

Case Study

Social Media and the Big Picture: The American Red Cross' Haiti Relief Efforts

When a devastating earthquake hit the country of Haiti in early January, it was no surprise that the [American Red Cross](#) was one of the first emergency response organizations to jump to its aid. Since the quake, the ARC has allocated more than \$80 million to help survivors, and has been supplying much-needed food, water, and shelter items to quake victims. In addition, countless volunteer teams from the worldwide Red Cross movement have been sent to Haiti to provide frontline assistance.



American Red Cross

The Red Cross' involvement in social media seems to be a natural progression for a non-profit centered around outreach and [community](#), and the unprecedented response from people on the organization's multiple social media channels after the quake is proof the Red Cross is doing something very right on the social web.

The First 24 Hours

"The first 24 hours [after the quake] were about getting information out there," said Gloria Huang, social media specialist for the ARC. Huang is half of the Red Cross' social media team, which also includes social media manager Wendy Harman. The ARC was able to release a short video providing detailed information about the state of the island and its residents on the organization's YouTube channel just five hours after the quake.

During the days immediately following the quake, Huang and Harman monitored activity on the ARC's various social media outlets – which include the ARC's [Disaster Online Newsroom](#), the [Red Cross blog](#), its [Twitter](#) stream, multiple Facebook [pages](#) and [groups](#), and a [YouTube channel](#) – to make sure the information being circulated and discussed was accurate and as up-to-date as possible.

"We provided the latest facts and figures from the ground and just tried to make sure that what we had across our social media platforms was consistent across the board," said Huang.

Different Networks Have Different Needs

One of the more interesting developments on the Red Cross' various social media outlets has been the clear distinction of user needs on each platform. "On Facebook, we have tons of fans, and a lot of them have previous experience with us," Huang said. "So there's a lot of discussion on Facebook. It's a lot like a forum, where people are helping each other."

Specifically, volunteers from previous campaigns were offering tips and advice to and answering the questions of those interested in volunteering for the Haiti relief efforts.

On the Red Cross' main blog, firsthand accounts, photos, and videos have been posted with unerring regularity, and the Twitter account remains a source of news, links to donation pages, and updates from the ground.

Findings, Lessons Learned, and Next Steps

The Red Cross' social media team has never seen the kind of traffic on its social media sites as it has for this relief campaign. While Red Cross aid to Haiti is ongoing, Harman and Huang are planning to take a big-picture look at the results of their work during those first few weeks after the earthquake to see what worked and where there's room for improvement.

From an observational standpoint, Huang said it was interesting to see which topics received the most attention. "It's interesting to see what peoples' minds first jump to, what they want to know immediately. In this case, it's been 'How can I help?'" she said.

Huang added that the key to this particular campaign was making sure they were consistently spreading the information people were looking for across their social networks, and that that same information was easy to find on the Red Cross website.

"We're excited to work into future exploration of how we can use social media and crowdsourcing to improve communication during these times," Huang said. Along with reviewing the details of this campaign, Harman and Huang are looking at the social media efforts of other emergency aid organizations to gather additional ideas for bolstering their communication efforts during crises. One fact that was reinforced for the Red Cross social media team during the weeks following the Haiti earthquake: social media is incredibly powerful.