

Communicating in a Crisis PIER Deployment During Hurricane Ivan

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How do organizations meet their responsibility to effectively communicate breaking news with thousands of people, during a natural disaster, when it disrupts their own operations?

How does an organization deliver the right information to the right people, at the right time, in the midst of the sixth most intense hurricane on record? Ivan wreaked devastation on much of the Caribbean before turning north into the Gulf of Mexico and making landfall near Gulf Shores, Alabama, on September 16, 2004. Landing with maximum sustained winds estimated to be near 130 MPH, Ivan resulted in 52 fatalities in the United States. Early estimates put damage in the U.S. at \$5-15 billion.

As Ivan came ashore, communication efforts and demand for information were peaking. Thousands of people sought information about evacuation, shelter, and rescue or business continuity. How did organizations maintain effective communications when confronted with the realities of power interruptions, limited mobility, required evacuations and the general confusion inherent in such a widespread, powerful and disruptive natural disaster?

Three organizations turned to an Internet based communications management tool to meet the need for timely and effective information.

A state Emergency Management Agency, a federal response agency and a major insurance company all utilized the PIER (Public Information and Emergency Response). These three organizations had communication responsibility to many different 'audiences', including responders, agents, employees, corporate interests, elected officials and the general public. With each audience, the challenge was the same; creating and disseminating information in a timely manner.

With PIER, communications was instant, distribution was broad, and response was positive.

1. The state Emergency Management agency created regular situation reports, consisting of text, photographs and maps, which were quickly uploaded to their PIER center for public access. They received over 11,000 hits to access the information during the hurricane, and more visits afterward.

"While the PIER system played a critical role during the hurricanes, it continued to be a key component of our recovery efforts long after the storms passed. Our PIER Web site was used to post recovery information, particularly relating to which counties received federal declarations. Storm victims who had questions



*regarding recovery efforts or how they could access federal assistance were able to easily submit their inquiries and state public information officers were able to efficiently track the status of the queries."**

2. The federal response agency, deeply involved in response and rescue efforts, launched a PIER center dedicated to Hurricane Ivan. Agency Public Affairs staff created, posted and disseminated 31 media releases, each to an average of 455 media recipients – with a total distribution of more than 14,000 emails during the hurricane. This center was visited over 397,000 times by people looking for hurricane updates. This federal agency's regular PIER center received over 119,000 hits by people seeking additional hurricane information at the same time.

*"The ability to control all aspects of our public information program from anywhere, anytime has infinitely improved our ability to keep the public informed about our operations."**

3. The major insurance company updated their crisis information center at least twice per day for the duration of the storm, and updated special Spanish-language information pages at the same pace. Their center, dedicated to employee and agent information, supported over 20,000 visits during the hurricane.

*"Throughout the hurricane events, our employees and agents -- especially those in Florida and the Southeast US -- were dependent on, and appreciative of, the information we supplied via our PIER Site."**

By the end of Hurricane Ivan, these three organizations' PIER centers had absorbed almost 550,000 page hits, and had transferred more than 35 Gigabytes of information – with no impact on speed or accessibility.



What did people think when they came for information?

The federal response Agency posted a survey on their Hurricane Ivan information center to see what center visitors thought. Here are some quotes garnered from that survey:

- *"I monitor multiple sources for information. Your site is another great source of info!"*
- *"Continue to be available and distribute info, as your office has done in the past."*
- *"You guys do a pretty good job in my book".*
- *"Good & timely info".*
- *"You guys are really doing a great job. You should be very proud!"*
- *"This site helps me keep up on the latest info. It is wonderful to have this website".*
- *"I continuously am appreciative of all your hard work. Your office is always cordial and helpful."*
- *"No problems, no complaints. Great source of quick information. A professional product from professional people."*
- *"GREAT JOB.THANKS FOR THE HELP".*

Associated Press reporters visited the Hurricane Ivan information center continuously, especially for the photos posted to the center daily, sometimes hourly. Many of the images shared with media across the country and around the world originated on PIER centers.

People who needed to have information were able to find it, and they appreciated the speed and quality of the information provided.

What about the users – the people who provided the important information?

PIER was there for them as well. Because PIER is Internet based, users who were not in the middle of the storm could provide content:

1. The State Emergency Management Agency was able to post information from their operations center and make it available to people throughout the region on their PIER center, even while dealing with connectivity issues within their own network. As the Agencies' Public Affairs Director related; "During the peak of Hurricane Ivan, the state experienced some major network problems. Because we had PIER, which is web-based, we were able to continue to post critical information that could be accessed by the public and news media."*
2. The insurance company site was administered on a 24/7 basis by corporate communications staff, one of whom reported; "As much of the hurricane activity took place over several weekends, I was able to use my home PC to create and post 90 percent of the content. That created all sorts of efficiencies and did not hamper my ability to post relevant content. What continues to sell me on using the PIER center is the ease of creating and posting content. In the midst of the chaos created by multiple hurricanes, we were able to swiftly post relevant, timely information to those in need."*



3. The federal response Agency was able to mobilize staff from geographically diverse offices, all working together to provide information on the Hurricane Information site. As staff had to leave their offices to provide physical response, staff in other offices were able to 'step in' virtually, logging on from their locations to provide continuity and quality of product.

As one staff person put it: "Thank you very much for the assistance provided by yourself and your staff. They greatly assisted in writing and releasing press releases while our Public Affairs Officers were on temporary duty assignments (out of office, not available to help). I always received the most professional and expedient service. A large round of applause for your crew!!!!"

During the hurricane, the federal response Agency's communications staff closest to landfall were assigned to hurricane related duties that took them out of the office, yet information needs still had to be met. With PIER, communication staff from other locations were able to prepare and post communication material for public viewing, as well as disseminate it to the news media and other interested audiences.

*As reported by a key user: "Right after Hurricane Ivan, we had 10 public information specialists and photographers spread out over a four-state area (LA, AL, MS, FL) to document storm impact and response/recovery operations. All of them were able to easily submit their information and imagery via the PIER System to our main office - three states away. Operating our "virtual information center" in such a way gave my staff a global view of on-scene operations, allowing them to make better decisions about what information was most relevant and timely, where and how it needed to be distributed, and ultimately improving the overall information management process."**

PIER met the need for effective communication breaking news with thousands of people.

Throughout Hurricane Ivan, PIER provided multiple users in diverse locations the Virtual Communications Center they needed to provide a precious resource: accurate, timely and widely available information.

Whether adding information to their PIER center for public viewing, or disseminating it to hundreds of media recipients by email, public communication professionals were able to do their job throughout the crisis. By using this Virtual Communications Center, individuals responsible for their organizations' effective communication were able to meet that responsibility, regardless of the disruptions of a major hurricane. PIER allowed each organization to maximize the effectiveness of their communications professionals, wherever they were. With PIER, each was able to provide important information when it was needed – the right information to the right people, at the right time.

**Due to agency and company regulations, AudienceCentral is unable to quote the organizations or people by name. If readers are interested in speaking directly with the individuals quoted, please contact AudienceCentral.*

