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# Mobilising Online Communities to Your Cause



By Vinika D. Rao , Executive Director, INSEAD Emerging Markets Institute and  
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**Social media can amplify a message or start a movement, but there are fundamental rules for success.**

On September 6<sup>th</sup> 2014, floods struck Kashmir and thousands of people were stranded across the state. There was a complete communication breakdown as phone and mobile networks went down. When contact was made with people in the affected area, they were asking for help in the local language and the volunteers who wanted to assist did not understand. A common language and communication platform were needed. That's when a Twitter team was mobilised to create the hashtag #Kashmirfloodrelief.

It proved to be a simple but immediately effective solution. Within 24 hours, people from different parts of India and around the world connected on rescue and relief efforts. The hashtag went viral. Individuals, volunteer groups, the Indian Army and the National Disaster Management Authority all used it to coordinate their efforts. Airlines pitched in to ferry people to safety. A website, [jkfloodrelief.org](http://jkfloodrelief.org), was set up to collate information and direct donors. Ultimately, this led to the creation of [@InCrisisRelief](https://twitter.com/InCrisisRelief), which

consolidated efforts and is now used as a citizen-led disaster relief handle managed by a volunteer group. The power of the internet, the ultimate connector, had been put to use in the best possible way.

Through a combination of what the folks at Twitter now call “Algorithms, Community and Engagement” (ACE), relief efforts were able to harness the collective efforts of an incredible number of digital natives in search of a common purpose, from arranging emergency supplies to rescuing stranded tourists and saving lives.

## **The principles**

This story and many others like it reflect the rapid social shift taking place on the back of the technology revolution. But it also reveals some fundamental principles for building and mobilising communities to prominent causes. Based on our observations, there are a few key ingredients to get it right.

First of all, you have to be fast. In the case of Kashmir and later the devastating earthquake in Nepal, social media was in many ways a first responder. The hashtag, #Nepalquakerelief was able to consolidate messages into a coherent stream, connecting those who needed help with those who were able to give it. Embassies and big organisations joined in and started funneling resources to the cause. Heartbreaking images were shared by the community who felt strongly for those affected, further incentivising donations. In addition, relief organisations were also able to share what they needed and what the best way to donate was. Often in humanitarian crises, relief organisations can become overwhelmed with donations of clothes and other physical material that chokes logistic centres.



**Parminder Singh**  
@parrysingh



Following

Here's how you can contribute to  
[#kashmirfloodrelief](#). PI RT

[#Kashmirfloodrelief](#) Donation details

**What to donate?**

**Top priority:**

Tents, Blankets, Medicines  
(see other pic for full details)

**Where to donate?**

B-100 Rama Park, Near [Uttam Nagar](#)  
Metro Pillar Number 764  
New Delhi – 110059

**Who to contact?**

[Aashish](#): 9953142083

\*All supplies being sent to [Salid Iqbal](#) foundation, Srinagar for further distribution

