

Azusa Police Department
Social Media Team

Officer Mike Bires
February 14, 2014

The AZPD Social Media Program And “Baptism By Fire”



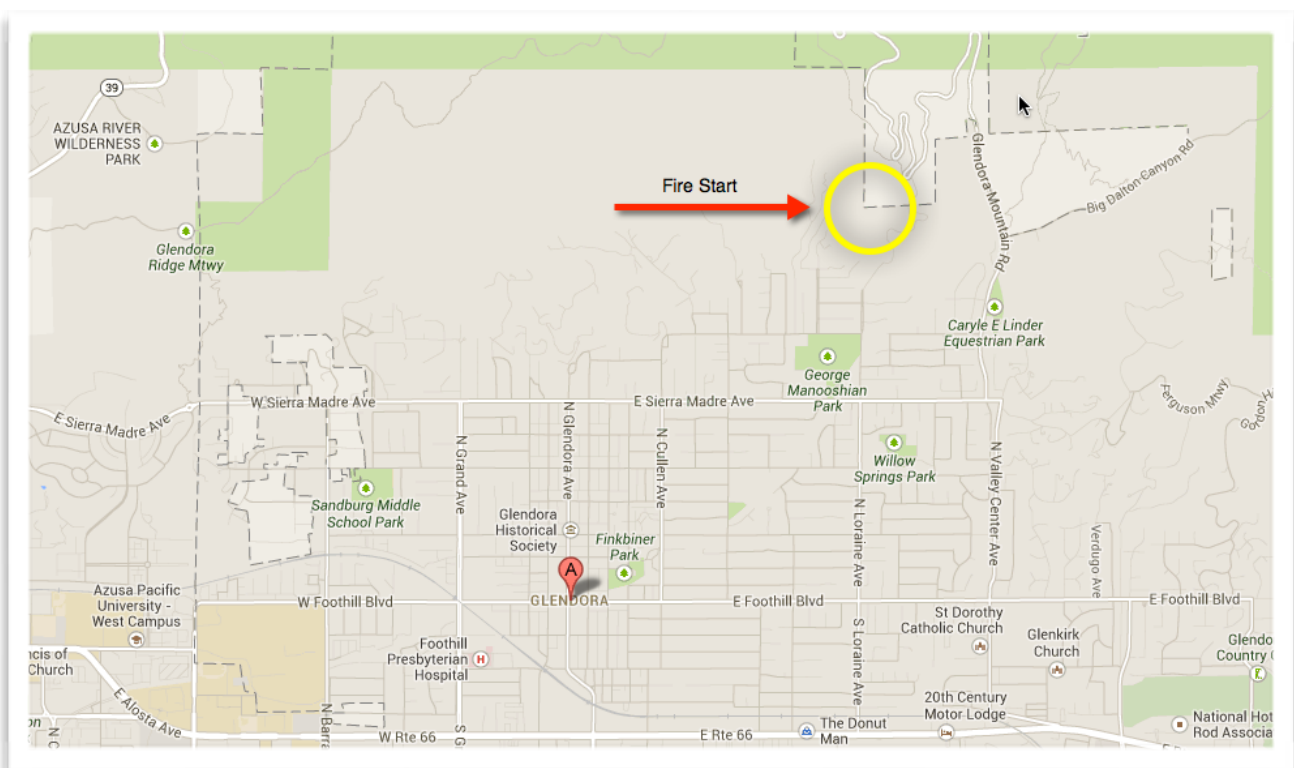
January 16, 2014 through January 18, 2014

Purpose

This report has been prepared for members of the law enforcement social media community. Information contained in this report is not confidential. All images of messages and comments were taken from publicly viewable pages. This report describes not only the social media activities involved with the Colby Fire of January 2014, but the initial launch of the Azusa Police Department's Social Media Program, which occurred 15 days prior to the fire.

Synopsis

On the morning of Thursday, January 16th, 2014, a fire was started by 3 people in the mountains above the City of Glendora. The City of Glendora is located at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, and approximately 27 miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles, in Southern California. The location where the fire started was about 11.90 miles north of residential neighborhoods.



In the days preceding the fire, the United States National Weather Service had issued a “Red Flag Warning” for the Los Angeles area. A warning of this type informs the community as well as fire fighting and emergency personnel that weather conditions are ideal for wild land fire ignition and quick propagation of terrain.

The Glendora Police Department and the Los Angeles County Fire Department responded to the fire and began fighting the fire and evacuating residents in the affected area. Within a very short period of time, the fire traveled about 3 miles west and entered the City of Azusa. The fire was headed towards several housing tracts and condominium complex' located in the northern section of Azusa. Mandatory evacuations were immediately ordered of all residences in the affected area.

During the next 60 hours, over 1,500 firefighters and law enforcement officers descended on the City of Azusa. Using ground crews, helicopters, "Super Scooper" aircraft, and fire engines, the fire fighters used their previously developed plan and fought the fire in a manner which prevented any loss of homes or lives in the City of Azusa. Law enforcement officers from Azusa, as well as several adjoining cities, provided vehicle and foot patrols, traffic control and security of evacuated homes.

After 3 days, the fire had subsided enough on the back side of the mountain to allow operations to scale down within the city, and allow the last remaining evacuated residents to return to their homes.

