BUILDING A SOCIAL-MEDIA-TEAM

IN A LOCAL FIRE BRIGADE

Use case of the LINKS guidelines library

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CONTENT

1. USER STORY

A social media team is to be set up and established in a medium-sized public fire brigade with around 400 to 600 emergency personnel.

A variety of questions need to be addressed, such as:

- What are the fire brigade's goals in entering the social media world?
- Which of the numerous platforms should a fire brigade use?
- How can one monitor if objectives have been achieved?
- How much staff is needed for implementation of the Social Media strategy?
- Are there technologies that are required and/or desirable to ease the use?
- What regulations, standards, or rules should of have to be followed?
- Are there examples of successful social media use, or templates, tools, and documents that are useful for setup, operation, and various scenarios when using social media in emergency response?

The following steps are suggested for implementation:

- Definition of objectives
- Definition of target audience
- Definition of content types and categories
- Determination of type of content
- Definition of community management rules
- Selection of platforms
- Scheduling
- Organizational and staff planning

2. IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Strategy and definition of objectives

As a rule the "why" should always be clarified at the beginning of such a process. It must be clear right from the start what the intention and goals are in setting up a social media team. In the context of fire brigades, these could be a variety of goals or just one.

Examples of such goals can be:

- Recruitment
- Communication with people of own city or community
- Public warning
- Optimizing cooperation with and control of spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers
- Increasing the reach of fire prevention education of children and fire safety information for adults
- Risk and crisis communication
- Intensifying employee loyalty with the fire brigade
- Creation of an additional source for situational awareness

Of course, this list is not exhaustive, but can be adapted individually. This also depends on how much the fire brigade wants and can engage on social media; rather passively (observing) or actively (reacting, informing, motivating).

It is recommended that goals are prioritized and not tackled all at once. The risk of getting bogged down should not be underestimated.

Defining the initial goals lays the foundation for defining the first and essential paper, the own communication strategy with social media embedded.

Further documents based on the strategy can subsequently be, for example, the internal social media guidelines, the community policies and content frameworks.

These represent separate, further-reaching documents which, building on the defined strategy, are important and necessary for implementation. In the context of this paper, we can only briefly discuss the main features.

- SOCIAL-MEDIA-GUIDELINES
  These guidelines are intended to help the own employees and people in the brigade's organization to use social media in a way that is at best fully in line with the interests of the organization, but at least does not conflict with them; these will help employees can orient themselves. Social media guidelines therefore address the entire organization.
- COMMUNITY-POLICIES
  The anonymity of the Internet unfortunately leads to comments and discussions that are sometimes unpleasant, offensive, racist, or even hurtful. This should of course be avoided

in the own area of responsibility, so that one defines community guidelines for the own channels. Discussion and communication are important, so as little as possible should be deleted or blocked. However, if this does become necessary, these guidelines should clearly and transparently communicate in advance the cases in which this will happen. There are numerous examples of this in the LINKS guidelines library.

- CONTENT-FRAMEWORK
  In order to be successful in communication and building a community, regular interaction is important and crucial. Therefore, a plan or calendar for your publications should be defined in advance for a defined period. This does not have to be rigid but should at best contain certain regularities.

2.2   Social-Media-Strategy

The social media strategy contains the essential cornerstones and decisions that have a central influence on the brigade's own actions and activities in this area.

In addition to the brigade's goals already described, the main components of this strategy are as follows,

- the definition of the target group
- the basic definition of the essential contents,
- the type of own content,
- the definition of the type and scope of community management and dialog with the brigade's community.

Furthermore, these points subsequently determine the choice of the

- platforms to be used,
- the amount of time required to operate the channels or accounts,
- derived from this, an organizational and staff concept.

Furthermore, the social media strategy must also deal with the basic technical equipment with hardware and software, which are required for the operation of the own accounts and for the implementation of the social media strategy.

A possible process route is outlined below using the fictitious example of a colleague tasked with implementation and two goals described hereafter.

2.3   Definition of goals

2.3.1   Goal 1

Optimization of public warning by using additional communication channels

The regular use of social media together with an overall increase in media presence should increase the reach in the event of a necessary public warning. After one year the reach in the event of a public warning should be 50000 views in total across all channels.

