

Social Customer Service in the Eye of a Storm



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"Delivering new kinds of content like video really helps us give our customers a great sense of what's going on around the network and helps us develop a more positive relationship with our customers."

Barry Kenny, Corporate
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"We are a mobile service. People want live up-to-the-minute information and for us, the channel that works best is Twitter. So, we give customers what they want to know and in real-time."

Barry Kenny, Corporate Communications Manager, Irish Rail / Iarnród Éireann



Social Media Challenge

Irish Rail operate 4,300 weekly services which carry an average of 875,000 passengers.

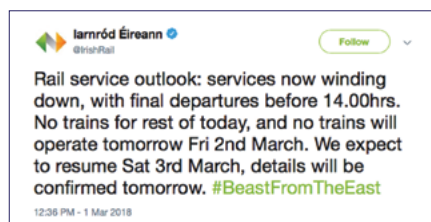
Being a semi-state body with limited resources and trying to maintain a trusted reputation as a professional and reliable transport service is a considerable challenge, particularly in an age where the public expects everything now.

Before the digital age, a major event would have been a communications nightmare for the organisation, as commuters and intercity travellers would have been left in the dark about postponements, cancellations, or interruptions to service.

This in turn would have hamstrung its ability to maintain or enhance its brand image.

But when Storm Emma was forecast in February/March of 2018 with projected record snowfalls, Irish Rail saw the use of social media, particularly Twitter, as a way to build up trust and affinity for the company.

So rather than seeing potential disaster, they saw opportunity.





Social Media Strategy

From starting their social media conversations back in 2010, Irish Rail had learned a lot about content strategy and how social media engagement works.

They also got a better sense of how they could use social media to improve corporate communications which they sum up as:

Find out what information our customers want to know;

How to communicate with impact;

Listening to establish what we haven't made clear.

By researching and listening, they discovered that 91% of the time customers simply wanted up-to-the-minute service updates.

This helped Irish Rail measure their effectiveness and pick the right social channels to suit their audience which turned out to be Twitter.

However, even with something as mundane as service updates, Irish Rail knew they could still build up affinity with their customers by:

1

Taking risks in how they conveyed this information – using humour, or quirky posts.

2

Bringing more personality to their posts – making it more conversational.

3

Getting buy-in internally from everyone who works at the organisation and right throughout the country.

4

Designing a coherent content calendar with different types of engaging content i.e. text-based, imagery and video.

So, when approaching Storm Emma, Irish Rail already had a good sense of how they could inform and engage their customers through a potentially difficult and confusing period.



Social Media Tactics

Irish Rail took a clever approach to showing how committed they were to their customers.

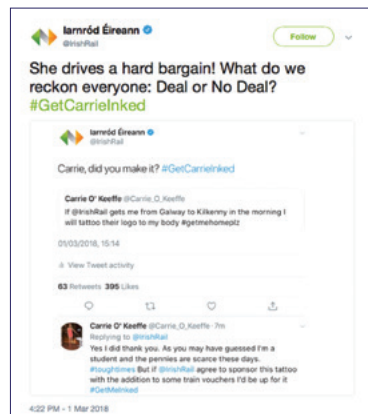
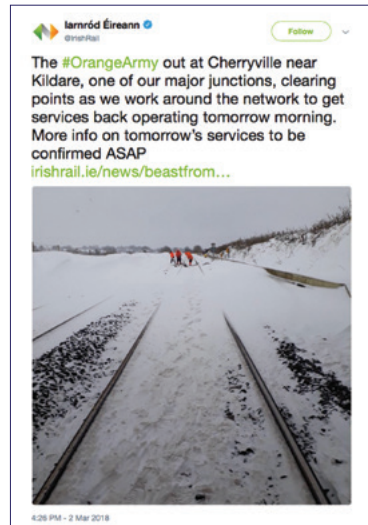
They know that basic information on services would be their key communications driver but on top of this they developed posts which fed into people's sense of fun around snow taking full advantage of this major weather event.

They also called on all their maintenance crews to show just how hard they were working to keep lines open and keep their customers on the move.

This showed the company's staff as being heroes and gave a sense of everyone being *'in it together'*.

They also kept an eye on user-generated content and found nuggets of gold such as a student offering to get a tattoo of their logo if they could get her from Galway to Kilkenny at the height of the storm (they did get her to her destination, although confirmation of the tattoo was never verified).

They also visually displayed to customers just what the conditions were like across the rail tracks of Ireland, so if any cancellations did happen it would mitigate any frustrations.



"We have access to so much behind-the-scenes content that we know audiences love today. These are stories that make the public sit up and think, 'gosh I never knew what was involved in delivering my rail service to me.' So you could say we maximised that customer attention with stories and photos that we might not share on a day-to-day basis."

Barry Kenny, Corporate Communications Manager, Irish Rail / Iarnród Éireann



Results

The results of Twitter impressions over the week of Storm Emma show the incredible value of the social media channel as a public information tool, while also showing the benefit of adopting a clear and clever strategy.

The week before Storm Emma (with average weather conditions) impressions peaked at 240,000, compared to 2,675,000 on the week of the storm.

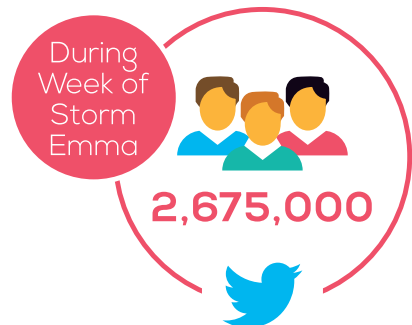
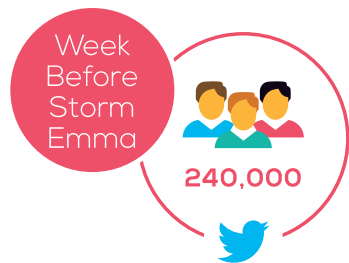
They also increased their following and affinity levels through other social, and indeed traditional, media outlets.

They also scored an unprecedented positive public sentiment of 97% following the storm.

Their 'Orange Army' of line maintenance engineers were praised as heroes in keeping the railways open right up until the heaviest snowfalls forced them closed.

"Our busiest day during Storm Emma saw almost 2.7 million Twitter impressions, just before our shutdowns. And it shows that service uncertainty is what most drives our engagement and interaction."

Barry Kenny, Corporate
Communications Manager,
Irish Rail / Iarnród Éireann





Learnings

Irish Rail learned a lot from their initial experiments with social media which was all about just being visible across many channels.

When Storm Emma approached they had a measured and clear strategy in place.

They had the confidence to use the right channels to deliver the messages they knew their audiences wanted to hear.

And in delivering these messages in compelling, engaging and even entertaining ways, they could build their brand reputation, trust and affinity in the process.

So much so, that far from being apprehensive about the affect adverse weather conditions could have on their brand, they looked forward to demonstrating the brand at its finest.

Key Takeaways

1

The commitment to putting their customers first was central to Irish Rail's communications strategy.

2

By getting them involved and then requesting photos of their staff on the coal face, or in this case the snow face, they could then show them just how much that commitment meant to them.

3

Customers could see the company was doing their best and being genuine heroes in ensuring families and loved ones weren't left stranded, or trying to help people get to work.

4

This led to a growth in followers and proved to the brand that their way of working was correct in increasing positive sentiment and engagement and getting their brand seen.