Increased Internet presence in tomorrow's forecast

WHNT 19 Chief Meteorologist Jason Simpson (right) prepares to give a report on the weather while Brandon Chambers and Jennifer Watson track storms.

By Diana LaChance

There's a severe thunderstorm in the Valley and a tornado is heading your way. You need information now. How can you get a weather update? And more importantly, how soon can you get it? Those are exactly the kinds of questions that the National Weather Service (NWS), area forecasters and NHTC take very seriously. The answers may surprise you.

"Social media is now a major part of the job for TV meteorologists," says WAAY-31 Chief Meteorologist Spencer Denton. He lists Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus and even LinkedIn as some of the platforms he uses to provide weather information to the public. "It's where people are going, and we're going to go wherever people are."

In the past, he continues, "we used to just go on TV and do three minutes of broadcast – and there is still a fair amount of people who watch the local weather." But now, he continues, "it's to the point where you not only have to be a good forecaster and a good broadcaster, but you also have to have an effective Internet presence, whether it's getting information to the public or being aware of new technologies."

WHNT News 19's Chief Meteorologist Jason Simpson also spends a lot of time online, and says his followers expect nothing less. "People are plugged into us through Facebook and Twitter, through email, and to some extent through Google Plus," he says, adding that he prefers Twitter over Facebook as a more effective means of communication.

"Twitter was built for weather, in my opinion," Simpson says. "If there's a tornado about to cross I-65, I can use hashtags on Twitter to reach many more people than with a Facebook post." Hashtags are key words or phrases, preceded by a hash mark, that are embedded in Twitter messages which makes searching for specific topics easier.

Forecasters aren't the only ones making the most of social media. Even the NWS has stepped up its online presence. "We'll post weather reports or storm watches on Twitter, and we also have trained weather spotters who can post on our Facebook page," says Stephen Latimer, a forecaster at Huntsville's NWS office. The NWS also sends out Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, which summarize news and information from a variety of sources and display them in a single place, often referred to as a news reader or news aggregator.

Those RSS feeds become even more vital to area residents during the months

ABOVE: Dedicated Internet connections enable Stephen Latimer with the NWS to stay in touch with meteorologists across the area during severe weather.

LEFT: WAAY-31 Chief Meteorologist Spencer Denton gives a weather forecast from the Backyard Water Garden.

of March to May, the primary tornado season. "It's very important to be weather-aware, especially with the amount of severe weather we get in the spring," says Latimer.

That importance has only increased since the devastating tornado outbreak that hit Alabama in April 2011. "I think we are probably at a heightened level of weather awareness at this point in the history of north Alabama and southern Tennessee simply because of April 27th," says Simpson.

It was in the wake of those storms that Denton visited NHTC to give a presentation on weather awareness and safety. "Severe weather safety is vital for NHTC, not just to keep their employees safe, but also to make sure their network is holding together so that customers have Internet access during that time," he says. "After all, if you need weather information immediately, high-speed Internet is a much better way to get it."

It's not only about weather information. "It's also about keeping the public's services up and running in case they need 911

services," says Tammy Weeks, NHTC office manager. "We have to be weather aware and know the signs to watch for because we have crews out and about all day long and we must be able to keep those communications up."

As with residents, the news stations and the NWS office also rely on uninterrupted access during weather emergencies. "There are a lot of communication lines that come through here, and we have several that are broadband," says Latimer. "I would say the faster the better, because when we're in severe weather mode, we have to have fast connections." And if those connections are knocked out, Latimer says not to worry. "Because we can't sacrifice speed at all, if our system starts going down or isn't performing like it should be, we have a sister office in Jackson, Miss., to back us up."

That said, broadband technology isn't just useful during severe weather. When it comes to providing day-to-day information, it can be just as valuable, if not downright essential. "You need broadband capability to watch the videos and to look at the graphics we put out on our website, and you also need broadband for Facebook," says Simpson. "And now we have an app called LiveAlert19, where we stream our live weather coverage, so that's another application for which broadband can be useful."

Denton concurs. "For our Tennessee Valley Weather Blog," he says, "which is a more detailed discussion of the weather, you need high-speed Internet for some of the videos we have and weather software that we use." He cites the Gibson Ridge radar product as an example. "Gibson Ridge is the same radar we look at as meteorologists, but to use it you must have certain specs on your computer — and you must have high-speed broadband Internet."

In the end, no matter what platforms or tools you use to get your weather information, be it Twitter or Facebook, RSS feeds or live streaming, the important thing is to be prepared and stay informed when the storm hits. "As long as you have some reliable, stable connection, you can get the information you need," says Simpson. ☎ 🖥

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