Azusa PD's Social Media Program

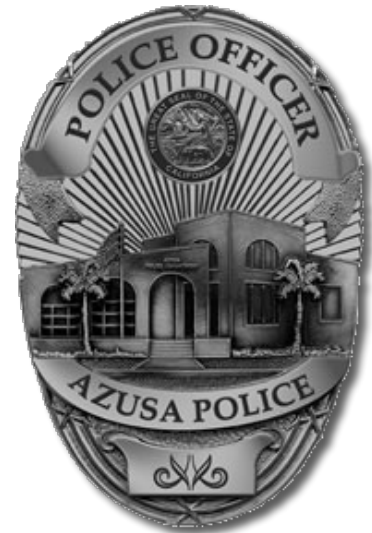
Since November of 2012, the Azusa Police Department had been developing their social media program. Along with drafting policies and procedures, and the design and development of a custom website, the department acquired several social media accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest and SmugMug.

All of the components were integrated to work with each other as best as they could, to allow for cross-posting on multiple platforms. Although this practice is somewhat discouraged by some in the social media community, we felt it suited the our needs and our fans "wants" as well. By cross posting great photos of our officers in action, we are able to garner the attention of fans, regardless of their social media brand preference.

We completed research and made several "Keynote" presentations to various leaders within our city and our department. Through our level of acquired expertise and demonstrated proficiency, our leaders had faith and confidence in what we were going to do, and how we were going to do it.

One of the key parts of our program which would be unique, was to design and develop a custom website for the police department, using a Content Management System ("CMS") platform. This meant 24 hour monitoring, and "on-the-fly," capability of changing items.

During our development phase, we attended the SMILE (Social Media, the Internet and Law Enforcement) conference, a social media class presented by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and a handful of miscellaneous classes presented by experts in the field of social media.



The department launched their social media program on January 1, 2014. The original intention was to monitor and pilot the program for a few months, so as to evaluate and address any issues, whether good or bad, with the program. Additionally, formal training was needed of the officers who had volunteered to be a part of the program, thus forming the department's Social Media Team.

Formation Of The SGVLESM Group

At the same time the social media program was nearing launch, the department's social media manager, Officer Mike Bires, had met with Los Angeles County Sheriff's Captain Mike Parker, and Arcadia Police Sergeant Tom LeVeque, regarding the formation of a localized group where law enforcement social media managers could gather and collaborate on ideas and strategies, to include the concept of "e-Mutual Aid."

Bires and LeVeque had worked together on a different fire on September 24th, 2013. At that time, the AZPD's social media program was in an "evaluation" mode, and not officially running. However, the department had acquired several hundred followers on their Facebook and Twitter pages.

Since Bires was busy tending to other law enforcement duties related to the fire, LeVeque was able to access the AZPD's HootSuite and Nixle accounts, and send messages out on behalf of Bires.



An email was sent to the law enforcement agencies in the San Gabriel Valley, to meet on January 15th, 2014, at the Azusa Police Department's Emergency Operation Center.

Although only a few were expected to show, it was pleasantly surprising when every chair in the room was filled, with 19 agencies being represented by a total of 38 attendees. The meeting included a general "meet-and-greet" period, some discussion on what could be accomplished with the group and a brief discussion on supporting each other's program during emergencies, known as e-Mutual Aid. The group officially formed the San Gabriel Valley Law Enforcement Social Media Group.

Unbeknownst to those seated in the room, everything Bires had presented, designed, developed and learned in the last year would be tested in less than 24 hours, as the Azusa Police Department would be thrust into a major incident viewed world wide.

Putting Our Program To The Test

The department's social media program, which had only been online for 15 days, would now be tested. Every component and feature would be used, revealing positives and negatives. Along with a myriad of notes and observations, the following items lead to the success of this entire incident.

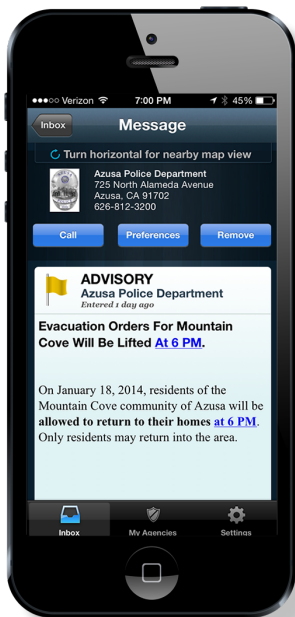
Emergency Notifications - Nixle

The Nixle Community Information Service subscription used by the department was invaluable and one of most important platforms used during this incident.



While driving towards the City of Azusa to get to the EOC, AZPD Captain Frank Chavez had called Bires and requested he send a Nixle notification advising the community that the Garcia Trail had been closed due to the fire, and to also remain away from the area (The Garcia Trail was right in line with the fire's path).

Since time was of the essence, once again Bires leaned on his friend and mentor, LeVeque, to help him out. LeVeque accessed the accounts and sent messages on behalf of the Azusa Police Department. Since Bires had previously integrated the Nixle account to send those messages to the department's Facebook and Twitter pages, the message was dispersed among a large audience.



As Officer Bires was getting closer to the city, another order was received to now send a message requesting residents living in the housing area directly in front of the fire immediately evacuate their homes. LeVeque distributed a high-priority "Alert" message to the residents of Azusa, informing those in the affected area to evacuate immediately.

Once Bires arrived at the EOC, he took over the department's social media efforts from LeVeque. Subsequent priority and evacuation orders were issued throughout the following couple of hours.

During the entire course of this fire, a total of 5,991 emails and 9,380 text messages were sent by only having to issue 20 Nixle messages. These messages went out to over 400 Nixle subscribers, 900 Twitter Followers, 200 Facebook Fans and over 10,000 website visitors. Those fan and follower numbers would grow incredibly during the next few days, as the word began spreading about the AZPD being a verified source of accurate information.

The versatility of the Nixle platform allowed us to not only use it as a tool for keeping the community informed, but we were able to use it to summon additional personnel using the Private Messaging System as well. Through private messaging, we were able to broadcast to select groups the fact we needed additional officers to come to the station and assist with the incident.

