



Integrating Social Media with Emergency Management at Airports



Southwest Airlines Case Study

Synopsis

The Barich, Inc., Research Team produced the following case study based on meeting notes received and the teleconference meeting held on November 19, 2018, between representatives of Southwest Airlines (Southwest) and Barich, Inc. Southwest provided input on the content of this case study to allow use of this information in *ACRP WebResource 8*. Those in attendance included Brooks Thomas (Southwest Senior Advisor, Social Business and Communications Outreach) and Brian Parrish (Southwest Senior Advisor External Communications Team - Operations focus), and Frank Barich and David DiMaria from Barich, Inc.

This case study presents the benefits and challenges of closely integrating social media (SM) activities with emergency management (EM) procedures and EM events. It also presents the benefits of close communication and collaboration with the airport authorities and other jurisdiction. Finally, this case study takes a brief look at the need for continual SM and communication training. This case study emphasizes the SM and EM collaboration recognized in the catastrophic events during flight 1380 in April 2018.

Background

Like most airlines, Southwest actively uses and monitors many of the popular SM channels. Although they do not precisely calculate the growing percentage of passengers communicating through various forms of SM, they have clearly seen an increase in engagement over the years since they first launched SM channels. With a continual growth in SM uses, it is important for Southwest to examine the SM use trends and to get accurate reports on how well they are doing in SM communications and, where necessary, how they might need to shift in their methods of communicating.

Procedurally, Southwest stated that they are learning a great deal from SM. As a result, they maintain a Crisis Communications Plan and a Social Crisis Response Plan. They conduct quarterly revisions to these plans, which are then merged into the Southwest Emergency Response Plan. They constantly stay focused on the larger vision and stay keenly aware of reputational management. This focus on communication outreach is clearly evident

throughout the organization and is why EM is part of the Communications and Outreach Department. To stay as ready as possible, they conduct tabletop exercises once a year and hold quarterly EM response meetings with each department.

Southwest maintains a Social Media Listening Center (Center) throughout the course of the year. During notable events, they activate and reorient the Center to deal specifically in crisis mode. Their Social Crisis Response Plan identifies the criteria as to when to activate the Center for a crisis. In the Center, there is a visualization portion and desktop software for pulling reports in real-time for interpretation and analysis. Southwest has learned that the simplest way to analyze incoming information is by volume, velocity, and potential hot topics in the media. Understanding what topics might spike in the media requires Southwest to be as close to the external spokespeople as possible, to have a more focused understanding of what to look for. The Social Team does a great job of listening. Information is analyzed by an in-house Analysis Team and sometimes this can be more art than science. Southwest has learned that having this team in-house is very important.

SM is an integral part of the Network Operations Control Center (NOC). In the NOC, the Social Team has a seat and an SM waterfall of information. As such, Southwest can compare the qualitative affect to the quantitative effect . This was particularly useful during an outage in 2016. In the SM Listening Center, they have a smart board where they started to do screen shots throughout the day to look at trends.

For Southwest, the greatest benefits of using social media channels during emergencies are obtaining early alerts and establishing real-time communications between those impacted by the emergency. Southwest noted these two benefits go hand-in-hand due to the ability to quantify and qualify a rise in activity related to a conversation or event. As a result, Southwest noted they generally have a better idea how to proceed with quick, proactive communications. In responding to an emergency, Southwest strives to have the facts straight and may proactively acknowledge an emergency at the beginning of intense fact-finding (fact-finding isn't always done solely on social media); from there they like to keep employees informed so they are equipped to speak with customers.

Misinformation is probably Southwest's greatest concern, given how widely it can spread in such a short amount of time. When considering the impact misinformation has, one can see an overlap of subsequent issues, including airline reputation, politicizing of issues, targeting of specific employees, lawsuits, and many others. Therefore, Southwest is very careful in disseminating information. Regarding SM, they aggregate all hot topics or most visual aspects of an emergency, synthesize it with other information/reports, and then cross-reference it with the facts they have. The key is to keep in contact with people, while walking a fine line and not jumping too fast on unconfirmed information. Southwest noted that the worst thing they can do is speak to their audiences or attempt to guide a conversation, using unconfirmed information that is later discovered to be false. That damages their credibility and subsequently erodes the trust of their audience.

