

Cingular Wireless' MediaRoom Serves the Public During Hurricane Katrina Crisis

OVERVIEW

On August 29, 2005, what would become the worst natural disaster in American history began to unfold. Hurricane Katrina has since taken the lives of thousands, displaced thousands more and left Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama reeling from the devastation. In a true illustration of generosity – both individuals and businesses – have contributed millions in dollars and in kind donations to assist the victims of this devastation.

Cingular Wireless, America's leading wireless company, understood early the role they must assume to assist customers, employees and the media as the crisis unfolded. Cingular counts more than 1,200 federal, state and local government agencies as well as 95 of the Fortune 100 companies as customers; millions of Cingular's customers are based in the affected areas, as were more than 5,000 employees.

Faced with network outages and displaced employees, Cingular's communications team knew they had to mobilize to provide as much real-time information to customers, employees and the media as possible.

CHALLENGE

Cingular's challenge was to find a way to continually inform their key audiences about network outages, donation opportunities and employee whereabouts, throughout the duration of the crisis and on an ongoing basis as needed.

Cingular identified the media, customers and employees as audiences that each needed breaking news and information. But they recognized that the messages and information that needed to be conveyed to each of these audiences would differ greatly. The communications team wanted to be able to convey information on network outages to customers and the media while at the same time encourage employees to check in with the company so Cingular could assist with employee relief efforts.

Further, Cingular wanted the public around the world to know how they could assist in relief efforts through a text-messaging donation program.

SOLUTION

Planning for a crisis, especially a natural disaster, is a challenge in any industry. The key to managing a crisis successfully is being able to get control of the situation and inform audiences as quickly and frequently as possible. Months before Katrina hit, Cingular's communications team recognized the need to take better control over the media room pages of their corporate website in order to create a more effective communications vehicle.

With such a large network, Cingular uses its corporate website as a primary vehicle to communicate information to customers from account updates to new products and services. For years, Cingular's communications team has worked with the IT department to update the media pages of the corporate website. Although not a primary focus for the IT department, they were able to work out a system where these pages were updated one day a week. As Cingular grew, the communications team recognized the need to establish a new system that allowed for more customized messages and frequent updates to the pages that the media and other audiences relied upon. The team also determined that they needed to be more proactive when it came to utilizing the website to prepare for new product launches, trade shows and even crisis communications.

In mid 2005, Cingular's communications team was introduced to MediaRoom, a web tool, that puts the full control of the pages of the media room into the hands of the communications professional, not the IT department. MediaRoom allows for realtime updates to content that is displayed in the same look and feel as an organization's corporate website. In addition to enabling the easy upload of typical media room content such

as management bios, corporate statements, images and more based upon preconfigured areas, it also provides “dark pages” that enable a communications professional to pre-populate content in anticipation of a product launch, trade show or crisis that can be “turned on” at a moment’s notice.

With their three audiences in mind, Cingular’s communications team registered a unique URL, www.cingularhurricaneupdates.com, and linked the URL directly back to their MediaRoom. Information contained within this page included media contacts for Cingular’s offices in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, emergency information and contacts for Cingular employees in the area, news concerning network repairs and availability, and a letter from Cingular’s president and CEO, Stan Sigman, detailing Cingular’s response to the crisis, how employees and customers can contribute funds and resources, and what Cingular will be doing in the weeks and months to ensure that the Gulf Coast recovers. Further, each time Cingular issued a crisis-related news release over the Newswire, the announcement was automatically posted to the MediaRoom. This feature allowed those people visiting the site or with activated email alerts to access news from Cingular as soon as it was issued. Cingular also posted high-resolution photographs of its employees working with customers and restoring the Cingular network. These photographs were available for journalists to download. Additionally, Cingular made an MP3 audio news release available on the site to broadcasters. Cingular’s headquarters and regional PR teams made a concerted push to ensure that journalists were aware of www.cingularhurricaneupdates.com and the resources available at the site.

The MediaRoom service allowed Cingular’s communications team to maintain full control over the pages of their media room that they were now dedicating to this unfolding crisis. MediaRoom became the key to how Cingular was able to manage their significant crisis communications outreach during Hurricane Katrina.

From the onset of the disaster to the present day, the MediaRoom became the central location for all information relating to Cingular’s Katrina response. The system enabled Cingular to quickly issue alerts to customers and employees in the affected areas, and disseminate information on network outages, employee whereabouts and how to make donations through text-messaging.

Cingular embraced the MediaRoom as the central point for communications. Customer Service Representatives pointed customers to www.cingularhurricaneupdates.com as a reference point. All employee communications about the hurricane included the URL. And the homepage of Cingular www.cingular.com also had a direct link to the page. In addition, Cingular’s state and federal regulatory groups provided the URL to legislators and regulators as a key information portal.

RESULTS

Cingular’s communications team acknowledged that if they had not had the MediaRoom service in place, they would not have been able to pull off the same kind of responsiveness. Since they had direct content control of the MediaRoom, including the ability to update the pages from anywhere there was an Internet connection, the communications team was able to inform Cingular’s audiences quickly and effectively, while still remaining focused on other areas that needed their attention, such as developing long term strategies that would help affected employees and customers.

In the weeks during and following Hurricane Katrina, Cingular’s website traffic increased 10x to more than 300,000 weekly hits up from a weekly average of 30,000 hits prior to the national crisis. Cingular continues to sustain traffic of well over 200,000 weekly hits indicating that the MediaRoom has become a primary source of information for Cingular’s audience.