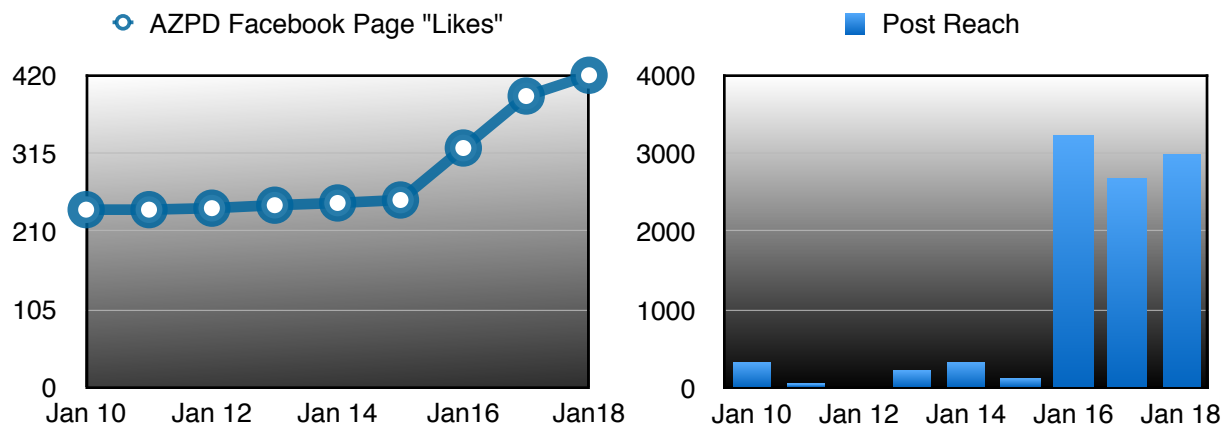
Towards the end of the incident, we stumbled across the thought about sending private messages to the law enforcement officers who had arrived from other jurisdictions to assist us. Had we created a keyword, like "Colbyfire" for example, we could have kept all officers informed as far as plans, relief, meals, and confidential information, regardless of which frequency they were operating on.

By simply having officers checking into the Command Post send a text message containing the word "Colbyfire" to 888777, they would have been immediately and easily connected to the EOC.

Facebook

The department's Facebook page communicated with fans, by posting the Nixle messages, as well as pictures and brief stories which did not warrant a full article posting on the department's website, yet needed more space than the allotted 140 characters on Twitter. These messages, coupled with the integrated Nixle messages, and the popularity of Facebook in general, caused the department's fan base and popularity to soar. The following graphs show the increase in Fans, from 252 fans the day before the fire to 420 at the end of the third day.

Our messages reached 3,230 people on the first day, 2,683 on the second day, and 2,975 on the third day. Prior to the fire, we were averaging our messages being seen by between 84 and 225 people.



Social Media Integration

When we originally customized our Facebook page, we came across an application called “Woobox.” This application allowed us to give our fans the ability to view our Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Pinterest feeds directly on our Facebook page, without having to leave it.

The image displays a Facebook page for the Azusa Police Department. The main header features a large photo of a police officer leaning into the open door of a patrol car. The car has "AZUSA POLICE" and "PROFESSIONAL SERVICE TO A" written on it. To the left of the photo is the department's official seal. Below the photo, the page name "Azusa Police Department" is shown with a 5-star rating (24 ratings), 469 likes, and 37 people talking about it. Navigation buttons for "Update Page Info", "Liked", and "Following" are visible.

Below the main header, there are social media integration tabs for YouTube and Instagram. A "Woobox" widget is embedded on the page, showing a Twitter feed for the account @AzusaPD. The widget includes the department's profile picture, name, bio, and a list of recent tweets with their dates and engagement options like retweet and favorite.

Azusa Police Department
Update Page Info | Liked | Following

Azusa Police Department
★★★★★ (24 ratings)
469 likes · 455 talking about this · 37 were here

Government Organization

YouTube | Instagram

Azusa Police Department | Twitter | Liked

Admin Tab Options | Settings

Add More Woobox Apps: [Icons for various social media and services]

Azusa Police @AzusaPD
Dial 911 for emergencies! AZPD uses TW to share with & to listen to our community. Following is not an endorsement, just a chance to engage. Not monitored 24/7.
Azusa, California <http://t.co/AFn5usLGG>

602 TWEETS
241 FOLLOWING
1,612 FOLLOWERS

Tweets

- Azusa Police** @AzusaPD 1 Feb
RT @mpLASD: Thank you partners @TRLVeque @RGatto_IPD @chMtnViewPD @AZPDSocialMedia @AzusaPD @AzusaPOA @crowther439 @NJSACOP @LASDHocking
- Azusa Police** @AzusaPD 1 Feb
From us at AZPD - Congratulations to @mpLASD on becoming LASD's new spokesman. His character and ethics are an example to all #SGVLESM #LESM
- Azusa Police** @AzusaPD 31 Jan
@LASDGary @tonymoore @chrismeadows @mpLASD @TRLVeque @AZPDSocialMedia @CherieEads @AlhambraPolice @BurbankPD @cavinapd
- Azusa Police** @AzusaPD 31 Jan
@schutzhund13 @LAPDK9 @BurlingtonPDK9 @Billericak9 @lapdwilshire @TauntonPDK9 @ArcadiaPD @LASDBrink @MonroviaPolice Good morning everyone!
- Azusa Police** @AzusaPD 30 Jan
<http://t.co/eO4OSUPKit>
- Azusa Police** @AzusaPD 30 Jan
Here's KABC7's video of purse snatch story. Helpful tips for women and purses too. If you know anything, call us! View it here...

