

# How Social Media Can Be the First Responder in Weather-Crisis Communications

By [Stephanie Miller](#) Social Media Manager, Madigan Pratt & Associates | February 11, 2018



This fall, Hurricanes Irma, Jose and Maria made names for themselves in the Caribbean and along the southern and eastern coasts of the U.S. As hotels were unfortunately pummeled with Category 5 hurricanes, many people turned to social media. Social media quickly became an outlet for followers to express well wishes, request updates on guest/staff safety, seek the hotel's condition or check their upcoming reservation status.

In the wake of weather-related disasters, social media has become a preferred news outlet, with Facebook being the most dominant platform.

Followers and concerned parties want - and expect - timely updates. While challenges are unavoidable, a hotel's ability (or lack thereof) to effectively communicate critical information can significantly affect its brand reputation, guest relationships and long-term revenue.



After a weather-related crisis, the last thing you want to add is a communications disaster. How a crisis is managed can make or break relationships with your guests and potential guests. For your hotel's weather-related disaster communications, use the following tips to prepare a plan, prevent social media mishaps and effectively interact with followers and guests.

## Plan Your Work, Work Your Plan

During a hurricane crisis, social media managers serve as the liaison between the hotel and guests to provide informative, timely and transparent updates. Posting to Facebook takes minutes, but coordinating a message can take days. In an era

where people demand immediate news, useful and well-timed updates trump everything else.

Preparing a communications strategy prior to the hurricane is essential. A proactive approach can expedite the communication to guests and industry partners after the disaster. Since hurricanes are unpredictable, a list of next steps and sample messaging should be created based on various outcomes that can quickly be selected and posted after the storm passes. For example, if damage is minimal, plan for a post-storm message announcing that the hotel continues welcoming guests. For moderate damage, the message can instruct guests with close-in reservations that they will be contacted by reservations with an update, and for major damage, the message can indicate the resort is temporarily closed and guests with existing reservations will be contacted by reservations to reschedule their visit.

While specifics clearly cannot be determined prior to the hurricane, the plan should still be reviewed with key stakeholders, such as the general manager, lead reservationist and other decision makers. (This should also include back-up points-of-contact for any stakeholders who may be unreachable after the storm hits.) Then, after the storm's passing, committing to decisions should be a top priority so the message can be quickly finalized and disseminated.

Creating a plan and reviewing it prior to the hurricane will help save valuable time after the crisis. Getting your message out quickly will alleviate stress, concern and panic from your guests and followers.

### **Don't Let the Bots Take Control**

While approaching hurricanes will be on the top of your radar, not everyone will be as tuned in, particularly if they are not in the same geographic region.

Long before any weather-related incident has been detected, your hotel may have secured coverage with industry partners or news outlets. Many companies schedule their social media content on automated platforms days and weeks in advance. Therefore, they may not realize their light-hearted post featuring your hotel's special promotion conflicts with a real-time weather crisis.

Inform staff and vendors that scheduled social media posts should be checked and placed on-hold until after the weather incident has passed and resort conditions have been confirmed.

If automated posts are published, this situation can quickly transform into a crisis of its own, depending on the outlet's reach. Others are likely to comment on the insensitivity and poor timing with your hotel also receiving some of the backlash. Actively monitor all social media vehicles so you can react quickly by privately requesting the post be removed, or responding to comments.

### **Communicate with Compassion, Positivity and Effectiveness**

A relevant update centered on positivity should be posted before and immediately after the hurricane hits. Subsequent, informative follow-up posts should be added within days and if necessary, weeks, post-storm. Reporting a delicate situation is challenging, but posts should include a balance of positivity, compassion and helpful information.

### **Posts Before the Storm**

Before the storm, inform followers that the hurricane is approaching and thank your followers for any well wishes you've received.



## The Somerset on Grace Bay

September 6 · 🌐

All is calm at The Somerset on Grace Bay as we prepare for the arrival of Hurricane Irma in Turks & Caicos. Thanks to those who have reached out to us. We will provide an update as soon as possible.

In the meantime, our thoughts and warm Somerset wishes go out to our Caribbean friends and those affected by Hurricane Irma.



👍 Like    💬 Comment

Jackie Haber Grunstein, Lauren Beck Pines, Joanne Silverman and  
137 others like this.

Top Comments ▾

### News After the Storm

While it's typically a best practice to use a short caption and complementing photo in your hotels' social media post, a post-storm update calls for an exception.

This is the time to share all relevant updates from your communications plan. Include a status on staff member's safety, the hotel's condition and any contingency plans. Even if you only have good news to share, remain sensitive to the situation and show compassion for any other hotels or destinations that were affected.

