



Zombies Attack Your Hospital: What Will You Tweet?

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Marketing Health Services e-newsletter



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I lured you in with the zombie attack headline to point out the importance of including social media in an emergency communications plan.

Obviously zombie attacks or invasions from Mars are unlikely catastrophic events, but let's say your city experiences a bridge bombing, which puts 35 children and adults in your ER within two hours. All of a sudden your hospital is in the spotlight, reporters are converging, and people are tweeting like mad.

How do you communicate the news to the public, balancing patient privacy and the public's need to know? What do you say? Who posts the updates? Do you have a backup person? How can you diffuse panic and deliver news that the public wants to know? Who makes final last-minute judgment calls?

You certainly can't ignore social media. Like it or not, your hospital will be defined on how and what you tweet or post, so there is a lot at stake. And there is also opportunity.

Social media is perfect for situations like these when it comes to relaying up-to-the-minute, real-time information—Twitter in particular. Social media now trumps the spokesman at the TV news conference because social media happens in real time and that's what people want. The press conference? It's just for filling in details.

Consider the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. The Boston Police Department, which had a couple thousand followers prior to the event, grew to about 277,000 overnight. More people were tuning into Twitter rather than TV for up-to-the-second information about the bombers that

Key Takeaways

- In the event of a catastrophe, social media is a real-time, logical approach to keeping your patients and the community up-to-date.
- In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing, the Boston Police Department used Twitter to help catch the bombers.
- Health care organizations should develop a solid social media plan before a disaster or event occurs.

even the reporters couldn't keep up with.

In fact, the reporters would read Boston Police Department tweets on the air to viewers. Once there were pictures of the suspects, photos were fed to social networks, which went viral, and the police got an ID quickly. The police department utilized social media to help identify and apprehend the bombers.

Patients now hold an amplified voice on social media. If we had another AIDS-like epidemic, for example, any new treatment approval process would likely spur public outcry, the likes of which we've never seen before. How would your facility's position be reflected in the social space on such an emotionally charged health care subject?

The bottom line is, your social media has to be part of your emergency communications plan, and you need to have drills and sample posts regarding any number of unexpected scenarios. Relying solely on improv marketing could spell disaster for your facility.

Some major disaster or bizarre catastrophic event will happen at some point in your career, whether it's a killer bee invasion or a toenail curling viral outbreak. And your facility has the chance to shine in the aftermath of a disaster if you prepare as best you can for the unexpected.

This was originally published in the June 2014 issue of Marketing Health Services e-newsletter.

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