

Top Tips for Using Social Media for Local Community Disaster Recovery

Link: <http://bitly.com/localrecovery>

Example online groups: <http://bitly.com/sandygroups>

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What can you do with social media and online tools with your nearest neighbors to rebuild?

As we move from post-SuperStorm Sandy emergency response to community by community long-term recovery, here are tips generated with input from the experienced [Locals Online community](#).

Summary:

1. **People matter more than tools.**
2. **Tools do matter.**
3. **Gather email addresses, mobile phone numbers, and other contact information first.**
4. **Connect people horizontally by creating an online group for your local building/block/neighborhood/community. Then share.**
5. **Pick your geographic scale and openness.**
6. **Interaction matters to set community agendas and priorities.**
7. **Now let's talk tools.**

During the initial emergency response, Facebook Pages like the [Jersey Shore Hurricane News](#), the massive [collection of links from CrisisWiki](#), and [lessons from past community-based information-sharing with immediate disaster response like Joplin, Missouri](#) demonstrate how to cover large regions and essentially broadcast crucial information. The [OccupySandy Relief effort](#) is pushing the envelope on collaborative use of the Internet for disaster response and is leveraging [Recovers.org](#) new tool set as well.

Once you have shelter, food, heat and the power back on, what's next?

How do you connect with your nearest neighbors to rebuild your own community once the volunteers go home and the relief sites scale back?

These tips are written for the “e-connector” or organizer in your building, on your block, or covering your wider neighborhood as you shift from crisis response mode to community recovery and rebuilding. It will be ten times easier to build e-connections now while people are motivated to connect in new ways.

This article assumes that we are in this together, there is a surplus of noisy information, and the longer people cooperate with their nearest neighbors the better the results. It builds on the [many benefits of neighbor connecting online](#) and [IRL \(in real life\) neighbor-to-neighbor activities](#) in good times and bad.

The top tips:

- **1. People matter more than tools.** Don't spend hours searching for the perfect tool, if you are willing to step up for your building, your block, your broader neighborhood or community, etc. it is your leadership that matters. Combining your willingness to digitally organize your neighbors with the best social media tools for you - be it compiling a simple cc: e-mail group of forty households or creating online groups using the latest social media tool to connect thousands - what matters most is your energy and dedication to reach out to your neighbors in every way possible. Be an e-leader for your community. You won't regret it.
- **2. Tools do matter.** Pick your social media tools carefully and think about what your neighbors will actually use. Even if you are the right person with good communication skills and the ability to quickly establish trust among those neighbors you gather online, picking the wrong tool or relying on a single tool may not work. Just because a tool has great visual design or all the fancy features does not mean it will work with people stuck on smart phones for example who just prefer to use e-mail, Facebook, etc. Reach people where they are with tools they use. See # 7 for a list of key tools.
- **3. Gather email addresses, mobile phone numbers, and other contact information first. Then share.** Having email addresses and mobile phones numbers in your possession allow you to actively reach people. The ability to “broadcast” to your nearest neighbors with full control over what, when, who, etc. matters particularly if you want to reach older residents who do not “live on Facebook.” With complete control over the distribution of important information, you can use different tools and approaches without being locked in by a single website. Here is a [paper sign-up template](#) (Word) you can adapt from E-Democracy to start gathering information. If you are are focusing on your nearest neighbors over a couple streets or in your building, here is a rough [Google Doc spreadsheet template](#) you can copy and adapt or [view as a sample web form](#). Use a mix of online and paper to gather the information you need.

If you are focused on your nearest neighbors, sharing the resulting contact list with those who shared the information with you will foster increased one-to-one communication as well. Sharing it in print with those offline is important as is your decision to send it out “CC:” or “BCC:” via e-mail. CC: may be all you actually need to connect people on your block or building. People will reply and reuse the email CC: over and over again when they have a compelling reason to communicate. If you use BCC:, people will likely send you information and ask you to share it with the group. That is added responsibility, but it may be the best option depending upon your goals or the number of emails collected.

For those steeped in the latest social media who figure no one uses e-mail anymore, the next section is for you. That said, while Twitter and Facebook makes sharing and connections quite visible, [to this day social connections in the “dark” mostly via e-mail still dominate](#). Your need to connect with and reach people where they are not just where it is easiest to reach them.