Increasing the reach of fire prevention education and fire safety information

Awareness of fire safety education and fire safety information should be raised via processed contributions in various channels. The range for these topics should rise in the first year to approximately 15000 views per publication. Furthermore, the creation of a digital portfolio of training and further education modules, such as webinars, short films and the like, should start in the first year.

2.4   Target audience

The definition of objectives triggers the definition of the target audience. Particularly in the context of public authorities, one fundamentally pursues the goal of reaching out to the entire population, e.g., for public warning. However, if one has focused on e.g., the recruitment of employees, one will rather concentrate on young people. In the LINKS Guidelines, there is also an example of the typification of persons who exemplify the respective target audience. These hypothetical persons are given specific characteristics, preferences, and habits to be able to assess as accurately as possible the effect of the own social media presence on this target group. This approach greatly helps to make the abstract process of communicating in a way that meets the needs of the target audience and addressees more tangible and thus also to find a suitable approach.

For the specific example, below two possible target group definitions are described including a respective hypothetical person.

2.4.1   Target group 1:

Adult citizen; age between 35 and 55; interested in administration and social life; solid in professional life; likely highly educated.

Hypothetical person 1:

Georg Frei, 43 years old, engineer at the local energy supplier in the field of gas supply; married, two children; lives in an urban suburb; interested in environmental issues at the local level, administrative work, sports and locally involved in clubs. In addition, he is interested in politics and is active in a political party on a voluntary basis. Usually uses Facebook, Whatsapp, websites, print media for daily information and communication. He has an account on Twitter, but only reads.

Suitable for objectives 1 and 2

Press representative at a local media agency in the city, age between 27 and 35; interested in administration and social life but also the fire and rescue service in particular. Trained in media and reporting.

<u>Hypothetical person 2:</u>

Isabelle Frohn, 31, editor at the local newspaper publisher. Married, no children. Interested in local news and topics around the city. In addition, active in sports in the club as a volleyball player. Usually uses Instagram and websites for entertainment, Twitter and Whatsapp for communication and news, and print media for daily information. Very active on Twitter, she uses Facebook more for private interaction and rather less frequently. Regularly obtains information from relevant press portals for professional use.

Suitable for objective 1

2.5 Categories of content

The next step is now to define the content categories for each target group. Depending on their interests, the desired and popular content also differs greatly. If some people are more interested in current information about what is happening in their own city, other people would rather be entertained by regular insights into the day-to-day work of the fire and rescue service. Still others also like to share content or use social media to communicate information to authorities. Again, one sees the direct derivation of these determinations from the original definition of objectives as well as the definition of the target audience.

Based on the target groups defined in the previous step, the content could look as follows.

2.5.1 Content 1:

The following content is prepared for Georg Frei and target group 1:
- Up-to-date information on operations and the daily work of the fire brigade.
- Targeted information about the activities of the volunteer units in the neighborhood
- Topic blocks around the work "behind the scenes" at the fire brigade
- Acute information and warnings

2.5.2 Content 2:

The following content is prepared for Isabelle Frohn and target group 2:
- Up-to-date information on operations and the daily work of the fire brigade
- Targeted information about the activities of the volunteer units in the neighborhood
- Individual support for content and report requests
- Acute information and warnings

Strengthening links between technologies and society for European disaster resilience

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 883490

- Topic blocks from the medical emergency service and disaster control units for individual retrieval from a database

2.6 Social Media Content

Social media content is the term used to describe content in social media. The type of content or the form of the content is largely determined by the intended content. Depending on the content category, pure texts are suitable, e.g. for quick and concise information. Images are another content type that can speak for themselves or be supplemented by graphics and/or text. In recent months, however, video is becoming more and more prevalent as the preferred form of content. It is possible to convey messages and information quite well with videos. However, there may be a problem with the speed and potentially with the own possibilities. Ultimately, however, the target group and the type of content are the determining factors that significantly influence the choice of content or content type.

The following variants come into question in the specific case:

2.6.1 Variant 1 - video, text if necessary

The content that usually generates the highest interaction rates and the greatest reach is videos of varying length. For most formats, short video sequences are suitable, which can be supplemented by accompanying text. If possible and plannable, video should always be planned, this is particularly suitable for use with:

- Instagram stories and reels
- Facebook videos and Facebook posts
- YouTube and YouTube shorts
- TikTok and Twitter

It doesn't always have to be a "normal" video, so-called funny memes are also suitable for transporting content. However, it is important to ensure that the type of content matches the content. Memes are not suitable for conveying information about emergency response missions.