Communicating With The Community

Those members of the community who preferred to use Facebook over other forms of communication, sent messages to the AZPD through the messaging component of Facebook.

Understanding that people were anxious to return to their homes, or they may be in a predicament unlike others, we weighed the safety factor of getting them back to their residence versus finding a different solution for them.

In the below example, we had a resident who was frustrated with not getting a definite time when he would be able to get his elderly parents home to retrieve some medications. We gave him all the information we knew, as well as an alternative solution.

We eventually followed up with this resident, and in return, received a great compliment about our efforts and the social media team.



Paul Taylor

Is there any info on an approximate time folks can return to their homes at Mirador and Mountain Cove areas? Ive called the department a couple times but I just keep getting barked at that they have no idea. I've got elderly parents that need to get home to get medications etc. Hope to hear some good news !



Azusa Police Department Hi Paul, unfortunately there is no time line as to when the evacuation order will be lifted. If they are in need of medication you may have to consider taking them to the hospital.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · January 16 at 10:38pm



Azusa Police Department Hi Paul Taylor. We just wanted to follow up with you and hope your parents made it through the evacuations alright, and that you didn't have to take them to the hospital after all.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · January 19 at 3:15pm



Paul Taylor Yes everything worked out just fine thanks for all your efforts. I think we all understand that it was just an unfortunate situation to begin with and the call to do a back burn while the residents were already evacuated was a good one. You guys did a great job with keeping things well organized and I commend your social media team in keeping residents up to speed as information was made available. Again many thanks for taking time to respond to residents and concerned family members on an individual basis

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · January 19 at 3:21pm

We received messages from residents who wanted to help out the police officers, to say thank you for their hard work.

We suggested to one mother who really wanted to do something for us, that often our dispatchers are forgotten, as no one ever sees them, like they do the police officers.

Sure enough, the mother and her daughter brought lunch that day for our dispatchers, which was not expected, but surely was appreciated.

The dispatchers took the opportunity to allow the daughter to try on a communications headset and listen in on what the dispatchers hear, as well as get a tour of the communications center.




Karine Mittwer Ramirez Yesterday
I live on Mirador and I was wondering if there is anything we can do for the police department to thank you for keeping our neighborhoods safe?...coffee, water, snacks, anything? My church, Foothill Church in Glendora, is doing an outreach for the firefighters but I wanted to find a way to show the PD that we appreciate you too! Any suggestions?



Azusa Police Department Yesterday
We appreciate it but don't expect anything for doing our jobs. They have food and drinks being delivered. Who frequently gets forgotten is the dispatchers, because nobody sees the ones who are talking on the radios and phones. If you called and told them that you were buying them lunch today, I'd bet they would love it. They do so much that goes unnoticed!





Karine Mittwer Ramirez Yesterday
Great Idea! I just called them and they are extremely grateful! And thanks again for everything. Our good friend is Rick Hayden and he made sure we were safe and calm when evacuation orders were going out. You guys rock!



Azusa Police Department
23 hours ago

Thanks to Alicia Ramirez from Azusa who came to the police station and delivered lunch to the dispatchers. They are always heard, yet seldom seen. Thanks Alicia and family for thinking about the ones who get help to people!



Like · Comment · Share 1

Tami Hubbert Patlogar, Erika L. Johnson, Kelli Brunelle McMath and 51 others like this.

Write a comment...

Bruce Badoni Very much deserved and we've got the best team of dispatchers around.
Like · Reply · 22 hours ago

Tom Montague Our Dispatchers are the best
Like · Reply · 21 hours ago

Rick Ahrens Thank You Alicia..Good & Thoughtful Job..Kuddos 2/YA.
Like · Reply · 21 hours ago

Write a comment...

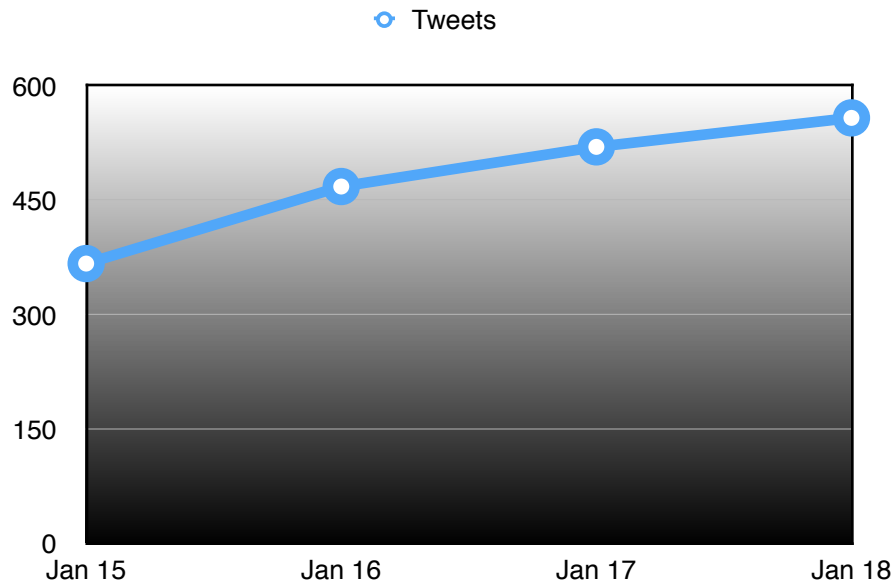
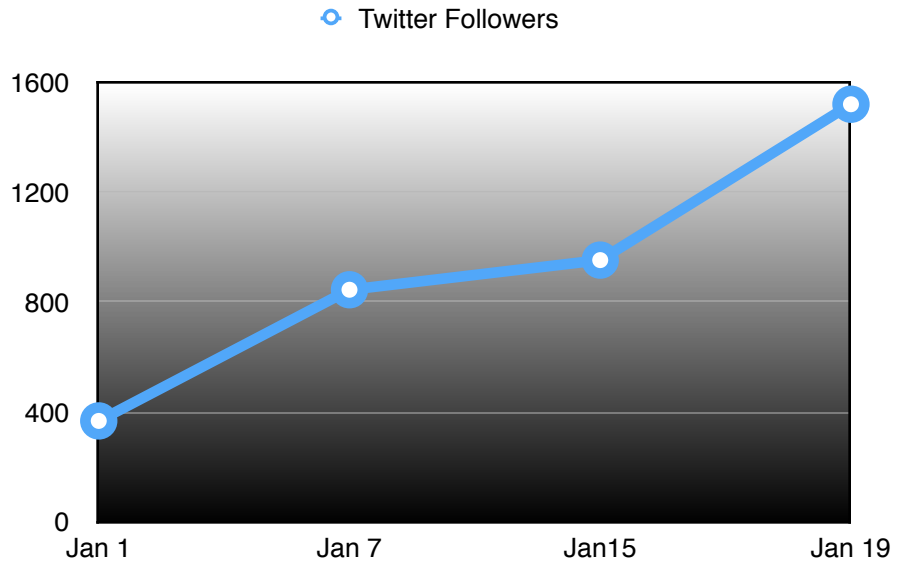
736 people saw this post

