

# **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS IN A LONG-DURATION CRISIS: KEEPING THINGS TOGETHER DURING COVID-19**

THE IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 FOR NONPROFITS

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## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS IN A LONG-DURATION CRISIS: KEEPING THINGS TOGETHER DURING COVID-19**

- Few communications plans anticipated irregular operations starting suddenly and lasting weeks or months. In this presentation, a communications leader who was in the middle of communications during the 2014 Ebola crisis and many other front-page emergencies shares best practices for effective messaging and communications in an extended crisis.

### Learning Objectives:

1. Principles of communication during an extended emergency
2. Factors unique to the COVID-19 crisis
3. Balancing "business as usual" with empathy and flexibility
4. Pitfalls, third rails and danger zones -- and how to avoid them

**KNOW THAT SOME PEOPLE  
ARE REALLY AFFECTED.**

**THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF  
PEOPLE DYING, THOUSANDS  
SICK, AND MILLIONS AT RISK.**

# CORONAVIRUS

- Large family of viruses that cause many different illnesses
  - Common colds
  - SARS
  - MERS
  - COVID-19
- Usually respiratory symptoms
- Originate in animals and transferred to humans
- Even though there are known coronaviruses, that does not mean we know everything about *this* coronavirus

# COVID-19

- Cluster of unexplained viral pneumonia/respiratory illness noticed in Wuhan, China in December 2019
  - Denied by China's government
  - Large festival went forward, against health expert recommendations
- Control in China only after strict social distancing enforced
- Dec. 31, 2019: First US media coverage on Flutrackers blog
- Jan. 8, 2020: First CDC advisory issued
- Jan. 20, 2020: First case identified in the US
- Feb. 26, 2020: CDC reports first suspected case of community-spread COVID-19
- March 23, 2020: 21,000 COVID-19 cases confirmed in NYC; 12 states on "stay at home"

## FOCUS ON THE FUNDAMENTALS

- Use your organization's mission and values as a guidepost
- Ask yourself how you would feel if you were on the other side
- Find ways to help those who need it most urgently
- Remember that this is for the long-haul

THE SECOND  
MOST-IMPORTANT  
THING TO DO  
WHEN ANY CRISIS  
BEGINS

Stop any previously planned marketing, social media posts or other sales outreach until you review and confirm that it should proceed or perhaps be postponed.

Address any immediate physical and other risks to life, health or property.

I.e., If there's a fire, make sure you tell people to get out of the building.

THE FIRST THING  
TO DO WHEN ANY  
CRISIS BEGINS



Recognize that covid-19's impact varies from place to place.

- There is no such thing as “business as usual”
- What used to be “normal” will never return
- Everything about how people interact now changes

## NONPROFITS HAVE A SPECIAL ROLE

- Operational nonprofits are on the front lines of the crisis
- Charities and other nonprofits provide support
- Many organizations and businesses are finding new roles
- Nonprofits also must address internal and external communications issues that are affecting every type of business or organization

WHEN TO  
COMMUNICATE?



## COMMUNICATE WHEN YOU HAVE SOMETHING OF VALUE TO SAY

- At the start of a crisis like this, let people know you and your staff are OK, say that you hope the recipient is OK, and give a brief idea of the organization's status
- Know that people are being bombarded by emails, so limit subsequent messages to ones that deliver value
- Be aware of how many people have had their entire lives up-ended
- Don't contribute to the noise

## INSTEAD OF THIS...

- “Since you’ve got time on your hands right now, we thought this would be a great time to ask you to reach out to your friends to get them involved...”
- “Please buy a ticket for our upcoming gala...”
- “Our organization is devastated by this crisis...”

## DO MORE LIKE THIS:

- Inform supporters about what happens to your work
- Notify anyone who was scheduled to attend an event or a volunteer shift
- Engage with your supporters online such as in a Facebook group or other platform.
- Consider a live briefing or other forum for people to ask questions or offer suggestions.
- Give people ways that they can *do something*

## WHAT ABOUT TICKETS ALREADY SOLD?

- Don't automatically issue refunds
  - Consider offering tiered refunds: 100%, 50% or 0.
  - This has worked for both nonprofits and commercial events so far
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- See *“Fundraising During the Corona Outbreak: Answers to 5 Pressing Questions” Chronicle of Philanthropy, March 19, 2020.*

## STRIKING THE RIGHT TONE (I)

- Double check your reason for communicating
- Target your audience
- Confirm that you are the right source for the info that you are sending



## STRIKING THE RIGHT TONE (2)

- Think carefully about the person on the receiving end
- Know that people are experiencing this crisis in vastly different ways
- Be sincere, empathetic *and brief*

## EMPLOYEES COME FIRST

- Communicate internally first
- Let supporters know that your staff is OK
- If there are layoffs, be up front about it

Show, don't tell how you are helping.

This is not a good time for puffery (if there ever is one.)

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THE COMMUNICATIONS HANDBOOK for  
**CORONAVIRUS**  
and Other Public Health Emergencies



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