



Category: Best Use of Social Media

Company: Newcastle City Council

Entry title: Taming the Beast from the East

Brief and objectives:

We used social media to fulfil our statutory duty as a local authority to warn and inform the public during 'The Beast from the East', a polar storm which ravaged the UK during the early months of 2018.

We used the storm to build a bond between the council and the city, by publishing information that would help keep people safe and provide reassurance, and which would position the council as the first port of call for information during a crisis.

We used front-line staff to reach out to the people of Newcastle, to create a common understanding of the challenges presented by The Beast from the East, and how we reduced the impact of that storm.

Rationale behind campaign, including research and planning:

The Beast from the East affected Newcastle between February 26 and March 6, 2018.

The city was hit by freezing rain, drifting snow, and -15C winds, which caused widespread disruption and deaths, nationally.

We'd seen in the days preceding the worst of the storm considerable 'weather warning fatigue'.

People doubted meteorological forecasts even as red weather warnings were being issued for the rest of the country.

Social media comes into its own during a crisis. It is the first thing people check when things go wrong; they look to their phones before they turn on the radio, TV or go online.

As such it can be a vital tool in emergency management.

Facebook is the primary social media channel for the council.

Since January 2016, we've achieved a 433% increase in Facebook followers.

This has been achieved by posting content designed to engage the people of Newcastle and to be favoured by the Facebook platform itself.

We have fewer Facebook followers than Twitter followers (31,107 to 39,728 respectively), but our Facebook content outperforms Twitter massively in terms of reach and engagement.

Our Facebook audience is split 60/40 between women and men respectively, who are for the most part aged between 25 and 55 years old.

The most recent residents' survey of the city, published in late 2017, showed a significant and growing number of people in Newcastle now use social media for their council news.

Data shows that more than 90% of our Facebook content is viewed on mobile telephone, with the sound off.

Strategy and tactics, including creativity and innovation:

We can rely less and less on the local media to carry important public information messages from the council.

In response, we have had to find a way to create informative, effective, and engaging content quickly, cheaply, and easily, and to find a new way to get our message out.

We have pioneered the use of mobile phone technology to create broadcast standard interviews designed specifically for the social media platforms.

And we have pioneered the approach of using front-line staff to deliver these messages to the public.

This approach, though counter-intuitive to the city's management, has helped create for the council online a voice that is engaging, relatable, and trusted.

Each member of our seven-strong communications team - the smallest communications team of any Core City - has been trained to create and publish this content across our digital platforms.

This means we can create and publish content quickly, and that we can be sure it is reaching our intended audience as soon as possible.

Implementation of tactics:

Daily, we worked with council managers including the chief operating officer and members of the public health, highways, and resilience teams to create a hit-list of key messages appropriate to the effects of the storm.

These messages focused primarily on gritting, keeping the roads and footpaths clear, school closures, social care, and rough sleeping.

Members of the communications team would be sent into the snow to gather the content which would then be returned to the office by WhatsApp, where other members of the communications team would edit it, subtitle and publish.

We collaborated with partner organisations including Public Health North East, Crisis, Northumbria Police, the North East Ambulance Service, Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, Colas, and Northumbrian Water to share messages.

Measurement and evaluation:

During the seven working days of the crisis, we published 69 original pieces of content, including 30 videos.

This was more than any other council in the North East (compared with 51 for second placed North Tyneside.)

These posts achieved a reach of 472,886, were liked, commented upon or shared 26,060 times, and saw the general engagement to our Facebook page rise by 1,278%.

We gained a total of 273,907 video views, with more than 99,400 minutes of video viewed in total.

Our Facebook following rose by 3,329.

Less quantifiable but equally important was the bond built between the city council and the people of Newcastle.

Newcastle City Council head of resilience planning Helen Hinds said: "During a major incident like the Beast from the East it is really important that the public know what services are available for them.

"As a Local Authority we have a legal duty to warn and inform the public so they know what is going on and can make informed choices.

"In the past this has been done through local radio and other traditional media outlets.

"The work of the Newcastle City Council media team to raise the profile of the council using social media has a massive benefit during any major incident, but particularly during such a long running incident as the Beast from the East.

"I was confident that the public were getting accurate, real time information and advice which in turn allowed them to make informed decisions.

"Notably this contributed to a reduction in car journeys to the city during the worst of the weather, which in turn will have reduced the number of accident and disruption that could have been caused.

"The use of social media is one that we will continue to harness in the management of any major incident that may occur within Newcastle."

Budget and cost effectiveness:

The campaign was delivered at zero cost.