Share updates from key destination partners or restaurants, and engage with other posts to express your own sentiments on behalf of the hotel.

### Ongoing Updates

After there's been time to thoroughly assess the situation and attend to operational needs, take a few pictures that can be shared online. Photos are a great tool to showcase your hotel's individual status. If your hotel is still open, feature shots with guests to verify it is business as usual and everyone is still enjoying their

experience. If there is minor damage, show the dedicated staff working hard to clean the resort. Or, as major repairs are underway and conditions improve, show pictures to demonstrate your progress.



### Nisbet Plantation, Nevis

September 8 · 🌐

Some of our incredible staff members have worked their magic on the grounds of Nisbet Plantation, Nevis today! We can't thank them enough for their positive spirit and tremendous effort to put the shine back on Nisbet. We also really appreciate the encouragement we've received from the Nisbet family over the past few days! (photo: Tina Thuell Photography)



👍 Like    💬 Comment

Tinney Pemberton, Paul Gaydos, David Gaston and 179 others like this.

Top Comments ▾

## Stay Connected 24/7

Before, during and after the hurricane, your Facebook inbox is likely to be flooded with messages. These will vary from well wishes from concerned past guests to panicked inquiries from guests with upcoming reservations.

While some notes may not require an immediate response, or you may be waiting for the situation to be assessed, you can't ignore the inbox. If the hotel's lines of communication are inaccessible, you'll receive even more inquiries, including those from journalists. In this case, you're just one response away from possibly securing some positive media coverage.

Actively monitor the messages, and respond as quickly as possible with a personal, helpful message. If you don't know the answer yet, it's OK to be honest or to clarify you are off-property, for those with remote communications teams. Just make a note of the request, and follow up as soon as you can.

## Let's Get Real

Implement a customer-centric approach, and coordinate with your entire communications team to make the guest experience seamless and personal.

Before you respond to private messages, see where else that individual interacted with the resort. Did they also send a follow up note to the resort's email update? Did they donate to your hotel's fundraising campaign for relief efforts? Do they have an upcoming stay on file that they didn't mention? If they're a past guest have they previously submitted a favorite memory into your photo contest? If any of these things apply, subtly mention it in your response.

While it will certainly take a few extra minutes to check these small details and guest history, a simple "thank you," could go a long way and help convert them to loyal guests.

### **Your Secret Weapon**

While the property and damage are assessed, patience will diminish quickly and your followers (especially those with reservations) will start demanding answers. Pushing out your initial carefully-crafted message won't be enough. Follow-up questions and requests for additional details are inevitable, and as a social media manager (who is likely off property), you may not be able to answer everything.

While key photos and information should be shared, keep some of the smaller updates or similar photos in your back pocket. You may not have the exact info guests are requesting, but additional updates will likely keep your followers satisfied.

### **Cover Your Bases**

Currently 71% of online adults use Facebook. While many will reference Facebook as a first source of news, others will look for news elsewhere. Therefore, it's imperative to spread the message throughout all platforms – your hotel website, emails, press releases, etc.

An integrated approach helps expand your hotel's reach, but there are also opportunities to drive new website traffic, expand your database and increase social media followers.

- On Social Media:

- *Share a sign-up form for followers to opt-in to receive the latest weather updates and ongoing resort news to help expand your email database.*

- *Feature blog posts to help drive web traffic.*

- *Post links to any fundraising campaigns.*

- *Share public relations coverage on social media to further its reach and increase awareness.*

- On Your Website / Blog / Emails / Public Relations Outreach:

- *Direct visitors to social media platforms for the "latest" updates and photos. This will help grow your followers and increase engagements.*

### **The Bottom Line**

Compared to a highly satisfied guest's hotel stays, a fully connected customer has an increased value of 41%. To maximize opportunities to convert loyal brand advocates, every communication touchpoint must be examined and social media interactions during a crisis will become more critical than ever.

Guests with upcoming stays want information on how their experience will be affected. If you cannot effectively provide this or answer questions, the relationship suffers. On the other hand, a strong and accommodating guest interaction can go a long way. Often they'll share their experiences with friends or family, and personal endorsements and word-of-mouth advertising have an exponentially higher ROI than other marketing initiatives.

Every interaction can affect your hotel's brand reputation, guest relationships and revenue, so take preventative measures, form a plan, and provide timely, informative and personal updates. Hurricanes are unpredictable and devastating, but your social media interactions don't have to be.



Ms. Miller

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**Extended Biography**

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