- **4. Creating an online group to connect people many-to-many in your local building/block/neighborhood/community.** An online group is an automated version of the “CC:” e-mail connection detailed above. Official disaster response systems create vertical broadcast communication channel with private channels for isolated individuals to contact governments, insurance companies, etc. one at a time. An online group is a radically different horizontal community connection model. These online groups will need to be created by the citizens themselves or they will not exist.

Local Examples:

- [Union Beach, New Jersey](#) - Facebook Group
- [Staten Island Strong - The Forgotten Borough](#) - Facebook Group
- [Long Island Forum](#) - City-Data (existing forum)
- [Rockaways Hurricane Sandy News](#) - Facebook Group
- [Breezy Point Hurricane Sandy Information](#) - Facebook Page
- [Ridin' Out Hurricane Sandy on Tangier Island, VA](#) - Facebook Group

We are [gathering dozens of online examples here: http://bit.ly/sandygroups](#). This list has grown by leaps and bounds since we first released this article (no credit deserved).

Name your online group with your place up front so it will last as a trusted online space for neighbor connecting over the long-term. You will then be better prepared for the next disaster and [benefit from greater social connections among neighbors](#) - an incredibly powerful outcome disaster or not. Try not to create a one-time infrastructure with an expiration date. If you create a web address or directory name (e.g. facebook.com/rockaway), name it flexibly so you can change the longer disaster name in the visible title but keep a shorter link with staying power. Invite people to join online but also invite people in-person, on paper flyers, etc. Remember that

the technology is the easy part. [Be as inclusive as possible](#) and don't forget renters and lower income residents.

As there are scores of existing online groups in neighborhoods across the region, before you create something new [review our search tips and join forces where possible](#).

- **5. Pick your geographic scale and openness.** You need to decide if you want to organize 30 households or to connect an area with hundreds or thousands of residents.

At the building or block level you probably want a private online space while if you are covering full neighborhoods you want to be far more public, open and inclusive. You want your public exchanges to be easy to find and open to local community organizations, places of worship, local businesses, local media and government. You are all in this together and private resident-only spaces covering population areas over ~1000 residents will absolutely limit your success, limit your ability to learn from and connect with nearby neighborhoods, and potentially lead to greater community conflict due to the lack of transparency in community engagement.

Imagine the power of connected private e-blocks reaching 80% of households combined with public full neighborhoods/communities online connecting say the most interested 25% of households. This is a one-two punch for organizing communities to accelerate community recovery through community exchange online. Tackle the scale where you think you can make the greatest difference.

- **6. Interaction matters to set community agendas and priorities.** The government and media will feed you lots of one-way information, but when it comes to very local, extremely relevant information your neighbors are both the producers, editors, and consumers. No matter the tool, a key feature is email notification where participants can at least be told about "what's new" and better yet also publish via e-mail to the community if they are mostly stuck on small devices without full computer access. If you are going to be that local e-leader, the most important thing to do once you choose your tool is to organize and facilitate people toward sharing questions, information, and news. By sharing your questions in public or semi-public using real names whenever possible for credibility and increased civility with the public service providers who you pay your taxes to in the loop - they and the local media will be influenced. Do it in the dark and you can easily be ignored.

- **7. Now let's talk tools:**

- **Facebook Groups:** Facebook is a very popular way to quickly gather people online. It is where most of the action is with new group connecting in response to Sandy. If you create a Facebook Group or Page, please add it to [our directory list](#).

If you want to use Facebook for organizing, create a [Facebook Group](#) not a Facebook Page. Facebook Pages while [good for immediate broad information sharing across a region](#), are a terrible tool for sustained group communication in a very local area. Long story short, [Facebook Page posts rarely make it into the News Stream of your Likers](#) and groups have more glue built in.

Even with Facebook Groups, the key difference with an e-mail list (described just below) is that you still must visit Facebook fully participate. Also, at about 150 members in a group, Facebook switches the default email notification setting to only send new members notices when your friends post a new topic. Be sure to remind people how to change their delivery settings or they will not know about new activity. Unlike typical email lists, Facebook Groups no longer send email notices about comments on existing topics unless you post to the topic.