2.6.2 Variant 2 - Images, text if necessary

Not for all content videos are suitable for the presentation of the content. However, it is usually possible to use images. Here, own images and graphics are preferred, but it is also possible to work with a library of external content, animations, and especially pre-produced graphics. Paid stock photos can also be used, depending on the occasion. For example, for information about a mission, a photo is not necessarily required, here a graphic with a corporate design logo of the fire brigade may be sufficient. The pictures are supplemented, if these are not self-explanatory, by text with the essential information. Pure links to websites should be avoided here, the content should speak for itself. Further details can then be integrated by a link.

2.6.3   Variant 3 - Text only

If information needs to be disseminated quickly, plain text is also suitable for dissemination. For example, in the case of public warnings, it may be necessary to first convey the essential information on correct behavior and the risks. More detailed information, e.g., with infographics, images, videos, etc., can be provided later.

2.6.4   Variant 4 - User Generated Content

First and foremost, and especially, the involvement of the city's volunteer fire fighters is an option. For example, so called "takeover days" are conceivable, in which individual units of the volunteer fire brigades, the medical emergency units or the like present themselves. Photo competitions of the units and of individuals are further options. In addition, a "Feature-Friday" can be introduced on a regular basis, for example, where postings, websites and people from volunteer units are presented.

2.7   Community Management and Dialogue

The basic prerequisite and essential cornerstone of the internal and external communication strategy should be open, transparent communication that takes place on a par. In this context, it is important to define rules for internal procedures as well as for different scenarios directly in advance. For example, despite the objectives set, it may not be possible to respond directly and comprehensively to every comment and inquiry in some situations. This may not always be possible, especially in situations involving large-scale operations and acute warnings. However, it is important that in such situations this is also pointed out with the indication that the dialog will be resumed as soon as possible.

In the following, two scenarios are defined - one for the regular (standard) situation the other one for the exceptional situation - on the basis of which the communication targets are set.

2.7.1   Standard situation - dialogue

In the normal state, the aim is to communicate with the population and followers in general. Here, the encounter on a par, the open and factual discussion and a "take along" of the people is important. Therefore, active contact in particular with other communities is also very important. Active communication is thus intended and important at regular intervals, on the one hand to signal interest and also to draw attention to the own topics. Furthermore, active participation should and can also bring added value for the followers as well as the brigade.

Furthermore, it is important and should be defined as a target that questions and comments are answered within a self-defined deadline. Thus, depending on the service times, an answer should be given on the same day, but at the latest on the following day; a response rate of 90% responses within one hour is defined here as a target.

To answer recurring questions, text modules should be created for general use and made available to all team members. In addition, specialist information from the brigades is to be compiled, which already contains essential content for the individual specialist areas. Nevertheless, it is always necessary to forward questions to the respective brigades for answering. It is important that the answers are not provided directly by the brigades, but always centrally by the communication team.

2.7.1.1 Rules for the dialogue

- Hate comments, insults, discrimination, etc. will be deleted immediately with reference to the netiquette or the community guidelines (needs to be created)
- Regular exchange with other thematically related websites, e.g., other fire brigades should be sought and also carried out on their websites.
- Altogether value is put on an open dialogue, discussions and exchange of opinions.
- A certain, but friendly appearance is a prerequisite.
- Questions should be answered openly and honestly.
- If questions cannot be answered, this is either to be communicated directly or it is answered with the reference that the answers need to be obtained from the respective specialist brigade and thus will be delayed a bit.

2.7.2 Exceptional situation – providing information

In an exceptional situation, this can be e.g.
- large-scale operations
- disaster situations
- Acute danger situations with a larger risk zone
- Major operations outside normal working hours

a normal dialog usually cannot take place. In these cases, the focus is on the immediate dissemination of information, warnings, and the communication of rules of conduct to the population. In addition, the emphasis, especially initially, is on speed rather than depth of information. For example, the rule specifically for warnings is that if there is a known risk situation for the population, a warning with initial, essential protective measures should be issued first. Waiting for more detailed information about the situation is not advisable here. Later, during the ongoing scenario, more precise information can be provided and, if necessary, a dialog can be resumed.

