

Twitter is a Continuity of Operations Tool, State Agency Discovers



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Photo: Twitter messages are used for everything from traffic alerts to ferry route changes

Government is slowly finding real-world purposes for Twitter, a free short messaging service that allows users to post updates (or "tweets") to twitter.com subscribers via Web browsers, mobile phones and instant messaging clients.

Police departments are posting tweets with crime updates, fire departments are tweeting the street addresses of structural fires and governors' offices are using Twitter to disseminate news releases. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) updates its feed, <http://twitter.com/wsdot>, with traffic alerts and route changes for ferries.

But Twitter has a larger purpose for WSDOT: It helps continuity of operations, according to WSDOT spokesman Lloyd Brown.

"In an emergency, people will come to our Web site, [www.wsdot.wa.gov] en masse to the point that it overwhelms our servers -- we've had that happen during snowstorms and other major weather events," Brown said. Because the Web site is a popular source of traffic updates, sometimes it can't handle a sudden spike in page hits, he said. During an emergency, WSDOT is considering the option of posting a "neutered," bare-bones version of its Web site that contains a Web link to the Twitter feed.

"One of the things that we're considering if we get into an emergency situation like that, we can update Twitter and our blog with our handheld BlackBerry or iPhone or whatever we have. It's a continuity of operations opportunity for us," Brown said.

When WSDOT initially decided to log on to Twitter, the department wasn't thinking about continuity of operations, he said.

"But on July 31, three major traffic incidents nearly brought the Web site down - it's a very popular site for getting traffic information. Our Web guru started 'tweeting' on the situation, and suddenly the number of people who were following us went from 20 to 160." Ever since, WSDOT has been spreading the word about its Twitter feed.