You can introduce other speciality tools later once people are gathered, but it is extremely difficult to fully move an online group once established on any platform. Be sure to set the e-mail address for posting new topics to the Group. This is very convenient for mobile e-mail users.

Two more limits with a Facebook-only approach - the public officials you want to respond to your exchanges are often blocked from social networking sites at work or do not have work-based accounts. Also by choosing a Facebook-only core you've eliminated half the Internet users over 50. If you have older folks on your block that you want to include, you need to reach them another way. Therefore, do not underestimate the simple power of the effective email distribution list (CC:, BCC: or automated) to break through computer firewalls and lots of Internet users [who use e-mail everyday](#). Consider using your Facebook Group or Page to building up a complimentary one-way email alert for really important news providing [email subscription option](#) on a [WordPress.com blog](#) like the [Red Cross Newsroom does](#).

- **E-mail Lists** (with web access too): [YahooGroups](#), [Google Groups](#), and more. If your CC: e-mail communication is getting unwieldy, you can create a single e-mail address that everyone can post to then reach the group. People can add and remove themselves (or ask to be added by you if membership is restricted to people or businesses on a certain block, etc.).

Note that you need to use tools like [Mailman](#), custom versions of [GroupServer](#)

(like [E-Democracy does](#)) or other “you own it tools” IF you want to be able to use paper sign-up sheets. The big free e-mail list hosts [no longer allow](#) you to “add” people. Now you may only invite them if you have their email address which means from our direct experience that most of the people you invite will not see nor click on the confirmation link without lots of repeat follow-up.

For a “social media maven,” paper sign-up sheets for e-mail lists may seem old fashioned but this is exactly what the Presidential campaigns do - collect e-mail and Zip Code everywhere and then build communication from there. They wouldn’t do it if it didn’t work. E-Democracy goes [door-to-door with the neighbors online efforts](#) in St. Paul. It works to reach lots of people who aren’t already among the most wired or most socially connected. The [Neighbors Online study](#) makes it clear that to go beyond wealthier residents in areas with high homeownership and strong existing social capital you need to [double down on outreach](#). More on this [non-profit, open source alternative is available](#) for those who want to inclusively reach people using field outreach.

- **Collaborative Content:** [Google Docs](#) are where it’s at. If you want to develop and maintain lists of resources, contact information in a spreadsheet, etc., Google Docs allow you to do that collaboratively. In short, the Internet is like your computer disk (geeks call it “The Cloud”) and you can access it on computers, tablets, mobiles etc. While Google Docs does enable collaboration, lead writers/information organizers need to do the heavy lifting and others will contribute at the edges. Here is an [example from Staten Island](#) during the emergency response phase. Another collaborative tool to explore is [Local Wiki](#) if you want to build out a community information website.
- **Local Twitter Hashtags** - Twitter is very useful for spontaneous networking and quick dissolution of group connections. On Twitter use hyper-local hashtags using #place or #placeXX at a level that isn’t too local so you can reach a critical mass and not so large that it is not useful for tactical exchange. See [#Sandy](#) for national exchanges and [#SandyAid](#) [#SandyRelief](#) [#SandyVolunteer](#) for some more focused “do something” exchanges. A list of local Sandy related hashtags (like [#njsandy](#)) or hashtags on a map for the hardest hit communities would be extremely useful.
- **Telephone and Group Texting** - When face-to-face isn’t viable (face-to-face is the cornerstone of neighbor connecting) or you need a quick check-in across a block or among block leaders across a neighborhood, don’t forget the power of simply connecting as a group over the telephone. Whether using a [free](#) (often long distance numbers) [teleconferencing service \(a review\)](#) and connecting at the same time every night for 15 minutes or weekly for an hour, connecting in real-time has value. A consistent time, agenda, and call leader is needed and

importantly tell people how to put themselves on mute so background noise does not wreck the experience. Here is a teleconference example for [pan-New Jersey citizen-based relief](#) connecting.

Also, as you collect mobile numbers, a new feature to experiment with is group texting on urgent matters. [GroupMe](#), is one such service. Another emerging tool connected to [MIT is VOJO](#) which combines online, voicemail, micro robo-calling, and texting is being used in [Redhook to gather audio via cell phones](#). So far this is more about local storytelling than group communication.

