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SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY FOR THE MILITARY-ENGAGED AMERICAN RED CROSS

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I joined the American Red Cross Service to the Armed Forces (SAF) in 2015 while living in Okinawa, Japan. Coming from a background in academia, I now had to switch gears into nonprofit operations and policies. Organizational culture, mission requirements, funding, and the necessary adherence to an approved memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Department of Defense (DoD) dictated the actions of our SAF station. Understandably, these factors also created the tendency to avoid massive change in practices. Upon returning to the United States in the summer of 2017, I was invited to become the strategic communications advisor to the vice president of Service to Armed Forces for a one year term. This role came with a rather specific charge: provide recommendations for a social media strategy for the American Red Cross SAF mission—what I consider a large-scale change to current practice on the ground.

In what follows, I will provide my approach to this task and address the following questions: (1) why should nonprofit organizations be concerned with current scholarship in social media implementation; (2) is it possible to create a single, unified strategy for the varied needs of SAF; and (3) how does the American Red Cross SAF acknowledge that staff and volunteers are in place as civilians, while still maintaining trust with the DoD and local military authorities? My task is met with a variety of obstacles including concerns from the communication teams regarding the inability to control messages, and the necessity to maintain operations security (OPSEC) specifically when dealing with Red Cross stations operating on American military bases overseas.

NONPROFIT SOCIAL MEDIA USE

To address my first obstacle and best convey to my colleagues the useful nature of social media, I called on current scholarship in the academic field. In many

professional settings, but especially the nonprofit sector, there is often push back on social media, as communication professionals are concerned with the inability to control postings. This concern is completely understandable as these organizations need to maintain a positive, trusting reputation within the community to encourage support and giving.

Current research, however, points to an ever-increasing portion of the public receiving its information from social media outlets. According to the Pew Research Center, 67 percent of Americans receive some of their news from social media, while 20 percent do so frequently. The same report also pointed to an increase in Americans over the age of fifty receiving news from various social media platforms—55 percent in 2017 over 45 percent in 2016.[1]

While these numbers are encouraging to those already confident working with social media, they do little to allay those who are fearful of losing control over their organization's messaging. Social media offers users the opportunity to converse with an organization in real time but also opens the door for messaging errors and unwarranted criticism.[2] But with communication consistently trending toward online interactions, social media managers must use these platforms to their best abilities while acknowledging the potential for risk.

In the process of creating my strategies, it became apparent early that while nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have specific concerns that differ from their for-profit counterparts, many elements of the approach to social media strategies are similar. For example, both organization types operate within the parameters of their stakeholders; a business may find itself beholden to investors, while a nonprofit may need to appease board members. For-profit investors may look to financial return on investment the same way nonprofit stakeholders are concerned about seeing social impact demonstrated.[34]

OVERSIGHT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

A factor influencing concern over social media is the difficulty posed in gauging how well postings demonstrate social impact and actually reach a desired audience.[5] While metrics, like those available through Facebook, offer some insight into page views and visits, the large-scale impact can involve a bit of guesswork. For this reason, dialogue between an organization and social media users becomes increasingly important when determining if a message is being received.[67] Staff and volunteers on the NPO side, then, need to be trusted, with appropriate training and oversight to appropriately engage with users and provide clear and correct messages.

If the NPO is to trust those in its organization to take this role, it is imperative that oversight structures be put in place since a misphrased comment

or inappropriate image risks severe damage to the organization's stakeholder relationships.[8] At an American Red Cross SAF station these structures need to be clearly dictated since volunteers, due their military association, turn over every two to four years, and mobile staff may only be on site for three years. It may seem obvious that such structures be put in place, or even that those presenting the information be already checking their comments, but a clear procedure on how to respond to a user and what information to post maintains the credibility of the NPO online and may reduce professional concerns. Providing resources that maintain consistent messaging assists those managing the online presence by providing easy access to accurate information.

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY AND OPSEC CONCERNS

The mission of American Red Cross chapters in the United States differs slightly from that of SAF stations overseas. Local chapters and US-based programs that most Americans are familiar with include—but are not limited to—disaster assistance, biomedical services (blood donations), and health and safety education (e.g., CPR and first aid training), among other local programs. SAF, whose mission hails from that of the original American Red Cross established in 1881, "serves as a critical line of communication between the U.S Armed Forces and their families."[9] SAF stations in the United States and abroad utilize large components of volunteer staff made up of military, retirees, and dependents, and offer services ranging from emergency communication messages between active duty members and family at home to workshops helping families deal with deployment scenarios. During my time in Okinawa, I witnessed the Red Cross participating in military exercises, managing professional development training for military spouses, and hosting family-friendly events to engage the community.

