



COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH A PERIOD OF GLOBAL CRISIS

GRABBING ATTENTION
V. ADDING TO DISTRACTION

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Communications through a period of global crisis

It is widely accepted that media consumption trends increase dramatically during times of crises in parallel with the demand for the latest, up to date information. In fact, a recent report by Neilson suggests that TV ratings in the US have already increased by 60 per cent, live streaming of content by 61 per cent and, in Spain, Netflix is up by 54 per cent. Gaming is also set to make a leap in the coming few weeks, as global consumer spending is set to exceed USD120bn.

In the Gulf area, online proliferation is reaching new heights, as the region boasts some of the highest levels of social media penetration in the world and a young tech savvy population. Instagram and Twitter feeds are extremely active, with over 60 per cent of GCC nationals citing social media channels as a primary source of news, and over 67 per cent getting their news from the internet.

Against this background, our ability to compare multiple sources of news and question policies shaped by others has never been greater. But how much of this deluge of content is actually helpful, or just poorly conceived reactions of bandwagon PR?

Whilst we are in the midst of a global pandemic (*the consequences and human cost of which are virtually incalculable due to so many uncertainties*), the communications and behaviour of companies becomes a legacy on which future judgments will be made, impacting on trust and reputations. Don't underestimate the memories of stakeholders and consumers, whose opinions and buying decisions will make or break your future.



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Choosing the right time and approach

How many emails have you received from vendors explaining that your health and wellbeing are their priority? Believe that and – regretfully – you’re probably being somewhat optimistic.

The real issue here is understanding when to communicate, with whom and what shape this should take. Plausibility and relevance are key components in making communications authentic, informing judgment to differentiate between the avalanche of knee jerk inertia, versus genuine concern and empathy towards what we understand are unprecedented circumstances.

Understanding where your messaging fits into this process, the conversations you can have and those that you simply should be prepared for as and when appropriate, fall into a formula of preparedness that seamlessly clicks into life.

The key issue here is being prepared to communicate and manage multiple scenarios, rather than feeling compelled to do so because others are. Decisions need to be measured against a metric of criteria such as relevance, strategic value and audience.

Important

Sent Mail

Drafts

Spam (42)



Drafts

Starred

Social distancing v. community engagement

On the assumption that social distancing will be a feature of business life for some months to come, and arguably will have a long-lasting impact on office behaviour, we need to really interrogate how we communicate and behave. Over many years, companies have aspired to become beacons of corporate governance and social responsibility, without being challenged for much in the way of evidence to demonstrate proof of concept. This extends beyond talking the talk, to actually walking it. IE substance.

Much of this was played out through owned channels and digital platforms which now more than ever, in the absence of much in the way of human contact, need to work harder. Today and for the foreseeable future, media channels will not only be your gateway to market, but critical in delivering an experience which informs and fosters a positive response.

Quality content is therefore paramount, but equally so is the critical need to communicate with colleagues to ensure that – even if they are working from home – they feel part of the plan and committed to the longer term picture. Painting that and making it a masterpiece is the test of true leadership.

Internal communications must therefore not be neglected – communicating the plan that includes thinking of your duty of care for them is of paramount importance. Ongoing updates and coordinated messages are also important. Above all else, show leadership and ensure that management are active voices during a crisis.

As we look down the road to potentially weeks and months of working from home, how do organisations ensure that they are communicating effectively and equipping them to perform during these testing times?

This is about more than just having the right technology in place and it is more than just ensuring a *business as usual* approach. Email alone is not enough and sustaining the daily course of business will require managers to dig deeper in how they communicate with their teams to get the best out of them. Structure and frequent engagement are important ingredients!



Key leanings – more than 101

Hindsight might be the gift of many experts, but few would have predicted that the world could have been brought to its knees because of an aggressive virus. We're programmed for economic catastrophes, natural disasters and especially familiar with the impact of conflicts here in the Middle East. But never in living memory has something initially perceived as so benign gripped the world in a vice of fear and uncertainty.

Markets have crashed, oil down to US\$30 a barrel and billions being ploughed into economic stimulus packages around the world. In the UK, up to 80 per cent of salaries are being underwritten by the British Government in a move which is unprecedented in modern UK history.

Although it is impossible to predict every scenario an organisation might need to respond to, there is a lot that can be done to ensure survival when faced with a crisis: preparation, preparation, preparation (and don't forget training!) To be caught completely off guard will only lower your organisation's chances of success in navigating a crisis. Some key questions to ask yourselves:

- Have you mapped your critical stakeholders who you will need to communicate with?
- Do you have positioning statements per stakeholder/per crises?
- Have you stress-tested the organisation's response to various scenarios?
- How are you organised internally to manage a crisis? Who forms your crisis team? How is it structured? How is it built for a rapid response?
- Who is your spokesperson? Are they media trained?
- Have you developed good media relationships?

No two crises are the same, but some general rules apply in terms of approach: speak clearly, speak calmly and authentically. Be human. This applies whether your response is written or verbal. Be prepared to move quickly - aim to be criticized for over-reacting and overestimating the gravity of a situation rather than the opposite. Above all else, go to the crisis and face it head on – organisations that go to ground and don't appropriately communicate risk their own survival.

Crises will be unavoidable in the life of any organisation. They may be of their own making, or outside of their control as we are seeing with COVID-19. What is in their control is the preparation and planning required to ensure an effective response. A business's very survival may well depend on it.



Some concluding thoughts...

It is so often in moments of crisis that leaders and organisations truly prove their value (or lack thereof) to their stakeholders. Valuable organisations are ones that demonstrate good governance; and good governance allows for effective risk management and crisis response and an ability to effectively communicate your thoughts, actions and next steps in a crisis.

At a time when effective communication is paramount, choosing to go to ground when expectations of you are otherwise, can be detrimental to confidence, trust and value of your brand. Employers, consumers and other stakeholders will not quickly forget this. There is no better time for a brand and its leader to demonstrate leadership and accountability and solid governance DNA.

Like good governance, effective crisis preparedness and response is only as good as it is tested. Ongoing evaluation, preparation and training form the ultimate insurance policy to mitigate crisis risk.





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