RETWEETS

157

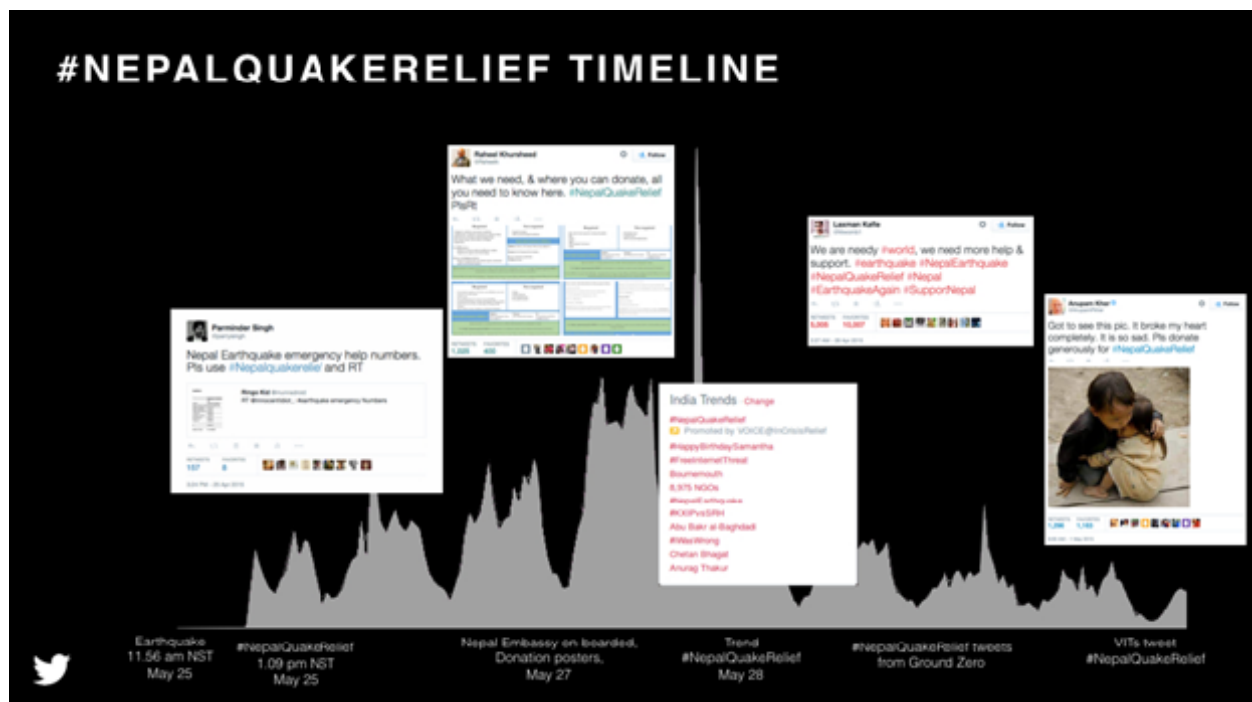
LIKES

36



11:08 AM - 7 Sep 2014

It's often best to wait for instructions on how you can help the relief agencies do their jobs most effectively. Social media can ensure the smooth flow of information and resources in this regard, so it's crucial to get the ball rolling early and gather the community around one communication vision and communication point.