Since SAF stations operate on military installations and in accordance with a DoD memorandum of understanding, the importance of adhering to military policies and structures is paramount. In the area of communication, this is most clearly seen in the need to uphold OPSEC procedures. The US Air Force defines OPSEC as "a process of identifying, analyzing and controlling critical information indicating friendly actions associated with military operations and other activities."[10] Translated for daily use, this usually means taking care to not share troop movements, deployment locations, training exercise plans, and other details that may hinder the effectiveness and safety of a military operation. Active duty members are routinely given training in OPSEC to avoid providing the enemy with information regarding how the US

military fights or gives indicators about upcoming operations, but in many cases civilian dependents lack this guidance. With individuals interacting with our SAF station on a daily basis, staff and leadership volunteers were concerned with the type of information being disseminated online. Volunteers, both active duty and civilian, took great pride in their work with the nonprofit, and were quick to share their actions online. Additionally, the station itself frequently employed social media to market its offerings to the base community, resulting in a highly active social media presence.

CREATING THE STRATEGY

In creating an effective strategy, I needed to be concerned with a variety of factors. SAF stations work with a varied population of active duty military members, dependent families, retirees, and government civilians. On top of this, those populations may reside in the United States or on installations abroad. SAF stations worldwide do not have a unified social media strategy; each station has its own Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., as well as its own locally created and managed web presence. Red Cross national headquarters provided social media tools to stations, but they were very basic. A quick overview showed that some stations use social media to a large extent, including posting volunteer and education opportunities and accounts of events conducted by the station. Other SAF stations, meanwhile, barely used social media at all. These factors create a situation where a one-size-fits-all approach to social media implementation is ineffective. As such, concern with being too prescriptive in social media use was a definite concern.

As demographics differ considerably between stations, the communication needs differ as well. For example, a post located in the United States may cater to a large number of retirees and their families, for whom social media is not effective. Meanwhile, an overseas station will serve active duty and their families, many in their twenties and thirties, and find social media to be the easiest way to reach a large community. Since building a script for all stations is not effective, the communication team provides guidelines and templates they can pull from, referred to as the "Hero Care Tool Kit." However, two distinct problems existed with the current tool kit: (1) there were no recommendations for when and how to effectively engage social media to ensure the American Red Cross SAF mission was appropriately represented, and (2) there was no guidance to assist stations, especially those overseas, in understanding and adhering to DoD rules regarding operations security. Since unifying stations under a single strategy is not possible, the best option was to instead support and not overwhelm the staff on the ground with too much information.

PROBLEM SCENARIO

From 2015 to 2017 I was a leadership volunteer at the Red Cross Kadena Station in Okinawa, Japan. I held the role of station chair, partnering with the regional program manager to oversee all station activities. One of two large stations on the island, Kadena Station provided support to a population of approximately 31,000 active duty military members; DoD civilians; DoD contractors, retirees, and dependents; and over the course of fiscal year 2016, our station engaged 318 volunteers in various activities. While working from home one day, I noticed a flurry of posts to our station's Facebook page from volunteers who were acting as "patients" during an exercise at the base medical facility. The images showed, in real time, the actions of the exercise, the location of personnel, and indicated the kind of emergency the active duty members were preparing to encounter. These images were a potential violation of OPSEC policies and were quickly removed from the page by Red Cross staff.

The following day, I spoke to a volunteer regarding the images. She stated that she had been given permission to take pictures by the officer leading the volunteers; however, a time line for posting the images was not discussed. Being a civilian dependent, she was largely unaware of the OPSEC policies and how they impacted her choices regarding what to post on Facebook. When I asked the opinion of the officer who granted permission, he informed me that his unit's typical time frame for posting such images was twenty-four hours after the exercise's conclusion—a time frame volunteers were not aware of. Unknowingly, the volunteers, who were very excited about their role and thrilled to be trusted with these duties, had potentially violated OPSEC guidelines.

