

Corporate Communications Timing and Content

Completed March 20, 2020



Goals

With an internal corporate communications plan in place, and based on theories of emotional processing or leadership, identify the appropriate time to introduce messages unrelated to the COVID-19 crisis.

Early Findings

Set The Standard Now

- “In crisis” communications set the standard for all future communications. It’s important to see all forms of news (both good and bad) as [working in combination](#) to raise the reputation of corporations within employee, shareholder, and customer-facing messaging. If companies create trust between management and stakeholders, and they are seen as consistent, reliable, and transparent - it should produce positive effects, no matter the timing.

[David Grabert](#), global head of marketing and communications for GroupM, “for better or worse, how your company responds to the coronavirus may well have a lasting impact on your brand. When a company is in a position to do something extraordinary, communications can help the company stand out as a corporate citizen.”

- Grabert also said [listening](#) is important, “communicating with employees right now [is] not just about giving updates (good or bad),” he said. “So, people leaders need to listen.”

[Jill Geisler](#), Bill Plante Chair in Leadership & Media Integrity, Loyola University Chicago, Freedom Forum Fellow in Women’s Leadership, shared her thoughts (sign up [here](#) for weekly updates from the National Journalism Institute):

- Maintain an FAQ mindset. As you write, anticipate the “what does this really mean to me?” questions from employees.
- Remember that people under stress don’t always process information well. If it’s important information, send it multiple times in multiple messages.
- In addition to information, people need encouragement and inspiration. Don’t hesitate to send brief messages of support to your team.

Communication Style Is Crucial

- Communicate early and often in [fast-moving, uncertain situations](#). The manner in which a company reacts during a crisis carries implications for corporate reputation that remain long after the crisis has ended.
- Approach the situation with [empathy](#): put yourself in your constituents' shoes to understand their anxiety. Look at communication from the perspective of your audience — have empathy for them rather than fearing saying or doing the wrong thing.

Empathy, Consistency, Clarity, And Tone

- According to [The Harvard Business Review](#), even if you're still trying to understand the problem, "be honest and open to maintain credibility."
- Studies have shown that leaders, in particular, have a [special role](#) in reducing employee anxiety. The company needs to reassure employees, put everyone's mind at ease, and provide hope for the future.
- After [9/11](#), it was vital to hear the voice of the leadership, whether live or through email, phone messages, or social media.
- Post information regularly in a highly [visible](#) location. Describe how decisions were made. Communicate no less than every other day. Try to provide timely information rather than waiting until you know all the answers.
- Focus on [empathy](#) rather than trying to create selling opportunities, "companies should rethink advertising and promotion strategies to be more in line with the current zeitgeist."
- Johnson & Johnson Tylenol crisis: speaking early, often, and directly with its consumers. Chairman James Burke was credited for his "transparency and calm demeanor ... Allowing the company to regain [95%](#) of market share within a few months, and ultimately enhancing the company's reputation."
- Keep communicating, even without all the information, reveal as much as possible, and be vigilant about correcting mistakes without [worrying](#) about the repercussions.
- Make sure that your messaging is consistent and that everyone speaks with the [same voice](#). The news cycle shifts rapidly — when working with the media, be credible without sacrificing accuracy or reputation.
- Based on the South Korean example, transparency, honesty, speed and customer service are "the [building blocks](#) of effective PR."

Show The Silver Lining

- Brands, organizations, and individuals offset the difficulties with acts of kindness. In the

article [[here](#)] published March 13, 2020, PR NEWS editor Seth Arenstein listed early examples of large brands doing good. He said, “kind acts likely earn double reputation points. Doing good is welcome always.”

Research

Academic research is available for full text PDF download [here](#).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of internal communication during a crisis by comparing how Italian companies communicated to employees during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and how employees interpreted these efforts. The study used interviews with internal communication managers and employees. It also drew data from two focus groups and a survey involving internal communicators. The results indicate a misalignment between what companies meant to communicate and what employees perceived. Companies planned excellent communication, made extensive use of official instruments and depicted the crisis as an opportunity, while employees complained about the lack of listening and about the clarity of messages, disliked hierarchical communication and accused their companies of opportunism. To reduce misalignment, companies should strengthen trust relationships before a crisis occurs and should focus on open and continuous listening during a crisis.