



Case Study: Morris County, New Jersey

Prepare for Emergency Response with a Social Media Strategy

In October 2012, New Jersey was hit by Hurricane Sandy—downed trees and knocked-out power lines plunged neighborhoods into darkness and impassable roads trapped people in their homes—but Morris County's Digital and Social Media Manager, Carol A. Spencer, was prepared with a social media-focused emergency response strategy to aid Morris County's citizens.

Morris County, New Jersey

Morris County, home to 500,000 residents, is located about 25 miles west of New York City. Over the last two decades, Morris County has faced many weather disasters, from heavy snow storms to several major hurricanes. Since 2010, the county has successfully used Hootsuite to manage social media and support emergency response efforts to this heavily populated area.



Collaborated with 39 municipalities to disseminate and amplify up-to-date news



Monitored keywords and search terms to identify messages not directed to company profiles



Assigned incoming messages to ensure no message was missed and no duplication of responses

What They Did

Carol Spencer knew from previous emergency situations caused by natural disasters that it was imperative to have the lines of communication open before people needed help, not after. By informing citizens about the county's social media presence and reassuring them that her team would respond as people reached out, Spencer was able to instill trust in the community and alleviate panic at the earliest stage.

Once the storm touched ground, the team set up their dashboard to prioritize pleas for help and send out rapid updates about road closures, evacuation efforts, and shelter locations. They were also able to dispatch critical information to first responders, assisting rescue efforts in some of the most damaged regions of the county. In one isolated neighborhood, surrounded by fallen trees, frustrated citizens had been without power for four days. One Tweet to the emergency account tipped off a chain reaction that led to a clear route within 24 hours.

The team also responded directly to citizens as hundreds of Tweets and Facebook comments came their way when the storm struck ground. At one point, when a group of people asked when their power might be restored, Spencer posted a message letting them know she had sent the information to Jersey Central Power & Light. This kind of human response helped ease people's fear and proved that the county was really listening and doing its best to help those in need. Social media gave Spencer and her team the power to build trust and meaningful relationships with vulnerable people during a dangerous situation.

How They Did It

Spencer used Hootsuite to set up an emergency response Twitter profile (@MCUrgent) and Facebook page during Hurricane Irene in 2011, so she already had a plan in place when Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012. She and her colleagues were communicating with citizens even before the storm reached land, sending out Tweets from the @MCUrgent handle, posting to Facebook, and updating the public information blog with road closures, emergency preparedness tips, security measures, and shelter locations. These messages were amplified well beyond the county's original reach as followers shared information via retweets, Mentions, Favorites, and Likes.

"We got so much positive feedback—it was unbelievable. One poster said, 'Social media was my lifeline during the storm...you did an amazing job of keeping everyone informed.'"

Carol A. Spencer, Digital and Social Media Manager, Morris County



Morris County NJ OEM

@MCUrgent

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📍 Morris County NJ USA

🌐 morrisoem.org

🕒 Joined August 2010



“The key for us was to have a single Stream that multiple people can post to from multiple towns. When you’re trying to coordinate that much information, it really helps to have all of your social media in one place, in one dashboard.”

Carol A. Spencer, Digital and Social Media Manager, Morris County

By capitalizing on their social media savvy, Spencer and her team hit key emergency response requirements through these three integral traits:

- **Trustworthiness:** The team was able to respond more quickly to questions and spread consistent messaging to hundreds, even thousands, who may be in the same position.
- **Accuracy:** By Tweeting and posting news updates to the information blog and Facebook page, citizens and first responders have access to current, correct updates that limit panic-inducing rumor.
- **Reliability:** Spencer had added representatives from some of the 39 municipalities as members of Hootsuite’s Teams feature, who were then able to provide up-to-date information from their areas.

The Results

The foresight of Morris County’s public information team and their proactive use of social media allowed them to build trust with their citizens, distributing reliable and accurate information in a time when chaos prevailed, saving lives and helping prevent greater devastation. The team acted as a centralized hub for information, and was able to triage information to emergency crews, utilities support, and other departments. This enabled them to get the power back up in affected areas, clear roads, and provide assistance and resources where needed. Spencer’s previous experience using social media as a crisis communications tool provided valuable insight into the scope of its reach and helped the team respond quickly with the most effective information.