SAF STATION SOLUTION

Thankfully, the aforementioned scenario was a very small infraction and did not damage the relationship between the Red Cross station and Kadena Air Base. Air Force guidance on social media was shared with volunteers, and the following month's station advisory council meeting included OPSEC training. The station staff implemented policies to avoid confusion in the future. Before participating in base events, volunteers were reminded to not post pictures of active duty members in uniform without express permission, and images from all exercises required permission from military counterparts and a twenty-four-hour waiting period

MOVING FORWARD AND MAINTAINING TRUST

The scenario at Kadena Station demonstrated a gap in social media training for Red Cross volunteers. Taking on the role of strategic communication

advisor at Red Cross National Headquarters, I faced this question of how to develop a plan that advocated the mission of the American Red Cross SAF while maintaining OPSEC and respecting our trusted relationship with the DoD. When developing guidelines for SAF stations, it is not enough to simply provide a definition of OPSEC—rather, a social media toolkit must include plain language descriptions of DoD, Air Force, army, navy, and Marine Corps communication policies. Access to social media policies from all branches, documents which are publicly available, should be provided to those conducting online communication for the American Red Cross SAF.

In line with maintaining the trust of our military counterparts, the Red Cross needs to also demonstrate a clear and focused mission statement for communication personnel working for the stations. Without being prescriptive, a social media tool kit provided by the American Red Cross National Headquarters needs to include language that defines the role of the Red Cross SAF and answers common questions and concerns regarding the organization on military bases (i.e., the difference between a station's response to a disaster versus a US-based chapter's response). Stating the mission of the American Red Cross SAF in all public online spaces provides stakeholders with a clear indication of the organization's impact. Finally, as the tool kit is developed further, it will be necessary to create documents explaining social media policies (those of both the Red Cross and the DoD) and offering Red Cross staff and volunteers links to acquire more info, contacts for questions, etc.

The new social media tool kit for the American Red Cross SAF was in development as of 2018. In working with the communication team, I encountered reluctance to present too much information as stations may view it as overly prescriptive. Since my personal experience matches current concerns at the DoD, I recommended military documentation and the MOU to support my push for further social media guidance. As the nonprofit sector continues to produce data on effective social media use, it is imperative that large organizations like the American Red Cross take these findings into account.

The tool kit itself needs to meet the needs of the staff and volunteers in the SAF stations. At a busy station like Kadena, there is minimal time for detailed training, and much of it is done on an individual basis. With this in mind, tools need to be quickly digestible and provide simple explanations with links to further knowledge as needed. This format also leaves guidelines open to the individual needs of each station. To assist in oversight, a tool kit should provide guidance on how to address common user questions and where to seek assistance if unsure of how to proceed with a question or request. These tools may also provide tips on how to stay on topic and not impose personal views on the station's social media platforms. Over time, tools can be reevaluated

in accordance with Red Cross and DoD policy, and situational changes at the station level.

CONCLUSION

The three questions addressed in this task need to be done so concurrently, with stakeholder engagement at the forefront of the social media strategy. The mission of the American Red Cross SAF is straightforward, but risks being misconstrued, and ensuring consistent messaging is an ongoing struggle in such a large organization. My sense is that strong tools can assist in detracting from errors on the part of American Red Cross staff and volunteers, and impart a culture of communication oversight. The tool kit, while not foolproof, will show over time where gaps remain. As stations follow American Red Cross and DoD guidelines, questions can come back to national headquarters and situational concerns can be addressed. Additionally, demonstrating active oversight also serves to maintain a trusted relationship with the DoD.

The role of strategic communication advisor pulled me into the duties of social media strategist. The tasks I encounter in this role taught me quickly the importance of engaging with varied stakeholders and recognizing their differing concerns. The role imparted on me the necessity of remaining informed of current scholarship in the field of NPO social media usage, as well as the ongoing changes to policies that impact an organization's ability to demonstrate social impact.

NOTES

1. Shearer and Gottfried, "News Use across Social Media Platforms."
2. Bowdon, "Tweeting an Ethos."
3. Guo and Saxton, "Tweeting Social Change."
4. Arvidson and Lyon, "Social Impact Measurement and Non-Profit Organisations."
5. Goldkind, "Social Media and Social Service."
6. Go and You, "But Not All Social Media Are the Same."
7. Guo and Saxton, "Tweeting Social Change."
8. Turley, "High (Risk) Society."
9. American Red Cross, "Service to the Armed Forces."
10. US Air Force, *Operations Security*.

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