Boost Post

Twitter

Twitter was our main form of communication with the public, news media, and other PIO's and agencies involved with the fire. We used the hashtag of #ColbyFire to gather all of the information for the fire under one place.

On the morning of the first day of the fire, we had 953 followers, and at the conclusion of the third day, we had 1521 followers

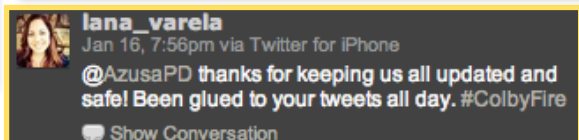
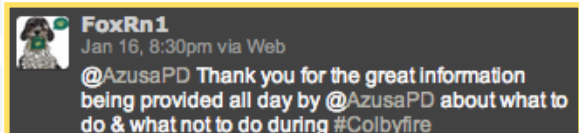
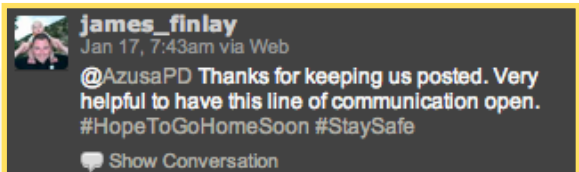
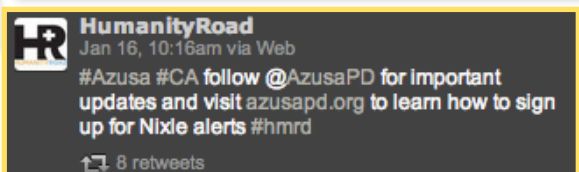
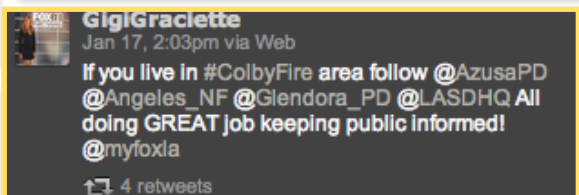
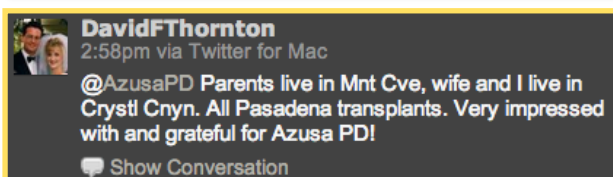
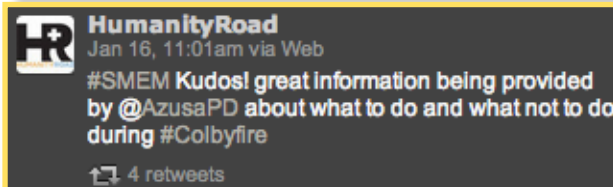
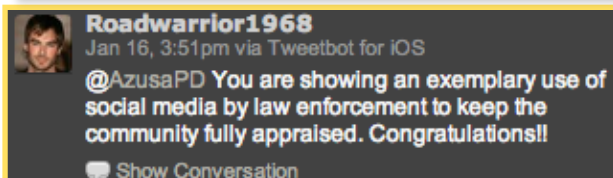
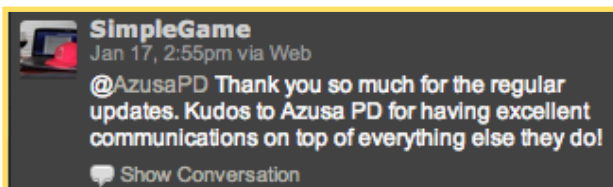


We sent 191 tweets during the fire. We started the morning of the first day of the fire with a total of 367 tweets ever sent, and by the end of the third day, we were at 558 tweets sent.

