Expert advice on how to communicate during a crisis

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Your customers want to hear from you during the coronavirus pandemic. They want reassurance that their power won't go out. They want information on how to pay their bill. They want to know your plan for keeping employees and the community safe. They want to hear about your acts of kindness and support. And they want to know what to expect from you after the COVID-19 crisis is over.

At our April 9, 2020, web conference Energy and empathy: A frank discussion with crisis communications experts, three crisis communication experts gave advice on how to talk to customers throughout the coronavirus emergency. Watch the recording and download the presentation to better plan and focus your communications during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Watch the web conference recording


Today's web conference
is on
Energy and empathy:
A frank discussion with crisis
communications experts

Review and download the web conference presentation

Downloadesource-crisis-communications-webinar.pdf

We captured some of the highlights below.

Matt Moseley, Dovetail Solutions: Empathize with your audience

During a crisis, corporate communicators have two goals:

- Build trust
- Demonstrate empathy

Through your language and actions, show customers you care about them and understand their difficult situation. Take this critical moment to affirm your utility's values and to remind people that you're a part of the national infrastructure that keeps vital operations going.

Underscore that even though we're practicing social distancing, we're all connected by the electric grid and the devices it powers. And these devices are keeping us connected to the people we love.

Take the "first mover advantage" by responding early. This allows you to define the narrative and frame the issue. The longer you wait to speak up and the less you communicate, the harder it is to control the outcome and maintain trust.

Prepare for what's next. Think about how the crisis will affect rural, low-income, and remote-working customers. And don't stop working on your renewable-energy goals.

There's always an opportunity in a crisis. Examine how you can use this situation to build your brand.

Andi O'Conor, Speakcoach: Have a plan

Remember the goal of your communication: to build a relationship with your audience. If they don't know you and trust you, they won't listen to the information you're trying to convey.

Determine right away who your audience is and what they want or need from you.

Remember the goal of your communication: to build a relationship with your audience.

Craft your intention. Ask yourself what you want your audience to think, feel, and do during and after the crisis.

Map your audience's emotional journey and communicate with them appropriately at each stage. For example, when they're concerned or worried, honor that. Don't tell them everything is going great. Be honest and authentic.

Maria Hartshorne, MTR Communications: Be a leader

Create a crisis communications plan now, not while the emergency is happening. For every $1 you spend on preparedness, you'll save $7 on the financial impact of the crisis.

Assemble a response team of three or four people—for example, your CEO, a human resources executive, a crisis communicator, and an expert in the field affected by the crisis. This group should meet often, be the main source of information, create succinct messages, regularly update customers, and explain what you know and don't know.

Talk to your most important audience: employees. Be their voice of leadership. Build and maintain confidence with them.

Empathize with customers and assure them that you're doing your part. Talk about how you're helping and giving relief, not maintaining business as usual.

Enhance your relationship with your community. Don't run your normal ads or push your products.

Use strong language in your communications. Make connections with your audience; be hopeful but realistic. On April 5, 2020, Queen Elizabeth addressed the UK citizenry for only the fifth time in her monarchy. Her speech was compelling and direct (**figure 1**).

Figure 1: Queen Elizabeth calms and inspires Britons in the face of COVID-19

The queen's emotional and reassuring speech is an excellent example of effective crisis communications.

Calm, confident, and concise, the queen assured the public that the country would emerge victorious from the COVID-19 crisis. Broadly viewed as an excellent example of effective crisis communications, the queen's speech inspired the hope that all of us, everywhere, needed. Her closing words were galvanizing:

> Better days will return. We will be with our friends again. We will be with our families again. We will meet again.

Brands that are doing it right

Many local and global brands are communicating consistently, concisely, and compassionately.

Best examples of utility communications and goodwill

Check out our Utility responses to the COVID-19 pandemic Google spreadsheet to see examples of how utilities are talking to customers, employees, and the public. We're also tracking energy companies' financial programs and acts of goodwill. If we're missing your initiatives, add them to the spreadsheet!

Consider adding them to the public Google document COVID-19 Corporate Goodwill as well. People across the US are using this file to monitor the efforts brands large and small are taking to support and relieve the public.

Auto insurance company Allstate is returning premiums to customers because few of their insured are

driving. Media outlets have lauded the effort and suggested other insurers do the same.

Delta Airlines is allowing customers to rebook their trips within two years, promising no waivers, fees, or blackout dates.

Recreation equipment retailer REI is paying its employees full wages. The company has also published content about how to hike safely during the pandemic, how to set up scavenger hunts with kids who are stuck at home, and how to set up a climbing wall in your back yard.

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