- **Specialty Tools for Emergency Response/Recovery** - The government will direct you to [Hurricane Sandy Recovery information from government](#). New services like the commercial [Recovers.org](#) and non-profit [Ushahidi crisis mapping effort](#) are important to note. [Recovers.org allows people to organize needs, gives, and volunteer time](#). Here is the [Staten Island](#) example. It is symbiotic with the messier many-to-many online neighborhoods groups on which this guide is focused. The [Crisis Commons world](#) gathers online with each major global disaster and the [Hurricane Hackers resource page](#) is there for the more technically inclined to explore.
- **Local Web Forums/Online News Sites** - While most [online news sites](#) turned off web forums years ago in exchange for commenting on news stories, some local web forums remain. If there is an existing go-to place in your local community that allows people to connect two-way as a group by geography use it and avoid re-creating the wheel. Also “[placeblogs](#)” are an important part of the local information ecology, but their editor-in-the-center model is more about broadcasting select news and information for comment and less about many-to-many communication. However, a really engaging placeblogger can do amazing things to foster two-way community engagement.
- **Emerging Local Everywhere Sites** - While roughly 30,000 online neighborhood groups or list exist across many generic online community services nationwide, EveryBlock, NextDoor, Topix, .St, and others specialize in connecting neighbors. Most areas technically covered by these sites lack critical mass interaction, but if you can't find other existing local places there is a chance that the “place to be” has found a home here. Very local neighborhood interaction online tends to be a monopoly where people migrate the online space with the greatest use and resist platform change. (One reason YahooGroups from the 1990s are still a heartbeat in some neighborhoods today.)
 - [EveryBlock](#) covers major cities like [New York City](#) with public exchange where users typically use aliases.
 - [NextDoor](#) allows private resident-only online groups quite appropriate for block level or small housing development groups with some nifty mapping

features but some are concerned about using tools that exclude community organizations, civil servants, elected officials, small businesses, etc. when this tool is used to cover large areas.

- [Topix](#) has numerous web forums by place name, Zip Code, etc. It doesn't require registration and to put it nicely it is a rough and tumble place with extreme views often expressed. However, in some areas it has an active exchange.
- [CityData's Forums](#) also provide web forums for lots of places and should be checked for local life.
- Patch is new to the "community scene" but is [piloting](#) social features in [Bellmore on Long Island](#).
- [America.St](#) (type in an address) is a small start-up, but in theory every building address in Lower Manhattan for example has public Facebook comment wall tied to an address on Google map streetview. Here is where the idea started at [345 Eldert St. in Brooklyn](#). Chicken and egg thing here, but this could be very useful for organic connecting building-by-building immediately.
- There are [dozens more sites across the neighbor connecting field](#). Many of its leaders are on the [Locals Online](#) community of practice.
- Please add any "there, there" examples here: <http://bitly.com/sandygroups>
- Most of the online group connecting action appears to be on Facebook with the Hurricane Sandy response.

If you find this article useful or are inspired to create something as a result, [please let us know](#).

Advice in action: <http://bitly.com/sandygroups>

This article is informed by [E-Democracy.org's 18 years of experience with local online community building](#). This includes recent [inclusion pilot work funded by the Ford Foundation](#) and major [expansion support from the Knight Foundation](#) for work in St. Paul, Minnesota.

It is also informed by our all-volunteer (no funding) and mostly failed experience to support an entire network of 25 local ["neighbours forums" across Christchurch](#), New Zealand after their big earthquake. In short, while we supported our two regional volunteers we skipped our "you must have a local volunteer forum leader and 100 initial members in EACH place to open" requirement. The desperate need for communication to assist community recovery did not generate local volunteers even with 1,000 participants recruited in-person at grocery stores, etc.. Their spread over 25 forums meant few had the critical mass required for conversation to emerge. So, the real world lesson is that no block, building, neighborhood or community will successfully connect in a trusted, sustained community-building manner online without at least one person in that area stepping up as an authentically local leader. All the technology in the

world will not make up for the power of one person saying, "I declare a 'place' online and I will make it work for the broader community."