

Virtual Operations Support Team (VOST)

Published On: 03 April 2017

Organisation: United States Department of Agriculture (USDS) Forest Service

Country: United States

Level of government: Central government

Sector: Environmental protection

Type: Communication, Data, Methods

Launched in: 2011

Overall development time: 5 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

Leveraging volunteers worldwide to assist wildfire Incident Management Teams (or other disaster response agencies) in creating, managing and monitoring social media to maintain better engagement and communication with the public as well as rumor control, during a disaster.

Why the innovation was developed

- For decades, before social media, we had only public meetings, one on one contact and news coverage to deliver information and determine how our efforts were being received. Our engagement changed for the better with social media. The problem is not that many Public Information Officers are trained on how to use SM, and its very busy during an incident like a wildfire, so VOST was created as a way to access the needed skills in the private sector and have extra eyes on the web to spot problems early.
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Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, Elderly people, Ethnic or racial minorities, Families, General population, High-risk populations, Low-income groups, People with disabilities, Students, Young people

Existing similar practices

Digital Operations Center

In the private sector, civil society or elsewhere

US Red Cross

The Red Cross has digital volunteers. But they are local and not around the world, participating virtually. The Red Cross volunteers are trained to talk to people. A VOST is not. A VOST SUPPORTS official information work. A VOST doesn't create messaging they simply amplify official messaging. A VOST lets fire agencies use volunteers which incidents have never done, without ever letting go of official control over messaging. <http://www.redcross.org/news/press-release/The-American-Red-Cross-and-Dell-Launch-First-Of-Its-Kind-Social-Media-Digital-Operations-Center-for-Humanitarian-Relief>

Results

Effectiveness

- We normally have 2 or 3 people working on Social media during a fire, when we can find any, but with VOST we can have up to 10 people helping. More eyes on the web means we can respond to questions faster, alleviate concerns faster, ensure that our messaging and firefighting tactics are understood, identify and correct rumors before they go viral and cause unnecessary concern. But mostly, VOSTs help us be more transparent and responsive to people who are in crisis, and that's a key part of our work.
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Service quality

Accessibility:

- Having a VOST lets us use tools the PIOs on scene may not know how to use. And those tools may make emergency information more accessible to the public.

Responsiveness:

- Being responsive is critical in a crisis. People need to be heard and know people are listening. When fire season gets busy and most PIOs are already deployed, it can be hard to find social media help. A VOST becomes critical to our success by allowing us to have enough people watching for questions and concerns, that we can respond in a timely manner. SM also allows us to provide a constant stream of small bits of information. In the past, all information was saved for a daily press release. But now we have a place to share it as it comes in so the public is provided updates that trickle in all day instead of having to wait. That results in people who feel that we have communicated sufficiently and enough.
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User satisfaction

- When we use Social media correctly and have the support we need to engage as frequently as possible with concerned citizens, we generally have great feedback and hear good comments from the public. Social media contact and access has become expected by the public and if you are not there, you will hear about it.

Development

Design

A man in New Mexico came up with the idea for his Emergency Management work. He knew he needed to engage on social media, but also knew he wouldn't have time to do it all if there was an emergency. So he built a group of "trusted agents" with whom he had interacted on social media and the first VOST was born. But he had no where to test it. I heard about it and provided a fire to test it and it was extremely successful and it grew exponentially from there. Design time: 3 month(s)

Testing

- We tested it on the Shadow Lake Fire in Oregon in 2011 and then I began talking to other Incident Management Teams about its value and many have been using it since. The original "idea man" in New Mexico began talking about it in Emergency Management circles and it has caught on worldwide. VOST was used in mudslides in Paris recently. The VOST.us website lists many deployments.

Testing time: 1 month(s)

Implementation

Tools used:

- Social media is the primary way to find and recruit help for a VOST. Sometimes, people you meet at conferences are asked but primarily recruitment is via social media. After VOST is created, training and retention happens via Skype, Google Drive and phone calls. People are trained on the VOST Excel workbook, Google Drive and protocols for being a VOST member.

Resources used:

- There is no cost. These are volunteers. There is some time involved in recruitment and training but little to no cash outlay.

Implementation time: 5 month(s)

Challenges and solutions

- There were policy challenges. A VOST brings more ability to use tools that many agencies are not familiar with so a lot of discussion had to happen about what social media tools we wanted to use/try. There was a lot of education around exactly what a VOST was and a lot of concern about letting "amateurs" have anything to do with messaging. Once they were assured that the VOST did not create messaging, nor did it have any contact with the public, that was resolved. We also found that clear "Leader's Intent" was necessary. Early on a VOST would get excited and build social media sites before the PIO told them to. We developed clear intent about the role of the PIO and the role of the VOST and that resolved it.

Lessons Learned

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- You don't have to rely only on your organization for the skills you need for effective social media. There is someone in the world with the skill you need VOST provides a way to harness those skills to benefit your agency or group.
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Conditions for success

- Someone willing to recruit and train VOST members and a commitment to manage the volunteer group. VOSTS can be paid but we have not done that yet.