Making Our First Impression A Good One

We received great feedback from not only our community, but the news media and people from far away who were monitoring the fire. As we realized the importance we were having among our community, we immediately crafted a strategy for our Twitter use during the fire, which was:

- Keep our community informed of everything we were doing as far as the police department and the city was concerned
- Keep the police department's administration and PIO's informed of the current message being delivered to the public and media, so all were "on the same sheet of music"
- Keep the media fed with up-to-date information, as well as communicate directly with the reporters in the field
- Monitoring other sources to insure the same information was being distributed, so as to alleviate rumors, false hopes and inaccurate reporting

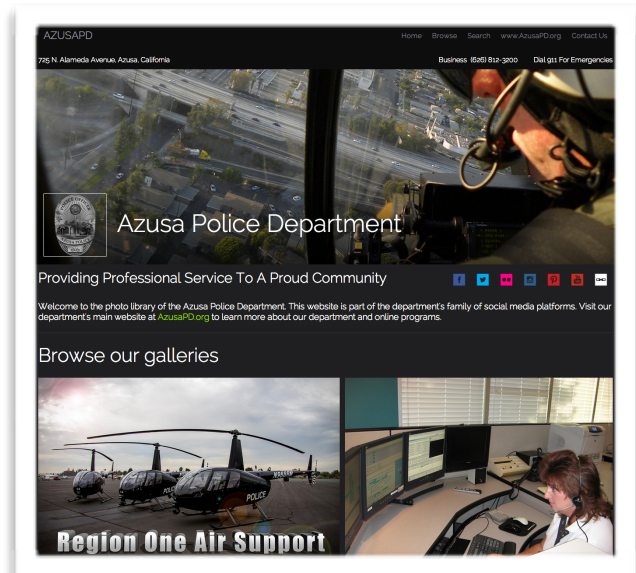


SmugMug

One of the last social media tools we implemented into our social media program when it was being developed, was the use of a photo sharing website called SmugMug. SmugMug was originally designed for the purpose of allowing photo enthusiasts and photographers to showcase and if they desired, to sell the photographs to the public.

We created a SmugMug account because they had features we were looking for to harvest photos and videos from the public, as well as display our department's photographs, thus making an online scrapbook. These certain features were:

- The ability for the public to easily “click and drag” photos and videos from their computer’s desktop onto our photo upload page on SmugMug. No saving, browsing or clicking certain buttons to make it happen - just click-and-drag
- The ability to keep uploaded photos and videos from public view until we review them and authorize them to be viewed by the public
- The ability to password protect certain albums on the website, for use by retirees, officers, etc.



In the case of the Colby Fire, we wanted to see photographs of what was happening on the fire line, as well as we wanted photo documentation of the incident. Being in the EOC with no windows to view the fire or firefighting efforts, we were glued to television and computer screens.

Knowing there would be plenty of people taking photos of the fire, we posted messages to the public requesting they go to our SmugMug page, and upload their photos to this website. We ended up receiving over 40 photos and videos from the public.

For those not having access to a computer, we also offered the option of having photos and videos sent to a special email address we created on the fly, just for that purpose. We later learned SmugMug has the ability to allow us to create a link for people to directly send emails to our SmugMug account.

Calming Anxiety With YouTube

After the evacuations, many people were anxious to return to their residences. This was understandable, and we sympathized with the residents.

After receiving several Twitter and Facebook messages inquiring when the evacuation order would be lifted, we made a decision to go into the field on a “recon” to obtain photos and videos, as well as to get a first hand look ourselves as to what the rest of our community had seen in person.

The social media team traveled into the canyon and photographed and recorded video of the part of the mountain the public was not able to see, nor allowed to enter. This video showed the fallen debris, smoldering “hot spots,” fires and smoke not visible to the rest of the city.

We returned to the Emergency Operations Center and began editing the media we had obtained. We immediately uploaded the videos to YouTube.

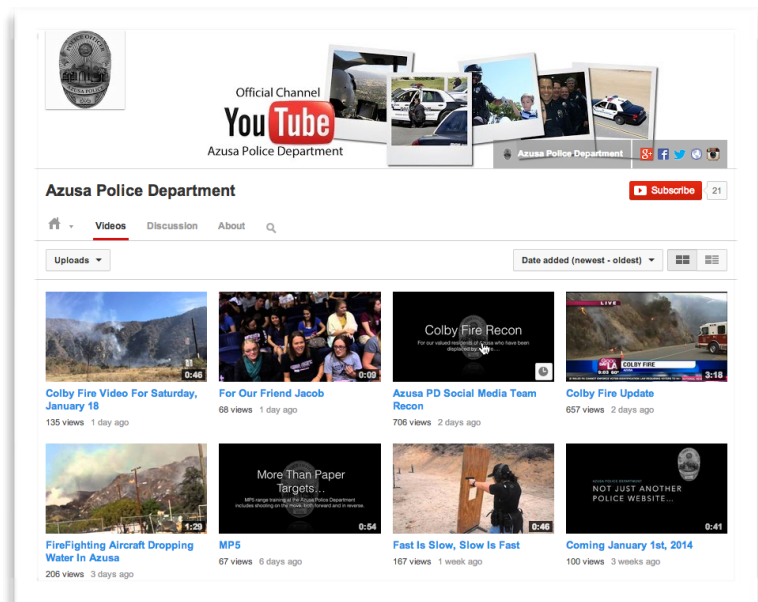
We personalized the video by making sure we indicated in the description field, as well as on the video itself, that we had made the video for the benefit of the residents who could not see what we were allowed to see.

We “shared” the videos on Facebook and Twitter, and again, personalized it by addressing it to the displaced victims. We noticed the questions subsided after doing this. Later, in preparing this report, we discovered the video was ranked the #1 link we had posted during the incident on Twitter, with it getting 157 clicks. In checking the video’s views directly on YouTube, we discovered the first “recon” video had been watched 706 times, and the second one was watched 135 times.

The Nucleus Of The Program - AzusaPD.org

We intentionally designed our social media program around our new, custom website. We knew every social media channel we would be using would have some way of referring visitors to our website, and we wanted our website to be a good one.