Even so, holding statements until one knows all the information, is not necessarily the right thing to do either. The public needs to know what is going on as quickly as possible. When information is scarce at the beginning, Southwest noted that their first messages can be tailored to generalities around the emergency. You don't want to incite panic, but neither do you want to appear business as usual when virality is starting to mount about an emergency involving your airline. Depending on the severity and/or potential government agency involvement, the follow-up message needs to be more substantive, and in the current environment might also need to be more progressive and explore things like video and live-streaming. It just depends on the emergency, categorically, and the information therein.

Case Study

Most recently, Southwest had to call into action their plans and procedures during the horrific event with flight 1380. Almost instantly, Southwest picked up a social channel where an individual was live streaming the entire event. Southwest Social Team led the story for the first 24 hours. After that point, traditional media took over the story. Within the 24-hour period, the volume of SM messages became insurmountable, reaching a threshold where Southwest simply could not get to all SM messages.

When such an event happens, Southwest tries to pick out topics that start to trend. In doing so, they can begin getting a shape to the messages: what is accurate; what subjects are becoming themes; and how to be anticipatory. In the case of flight 1380, the captain rose to the top of SM message themes. Southwest looks for positive trends in conversation and news and the captain was quickly becoming the hero of the story. This is the key track of information Southwest then gets out to the public.

Regarding communication and collaboration in SM tracking with local airports or jurisdictional authorities, Southwest noted that it is crucial that each major entity is plugged in with one another. Southwest aspires to keep communications lines open with the airports and local and federal authorities. Without close coordination, you risk losing a major opportunity of better understanding what information is being released and how to respond. It is no consequence to be transparent when the greater goal is to find out what is happening.

Preparation is key to effective communication and collaboration and starts with basic introductions. Southwest maintains a very close relationship with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) communication people, to the point of being on first-name basis and having access to the best phone number contact. Southwest works to have this same first-name relationship with airport public information offices (PIOs) and other communicators. As one can imagine, this effort is ongoing. What Southwest tries to avoid is having to meet a PIO at an airport crisis scene.

In the case of flight 1380, this close relationship proved critically beneficial, as Southwest sent press release drafts to NTSB for approval before sending the messages out to the public. Due the previously built relationship, response time between NTSB and Southwest was very fast. With regard to the local airport, the day of the flight 1380 event, the Philadelphia

PIO called the Southwest Communications Team and established quick communication and collaboration channels. As a result, Southwest and the Philadelphia PIO were able to coordinate responses. This coordination is very important, as airport communicators should not make statements on behalf of the airlines. The average traveler thinks about the airline as the channel of record since they are the consistent piece throughout the travel journey.

Southwest provided the following information about establishing the best communication and collaboration with them. Reach out to Southwest and share phone numbers and email contacts. Any airport PIO or communicator can do so by sending a message to: SWAMedia@WNCO.com. Southwest thinks it is important get to know each other before a crisis occurs. From Southwest's perspective, the best PIOs are the ones that will call in and give them a heads up.

Regular touchpoints are helpful, as is a look at materials to better understand the questions that may rise and to establish appropriate actions between airport and airline. For example, what expectations are there for the proper airline points of contact to be on site during an event? Typically, if an incident occurs at an airport, Southwest's local people will be there, and within 24 hours, their corporate representatives (including Communications) will also be on site with a Go-Team.

As would be expected, Southwest maintains a rigorous SM training program. They have Basic Social Media Training and Social Media Training for Leaders, available for all employees. Their training programs are scenario-based training. For their Social Media Team, they have Voice Training, and all Social Customer Care Team Members must also go through their Customer Relations Training that takes about two months to complete. This extended length of time allows their employee-in-training to study and learn all aspects of Southwest policies and become immersed in the Southwest way of doing things.

To supplement their class training, Southwest also has playbooks (in a wiki fashion) allowing the student to read and review what to do and sometimes suggesting specific information to search out. Southwest is constantly working toward improving their SM training, both at the amateur and master levels.