

Listen, Respect, Adjust: Integrating Social Media Cross Cultural Communications into Post-disaster Reconstruction Planning

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Social media serves as an important tool in public outreach, particularly when informing and engaging diverse communities on issues of hazard risk. Using social media platforms and online engagement tactics to reach culturally traditional, remote communities can pose engagement challenges. Integrated outreach strategies can empower success, if listening and learning is part of the plan.

County of Maui RGP Project

During the past year, I served on a consulting team as the community outreach and engagement coordinator for the County of Maui (Hawaii) Post-Disaster Reconstruction Guidelines and Protocols (RGP) Project.

Using the tagline “Building Back Safer, Stronger, Smarter,” we engaged community stakeholders to help define the county’s post-disaster reconstruction permitting process. Social media was one of the outreach tools that enabled the project’s success.

The intent of the RGP project was focused on the future – not if, but when a coastal storm will next hit – and to guide efforts to conserve sensitive coastal ecosystems; streamline repair and reconstruction of homes, businesses, structures and private property; and promote mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Maui’s Planning Department, with funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Pacific Coastal Storms Center, led our project team

in producing post-disaster reconstruction guidelines and protocols and public messaging.

Due to Hawaii’s location in one of the most remote land forms on earth, in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, using social media for reaching and engaging radically diverse island communities proved valuable, yet needed careful crafting. With our experience came lessons on the importance of holistic thinking and the willingness for course corrections along the way.

Project Background: Hazards and Challenges

Maui County is a premier tourist destination in the Hawaiian Islands. It includes three inhabited islands with beautiful beaches, clear ocean waters, and diverse natural and cultural resources.

Maui also faces a wide range of coastal hazards that can lead to beach loss, flood inundation, and damage to buildings and property. Plans needed to be put into place to prepare for a future storm event.

A critical aspect to the project’s success was engaging underserved communities and developing partnerships with key stakeholders, including developers, landowners, practitioners of the traditional Hawaiian culture, environmental advocates, political representatives, and students.

Our target communities ranged from geographically isolated pockets of local Hawaiian populations, to communities populated with high-end tourist resort developments, and a coastal community known for its independence and free spirit.

Outreach Strategy and Activities

Our project required considerable respect for local customs, traditions and cultures. This involved learning about and then applying a community’s preferences for receiving information – especially from local government on issues of land use and construction, always a delicate subject, but especially in Hawaiian communities where people, particularly kapuna (elders), are intricately connected to the aina (land) for spiritual reasons.

Our diverse audiences and their cultural uniqueness required attention to radically differing educational levels and differing relationships between the people and their coastal environments. The materials, engagement approaches, and community activities were designed to be technically informative, personally/locally relevant, and accessible for all educational levels.

Outreach was branded to build, empower, and sustain the project name and initiative recognition. A series of messages were designed to build project credibility and trust, emphasizing sustainability; resilience building; proactive/efficient processes; protection of natural, historic and cultural resources; and economic strengthening.

Social media activities were driven by our overall outreach goals:

- ensure meaningful community input;
- establish a wide cross sector network of informed and knowledgeable community stakeholders;

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- develop a system of consistent and timely communications; and
 - establish a strong base of project support.
- Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts were used to:
- raise risk awareness;
 - provide updates on project progress;
 - record innovative community workshops that included game-based exercises and “talk story” sessions; and
 - encourage dialogue and promote trust between government and a range of stakeholders.

In addition to social media, our multi-pronged outreach approach included: small, focus group style, community workshops; locally produced, hand-distributed flyers; speaking opportunities; articles in statewide and local newspapers and

national professional publications; and entry into a prominent, international climate change communications competition.

We knew from the beginning that social media could not penetrate all of the audiences, particularly those in the remote areas of Hana (Maui island’s east end) and the island of Molokai. In those locales, local newspapers and bulletins, posted flyers, the local “coconut wireless,” and personal one-to-one engagement were our most effective tools.

Lessons Learned: Respect, Integrate, Adjust

Our strategy required flexibility as we learned more about community preferences, personalities and sensitivities, and as we began implementation. We listened to concerns expressed by local leaders and project supporters, and course-corrected constantly. For example,

we shifted from widespread advance communications on the workshops to posting during and after, as participants needed to be limited and representation balanced. While one-to-one personal interactions remained the primary, most effective approach, social media expanded and continued the dialogue, and opened up opportunities for learning about the project outside of Maui.

Our outreach and engagement, like the overall project, was deemed successful and forward thinking. On a personal note, the project journey was fascinating, richly rewarding, and humbling. It served as a reminder that no matter how critical we view social technologies, human networks found in close-knit communities are deeply powerful and necessary to achieve outreach goals. ▲