We realize social media channels are used more than websites nowadays, and so are mobile devices and tablets over desktop computers. However, we know that people will always fall back on a department’s website to obtain further information or when looking for a way to contact us.



When we designed the website, we wanted to break free from the traditional governmental style website which has way too much information crammed on the home page, and also has the feel of a cold, in-personable cave. We thought about the top three reasons why people would visit our website, and built it around these reasons:

1. Resources - They want help with an issue
2. News - They want to know what's happening in the community
3. Contact Information - They want to know how to get in touch with us

We also took into account we wanted our website to be inter-active, dynamic and a frequently used tool of the community. To do this, we would need to make sure it was developed in such a way it enticed visitors to go "a little deeper" into the site, even after they had obtained the information they were originally seeking. To do this we had to pay attention to the Weibull Distribution Formula.

During the Colby Fire, our website's address was given out on several live newscasts, as well as when people called our dispatchers seeking more information. Fortunately, we had chosen to go with CloudAccess.net for our hosting company. Their hosting service is specifically designed to work with our website's platform, and they offer a level of support which we have not experienced with any other hosting provider. In fact, they refer to it as, "An insane level of support." We did not suffer any downtime or speed issues with the intense strain placed on the site during this fire.

In fact, according to our Google Analytics account, we found our website traffic was averaging between 70 and 224 visits a day, between January 1 and the morning of January 16th. During the days of the fire, the traffic jumped to:

- January 16 - 2,371 visits
- January 17 - 2,595 visits
- January 18 - 1,581 visits

Our website was visited 6,753 times, and 3,330 of those visitors returned additional times, thus bringing our website's minimum visits to 10,083.

Our paying attention to the Weibull formula paid off, as people "surfed" our site and we had a total of 33,940 pages viewed. In looking at the Weibull formula of needing to get people to stay on our site longer than 20 seconds, we found during the fire, the average time spent on the site was an incredible 4:02 seconds.

The Weibull Distribution Formula

"If your website can make it past the first 10 second judgement period, you are likely to get someone to look around a bit. That being said, there is still a higher probability of bouncing within the 10-20 second time frame as you can see above. It's really only after people have stuck around for more than 20 seconds that their probability of leaving the web page stabilizes."

- Chris Phelan of Evergage

Being skeptical ourselves, we wondered if the 4:02 was attributed to people coming to the website in search of information about the fire, which caused so many page views and time spent on the site. However, we quickly discounted this theory because we had placed fire information on the front or “home” page of the site, near our social media feeds.



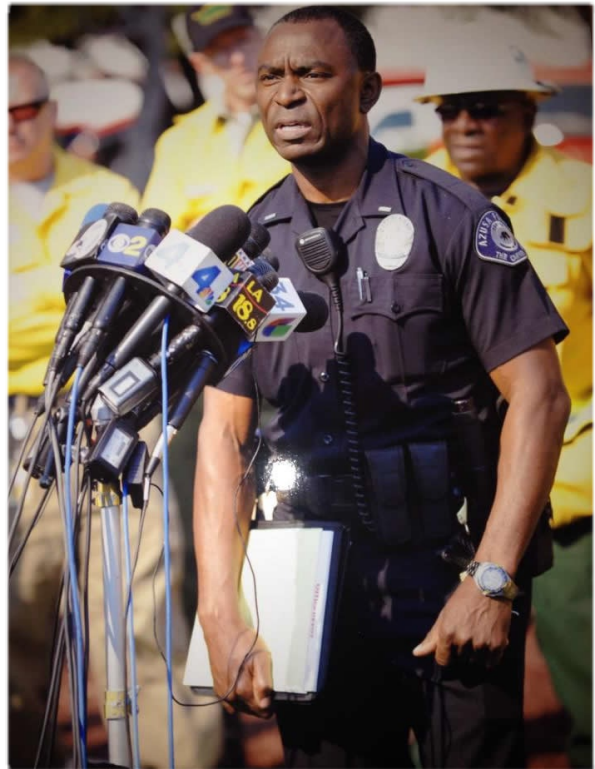
At one point during this incident, it was suggested by our communications center supervisor to place the fire information directly at the top of the website, for even easier viewing by our website visitors. We agreed this was a great idea, and quickly changed out the normal photo gallery collage with information about the fire. This was a great suggestion, and proved to be an even better solution for those needing information.

Working With The Media

Through the use of social media, the Azusa Police Department was able to work with the news media in a manner not frequently enjoyed between the two entities. By communicating with each other and sharing information, we were able to forge a trust which created a positive outcome for both the department, and the journalists covering the fire.

Rather than being placed on hold or directed to someone who did not have the answers, the media was able to immediately call upon the social media team to get answers to questions.

Additionally, when erroneous information was published by the media, we were able to very quickly contact them, which resulted in a quick change to the information.



Managing It All Through HootSuite

To monitor all the various platforms we were managing, we couldn't have done it so easily without the use of HootSuite. HootSuite is a social media managing tool which brings all of our social media accounts into one dashboard, thus allowing us to quickly see everything we need to know about our accounts and their followers.



