

Case Study: University of Houston

Managing Emergency Communications in the Face of Hurricane Humberto

With Hurricane Humberto quickly approaching, UH needed to do more than just send 'school closure' notifications; they needed to manage the many incoming inquiries and be able to provide interactive communications with stakeholders regarding the storm's impact. Thankfully, they had PIER.



UH's beautiful campus, just minutes from downtown Houston.

Overview

Customer Profile

The University of Houston's campus is home to approximately 35,000 students and 8,000 faculty and staff.

Situation

When Hurricane Humberto struck Texas on September 13, 2007 its formation and intensification was the fastest on record. UH had little time to prepare school closure notifications and respond to the many requests for information on the storm's impact to school operations.

Solution

UH originally acquired PIER to manage crisis communications internally. During Hurricane Humberto UH used PIER to communicate with all internal and external stakeholders.

Key Benefits

- Ability to alert students, faculty and staff of school closures via e-mail, SMS messages and telephone notifications
- Pre-staged contact lists allow alerts to be sent quickly
- Online platform allows users to manage notifications remotely
- Recipients can respond to notifications with questions
- Ability to view incoming inquiries and respond accordingly
- Ability to track success rate of notifications sent
- Ability to self-publish information directly to UH's emergency information website

Customer Profile

Founded in 1927, the University of Houston's 560-acre campus is home to approximately 35,000 students, 5,000 staff and 3,000 faculty members. UH currently has the third largest enrollment of higher education facilities in the entire state of Texas, and is located in the nation's fourth largest city.

The University of Houston consists of 12 academic colleges, including both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Many of the school's programs have been recognized for their excellence over the years. In 2007, for example, US News & World Report placed UH's business program, the Bauer College of Business, in the top five percent of all undergraduate business programs in the nation.

UH places just as much emphasis on the safety of its students and faculty members as it does on its exceptional education offering. UH aims to ensure that the safety of everyone on campus is never compromised. However, due to the school's location, the University can experience severe storms during the hurricane season. As a result, UH has a considerable responsibility on its hands. It must be able to not only send alerts about school closures and other emergencies to its many stakeholders, but also communicate as needed, before it's too late.

Situation

Hurricane Humberto began appearing in the news in early September 2007. What began as a tropical depression in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico on September 12 quickly developed into a tropical storm, and later became Hurricane Humberto. Hurricane Humberto's formation and intensification was faster

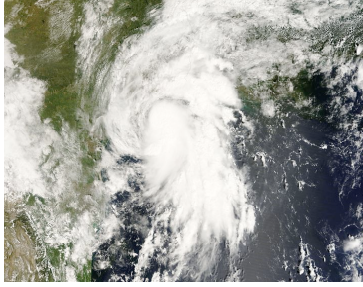


Image of Hurricane Humberto on September 12, 2007 (Courtesy of NASA)

than any other tropical cyclone on record.

Humberto struck the State of Texas on September 13 as a strong Category 1 hurricane, reaching speeds of 90 mph. In its wake, Hurricane Humberto left one fatality and caused approximately \$50 million in damage.

With such a short period of time between news of the storm's development and its landfall, UH had little time to prepare school closure notifications and respond to the many requests for information on the storm's impact to school operations.

Fortunately, the University had implemented a communications management technology one year earlier: the PIER System (Public Information and Emergency Response), which would prove to be invaluable for this need.

The Communications System

The University of Houston originally began using PIER in the spring of 2006 as their primary crisis communications platform. The vision for the system was to manage internal communications, allowing virtual collaboration between their critical command staff, Public Safety (Chief of Police), the President of UH, Provost, Board of Regents, Plant Operations staff, IT staff and others. However, in the wake of the tragic events that took place at Virginia Tech in April of 2007, the University began looking into PIER as a means to communicate with all of their internal stakeholders, as well as outside groups such as the media and government.

Contact information for staff, faculty and students was imported from UH school records into the University's PIER database. Additional opt-in options for those not already in the system were encouraged through the UH website. Allowing students and other stakeholders to submit their cell phone numbers was critical for the University's ability to send SMS notifications.

When school officials learned of Hurricane Humberto, they knew they needed to be prepared to take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of all students and employees. If necessary, UH would need to send time-sensitive school closure alerts, with the assurance that messages would reach their desired targets.