2.7.2.1 Rules for the communication

- Speed outweighs detail in warnings.
- Initially, possibly only one-way communication with rapid transfer of information.
- Indication that in the acute situation it may not yet be possible to provide answers to questions – no dialogue at the moment.

- For extraordinary situations, predefined hashtags can be used, e.g., to receive situation information in the form of images. These can be:
    - #frsXXsituation - for situational picture in general.
    - #frsXXdamage - for information on damage, destruction, etc.
    - #frsXXX - further as required
        - *XX is to be replaced by an acronym for the respective city.*

2.8 Selection of channels and platforms

One can see the common thread of the strategy when you derive the channels, accounts and networks to be operated from the previous definitions. However, the motto here is: "Better to start small" and start with full commitment than try to be active on several platforms simultaneously. Especially in the initial phase, when there is usually little or no staff and also little experience and routine, one should generally not deal with several accounts and platforms at the same time.

Common platforms that are currently being increasingly used by fire brigades include:
- Twitter
    - Twitter format meets the quick information requirements. Here information can be conveyed quickly and compactly, warnings disseminated, and questions answered.
- Facebook
    - Facebook, now a classic social network, is also used by older people and is still the largest network with the highest number of users.
- YouTube
    - YouTube is not only a social network, but also a search engine that is heavily used worldwide. The abundance of partly high-quality productions as well as a fan base on the topic of firefighting makes this network very interesting for fire brigades.
- Instagram
    - Visual network used primarily by younger people, which has only recently shifted its own focus from images to videos.
- TikTok
    - Currently one of the fastest growing social networks, used primarily by young people, with a focus on video content.
- Twitch
    - Platform for live streaming, mostly used for gaming.

- Mastodon
  - After the takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk, a Twitter alternative with strong growth for a short time, but still with a very low number of users and therefore still rather unsuitable as a communication channel for public authorities due to its extremely low reach.

All of these platforms can be relevant options depending on the individual orientation of the own social media strategy.

In the concrete example, the fire brigade initially chooses the Twitter and Facebook platforms for the following reasons:

Twitter

- With Twitter, both hypothetical persons are addressed and thus the target groups are addressed.
- Twitter offers the right format for the needs of quick information. Here, information can be conveyed quickly and compactly, warnings can be spread, and questions can be answered. Therefore, Twitter forms one of the main tools and it is intended to be used daily.
- The use of hashtags increases the value and retrieval of information and tweets. In addition, Twitter can be used very well as a monitoring tool, which can sometimes help to improve the situational picture. Of course, the dissemination of information also requires a certain reach, but the overall reach is faster than on most other channels.
- In addition to acute information and warnings, Twitter is also intended to serve as a channel for current updates on response missions. No reports are posted here, but the "live" channel is located here, where the information can be updated regularly.

Facebook

- Facebook can and should be used to build a community base. Facebook appeals in particular target group 1.
- On Facebook, the focus is not so much on the description of the current response missions and the like, but rather more on comprehensive reports and stories. Regular interaction, possibly the formation of groups, etc. is intended here.
- In the further course, Facebook Live events are also conceivable, where, for example, live broadcasts are made on various topics.
- In addition, many of the brigade's employees can be found on Facebook, so private groups could also be used for internal communication via Facebook, which could promote employee loyalty and the expansion of the brigade's own community.

2.9 Scheduling, organizational and staff planning

The specifications always result in a quantifiable effort, which must be made in terms of personnel, organization and ultimately also financially. At this point, there are often initial deviations between the management level's ideas and the actual implementation possibilities. Overall, however, it is important to demonstrate the maximum available capacities clearly and honestly against the effort required. As a rule, medium-sized and large professional fire brigades are more likely to have adequate resources in terms of personnel and funding, but this often depends individually on the strategy of the management levels of the fire brigade and the city. As examples show, even smaller fire brigades can have good Internet communications. However, if there are any disproportions at this point, it is of elementary importance for later success to adjust now.

- If no more resources are available, the effort and thus the own target definition must be adjusted if necessary.
- Otherwise, if resources are available, they can be expanded.

The central point here is the awareness that social media cannot be run "just on the side", but above all requires permanent human resources. If this is recognized, the scope can certainly be variably adapted according to the own possibilities.

