

Case Study: Refinery Fire

PIER in Use During a Refinery Fire Incident

PIER facilitates collaboration between geographically dispersed employees and effective management of information requests following a refinery tank fire.



Overview

The Situation

A diesel storage tank caught fire at a west coast refinery. Within an hour, media had responded and begun broadcasting the situation to the public via their websites.

The Solution

Using PIER to manage communications, the appropriate refinery employees were able to approve the initial statement concerning the fire and post it to their website, just over an hour after the fire began. Reporters were referred to the refinery's website for updates on the incident, and were assured that all available information would be posted there.

The Situation

A diesel storage tank caught fire at a west coast refinery. Within an hour of the fire starting, a regional news station had a helicopter overhead filming the response. That video, along with pictures of the storage tank, was posted to the news station's website for the public to see.

Also within the first hour, a national newswire service picked up on the story and began alerting the media. Local media in and around the area began broadcasting the situation on their websites.

The Solution

At the time the fire broke out, the refinery's external affairs contractor was working at the company's office, which is a 45-minute drive north of the refinery. Working with the refinery's Human Resources/External Affairs manager over the phone, the contractor gathered all of the available information. This information was then used to draft an initial statement on the incident. Once approved, this statement would be posted to the refinery's website as a way to provide confirmed facts on the situation to the many interested stakeholders.

Using PIER (Public Information Emergency Response), an online system used by the refinery to manage communications, the appropriate refinery employees were able to approve the initial statement from the refinery. The refinery's external affairs contractor then posted the approved statement to the refinery website while working from their office, just over an hour after the fire began.

With an initial statement posted on the refinery's website, the external affairs team began their drive to the refinery. Due to the media's swift response, the refinery's external affairs officer received a phone call from local and national print and broadcast media about every 30 seconds for the first half hour of the fire. The voicemails from these calls were tracked using pen and paper

on the drive to the refinery. The external affairs officer was then able to respond to the media's inquiries, and later log the inquiries into PIER. Reporters were referred to the refinery's website for updates on the incident, and were assured that all available information would be posted there. This step dramatically reduced the number of phone inquiries from reporters seeking the "latest news."

Once the external affairs team had received confirmation that the tank fire had been put out, the original statement was updated with this information and posted as a new press release on the refinery's website. Again, this was done while driving to the refinery by making a quick phone call to an employee working remotely who had access to PIER. The media quickly responded and updated their websites accordingly.

Several of the afternoon's media phone calls were from energy and/or financial publications that were interested in knowing whether this incident would affect operations. One such publication, Reuters, reported later that evening that refined products traders on the west coast reported a brief increase of two cents per gallon on unleaded gasoline in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Portland, Oregon after hearing of the fire. Once news was given that the fire had been put out and had not affected the refinery's production operations, prices returned to their previous levels. The refinery's ability to provide updated information to the media during this incident was instrumental in halting the concern that the event would affect production levels, thereby ensuring fuel price levels returned to normal.

Thanks to a quick and effective response on the part of the refinery's fire department and others, the negative affects of this event were minimal. However, the lesson to be learned from this incident is that even a small event with minimal impact on refinery operations can require a very significant communications response. Fortunately, this refinery had PIER in place to facilitate effective management of the many requests for information following the tank fire incident, and allow collaboration between on-site employees and the refinery's external affairs contractor.

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