On September 12, the University encountered such a situation. With Hurricane Humberto making landfall not far away, UH officials determined that the campus would in fact need to be closed. University employees quickly began drafting notification messages.

Stakeholder contact lists were already stored on the University's PIER System, greatly reducing the time needed for UH to get their message out. All that was left for the UH communications team to do was draft an alert message and identify their target audiences before notifications could be made. PIER's multi-modal capabilities provided effective communications through e-mail, text messages and telephone notifications. Nearly 40,000 e-mails, 5,500 text

messages and 8,500 telephone notifications were delivered to alert students, faculty and staff members of the school's closure.

Updates on the storm and resulting school closure were also posted directly to the University's PIER site to reach those who weren't in the UH database. PIER's integrated tools and user-friendly setup made this possible without the need of any extra steps or resources.

Prior to Hurricane Humberto, UH took steps to educate their students, staff and faculty of the University's PIER site and the role it would serve for issuing emergency updates. As a result, many of the University's internal stakeholders looked to the UH website for critical information during Humberto, greatly reducing the number of incoming inquiries.

In the roughly 16-hour period from the storm's development to its passing, the University of Houston's PIER site, www.UHemergency.info, received approximately 244,000 hits. Students, family members of students and others continuously visited the site for updates on Humberto and its impact on the school. The University's Communications team effectively handled all of the information updates that appeared on UH's site, without relying on IT assistance. The ability to self-publish information directly to the web, from any location with online access, proved to be an extremely effective means of notifying stakeholders, and another significant benefit PIER offered the University.

Using PIER, UH's communications team was also able to keep the University Emergency Staff updated on changes in the weather system. Updates were sent before, during and after the storm, which greatly improved the University's ability to make critical decisions regarding school operations in the face of Humberto. Additionally, UH was able to keep the University's remote campuses updated on the situation by sending information to the appropriate Emergency Management Teams.

The following morning, once the storm had passed and the decision was made that people could safely return to campus, UH successfully sent out a second notification message to the same list of students, faculty and staff members, and updated the UH website, announcing the campus' reopening.

In addition to supporting the University's proactive communication efforts, PIER also allowed UH to manage and respond to the many incoming inquiries from stakeholders. Relying on e-mail for managing and responding to all of the submitted questions during this situation would have been a significant burden for the University. Fortunately, the automated processes in place ensured that all UH PIER users were immediately notified of incoming questions regarding the storm. Using PIER, UH was able to view a history of the inquiries and determine the appropriate person to respond in a timely manner to both internal and external inquiries.

The University received a very positive response for their communication efforts during Hurricane Humberto. In fact, one person with ties to the University submitted the following statement to UH's PIER site:

"I just wanted to commend you on the emergency information distribution this afternoon. I noticed the e-mail about the decision to close campus went out shortly before 4:00 p.m. and I received a phone call from the automated system around 4:30 p.m. . . . I think the timeliness was very good considering this is the first time I think it's been used. Kudos!"

Key Benefits

- Ability to alert students, faculty and staff members of school closures and corresponding reopening with a variety of means (e-mail, SMS messages and telephone notifications)
- Pre-staged contact lists enabled UH to send out alerts quickly
- Online platform allows UH PIER users to manage notifications and other communications, even when unable to be on campus
- Inquiry management capability allows university students, faculty and staff to respond to notifications with any questions they may have
- Communication management tools allow university officials to view incoming inquiries and respond from a single, online platform
- Notification tools allow PIER users to track the success rate of e-mail and text-to-voice notifications sent
- Ability to self-publish information directly to UH's emergency information website

Now more than ever, there is a demand for universities to be able to notify key stakeholders of emergencies. Schools are expected to have the tools necessary to not only alert students, faculty and staff members of crisis events, but also manage the overwhelming number of inquiries made by government officials, emergency responders, families of students and the media during an emergency. Simply sending notifications is no longer enough. A comprehensive solution allows all communications to be handled from a single, easy to use platform, any time and from anywhere.

The University of Houston has taken steps to ensure it is prepared to handle the communication storm when the time comes. The University's successful use of PIER for critical communications during Hurricane Humberto is proof of that.

Contact PIER Systems, Inc.
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Additional Information

For more information on the University of Houston and their use of PIER to communicate with students, faculty and staff, visit www.UH.edu/emergency.