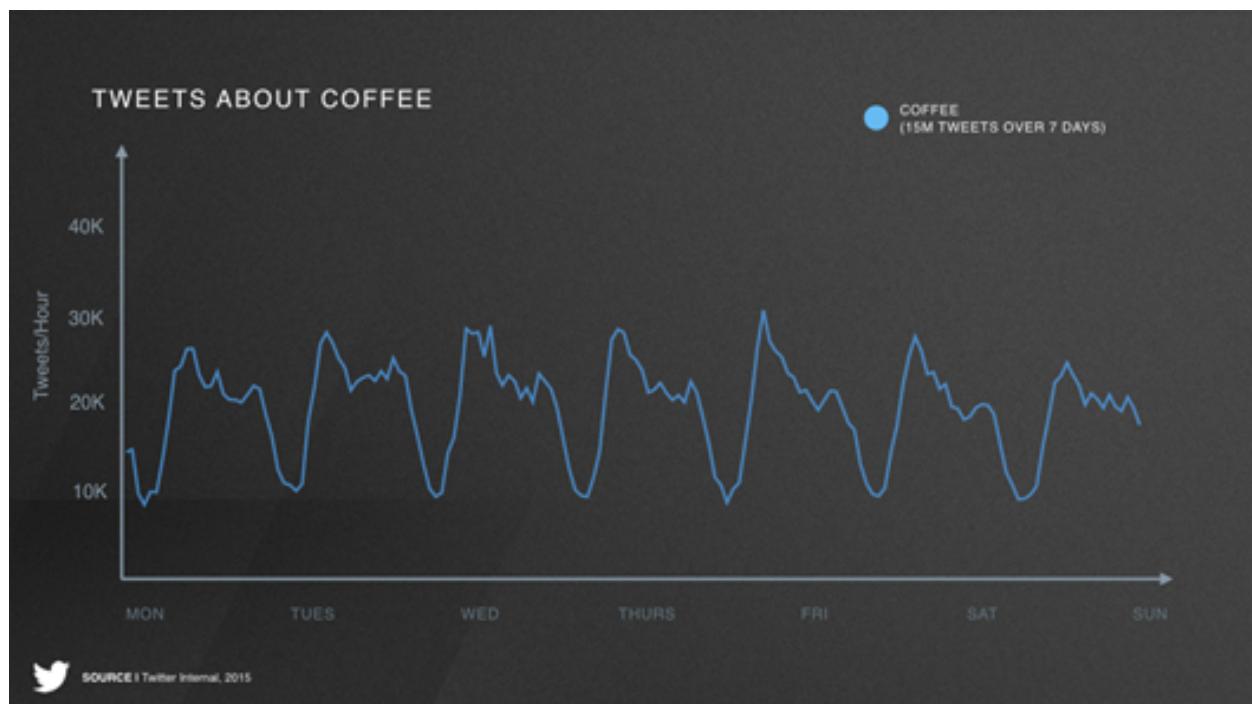
Secondly, it is crucial to understand exactly what is in demand before launching a campaign. From the business perspective, the unprecedented real-time customer service, customised brand outreach and online promotions that social media has made possible are ubiquitous. Every Chief Marketing Officer today expects to spend a substantial part of the budget on these activities. Businesses that ignore the power of social media today do so at a very real risk.

Apple, for instance, joined Twitter to provide service to their customers recently. They launched [@AppleSupport](#) on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and have seen an exponential growth in followers to 400,000 since then. This provides a much faster feedback channel to customers with problems, closing the loop of customers trying to answer each other's problems on Apple's support forum websites.

The saying "customers come first" rings true even more so today as they have an abundance of choices and alternative options. Businesses need to prioritise customer relationships and provide real-time care and support that customers require in their moment of need. It is also crucial to separate out requests for help with complaints or accolades so that attention and resources can be directed most effectively. Apple has taken this path with **@AppleSupport**.

Businesses today don't have the luxury of target markets that they can plan to capture after weeks of strategising – they have “target moments”. Once missed, these moments are lost forever. But they only need to be effectively targeted once to create engagement that pays for itself many times over.

For example, listening to the customers' chatter can give crucial insights about when to target customers with a particular type of content to maximise engagement. If you're in the coffee business, this chart could help you a great deal:



Thirdly, the more complex and large the organisation, the more it needs to go back to basics. One way that companies or governments can structure public engagement, especially communication on crisis/disaster relief or new policies, is to create simple topic hashtags to streamline the conversations and make it easy for the people in need to follow and engage.

This also enables the provision of real-time information and responses using the live feedback to prioritise and improve engagement as it happens. For example, at one point during the Kashmir flooding we saw 200 Tweets per minute with the hashtag #JKfloodrelief, but the computational power of algorithms gave us the ability to handle the deluge of live information, separating actionable signal from noise and allow not just relief workers but

the local and global community to respond quickly to the needy. However, the fundamental communication remains unchanged. What has changed is the method of communication, which in turn has changed the how of how organisations respond. Focusing on speed, and listening to demand are crucial to matching followers with supply and leadership. It's no longer unusual to have world leaders taking "wefies" and replying to each other's tweets. These may seem like unnecessary forays, given that governments were already communicating before the age of social media. But the "genuine" image they portray by doing this breaks down barriers and lets them "shake hands" with their digital citizens. As shown in our research, the [\*\*most influential leaders on Twitter\*\*](#) are those who share their personal causes, dreams and ambitions, not just their business successes. This influence will come in handy when they need it most.

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