In this use story, the colleague divides the process of building a communications team into two phases:

2.9.1 Phase 1 – no full-time staffing yet

The establishment of positions always takes some time, which would basically prevent the launch of a new communication strategy. To bridge this time gap, a model based on the organizational structure of volunteer units is the first option. This is recruited from the entire pool of fire brigade personnel, supplemented, if necessary, by personnel from the volunteer units. The service is provided in overtime work and takes place after being alerted or at scheduled training and advanced training sessions. Similarly, a communications team can start with a pool of motivated emergency personnel, recruited from a larger number of employees already involved in other tasks. The organization will then initially be decentralized and primarily virtual; here, coordinated rules and good hardware and software support are extremely important. The relatively low number of 24h-shifts in the operational service of about 8-9 per month also allows a relatively high degree of on-call availability. It is important here that day-to-day work can be performed by employees in offices or by on-call personnel.

2.9.2 Phase 2 – Addition of full-time positions

In the medium term, the task of the entire communication, but also the task of looking after social media, cannot be carried out exclusively through overtime work or volunteering. If this is to be carried out seriously, sooner or later positions will also have to be created for this purpose.

![LINKS logo](Strengthening links between technologies and society for European disaster resilience)

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 883490

2.10 Staff – Roles and tasks

A pool of personnel is to be found for the various tasks by means of an internal call for tenders, who will be trained in the tasks and then also perform them.

Suggested roles and related tasks are listed hereafter:

- Social media channel manager:
  - Twitter
  - Facebook
- Themes manager:
  - Identical to the channel manager
- Content & design managers:
  - One function as lead
  - 6-8 task forces from the station guards, at best at least one person from each guard; these persons can also be assigned to the channels and are thus altogether also assigned to the task of community management.
- Press officer/press spokesperson
  - At least 6 persons with incident commander qualification

The following pool of personnel is to be initially provided in addition to normal duties in the form of overtime work:

- At least 6 persons with incident commander qualification to perform the following tasks:
  - Press spokesperson at scenes of operation after alerting, not on standby.
  - Press reports during duty hours
  - Function Communication in crisis team
  - Responsible for social media channels
  - Responsible for themes
  - Community management
- Minimum of 6-8 emergency service personnel preferably at least one from each station.
  - Community management
  - Content creation during shifts
  - Media production
  - Creating texts and stories
- One person in direct contact with the brigade head/office management
  - Coordination with the brigade management/office management
  - Definition of the communication strategy
  - Specification of the rough topics
  - Official press spokesperson
  - Management function for the entire communication team

To ensure a continuous performance of tasks requires a relevant share of full-time positions.

2.11 Hard- and Software

Once all organizational and conceptual questions have been answered, "only" the definition of the tools remains. Basic elements such as photo and video recording devices are important. This can be the own cell phone but should at best be equipment provided by the brigade for permanent use. Suitable software is also part of up-to-date and modern equipment, especially around community management. Which hardware and software is used in the end is determined by the respective conceptual specifications as well as the respective strengths and weaknesses of the technologies used. Here, the Technologies Library in the LINKS Community Center (https://links.communitycenter.eu/index.php/List_of_Disaster_Community_Technologies) offers extensive information on available software solutions.

2.12 Coordination with press offices and press agencies

To ensure that the communications and social media project is not doomed to failure from the outset, contact should be sought with the local municipal press relations office at an early stage. From the very beginning, it is important that the fire brigade communicates that it will not take on tasks or competencies that are not related to the fire brigade, but rather that it will supplement and expand the range of public relations activities provided by the authorities. Also, task-specific and additional achievements, like e.g., the communication function in the municipal crisis team can be staffed by the fire brigade, which is often not possible by municipal press offices' personnel. Provided that the mutual advantages, overlaps, but also the possibilities of cooperation are recognized, a great added value can develop from such cooperation, especially for the population. However, this must always be approached with caution, prudence and in corporate manner, so that no one involved feels left out. Only by bringing together the expertise and skills of both disciplines a mutually satisfactory result will be achieved in the end.

3. CONCLUSION

Only when all the conceptual steps have been successfully mastered, and the organizational, personnel and technical conditions have been met, the new team can get off the ground.

It is important that the step of "going online" is one of the last.

On the entire path traveled so far, the contents and results of the LINKS project can provide important assistance and support the various steps.