to Medicare Cost Reports and cost and quality data from the 2008 Dartmouth Health Atlas. The researchers found that computerization did not reduce either administrative or overall costs. Modest quality gains were seen in the treatment of heart attacks. Hospitals on the "100 Most Wired" list

continued, page 12