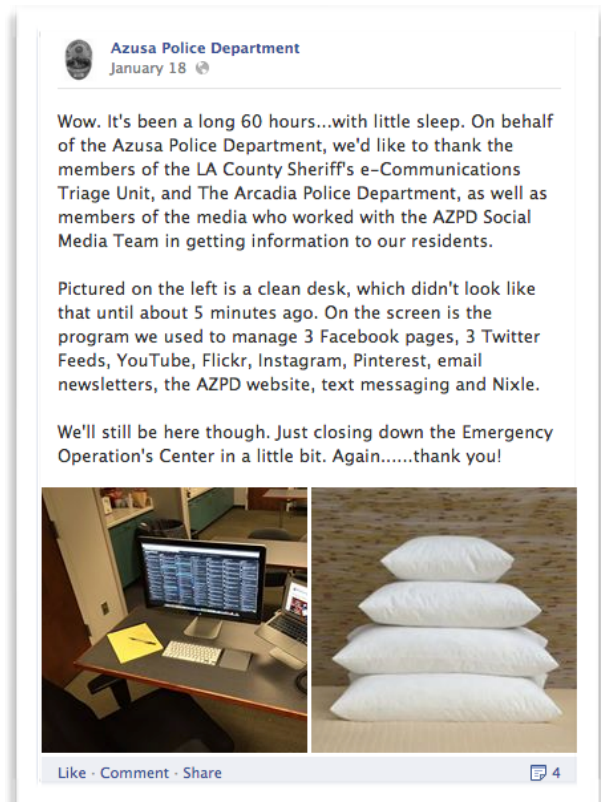
One of the best tools of HootSuite is the ability to create a message and publish it to ALL of our accounts at the same time. This was great for the fire, in which we were able to get safety messages out at the same time, to a wide range of followers on our department, police association, PIO and other accounts, regardless of whether they were Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or GooglePlus.

Humanizing It

We spoke about statistics in this report for purposes of showing the affect our social media program had during a traumatic incident and in our community. The numbers tell us we had a positive impact in getting the information to our intended audience. Unfortunately, many businesses gauge their success or prominence in the world on their fan base numbers. In law enforcement, it's much more than that.

One of our social media program's goals is to humanize the police department in a way which lends approachability, understanding, compassion and transparency to our audience, yet instills the confidence, professionalism and un-emotional, direct and "to-the-point" law enforcement our communities want patrolling their neighborhood.

We did just that, through both our actions in the field with guarding people's residences and controlling the evacuation process, to our efforts online.

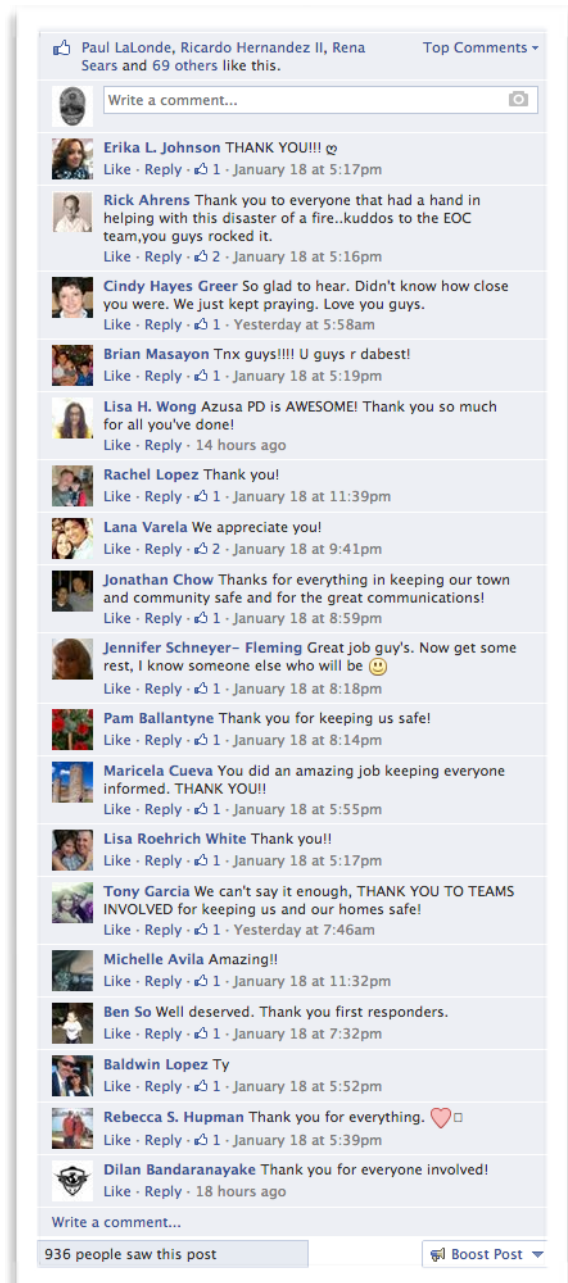


The Benefit or “ROI”

As a law enforcement agency, our “Return On Investment” or ROI, is not measured in dollars, but in the level of public safety and service we deliver. As the social media team for our department, our ROI is having people follow the department’s instructions to help us complete the mission, and the positive impact we have on our community. We displayed to the world, and more importantly, our community, that we were not just a law enforcement agency issuing orders. We are their law enforcement agency genuinely interested in their well-being and the safeguarding of their property.

The use of social media during this incident was invaluable and a key component to helping law enforcement complete their part of the mission, by:

- Immediately disseminating official information to the public and news media
- Effortlessly syncing information with the media to ensure accuracy
- Providing administrators and key city leaders with real time notifications when press interviews and releases were distributed to the media on behalf of the department
- Dramatic reduction in calls to the 911 dispatchers from the media wanting additional information
- Personal, one-on-one communication between the public and the police department
- Reassurance to the public their belongings were being guarded while they were evacuated
- Strengthened the police department’s reputation



About The Author

Officer Mike Bires has over 20 years in law enforcement, having worked for three departments in Southern California. He is currently assigned to a large university as the University Resource Officer, and is the social media manager and webmaster for his current department, the Azusa Police Department.

Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact Mike at mbires@ci.azusa.ca.us.

