

CONTENTS

Crisis1,2,15
Image Patrol3-5
Measurement6,7
Roundtable7,8
Storytelling9,10
Crisis10,11
Social Media12,13
Measurement13-15
Media Relations16



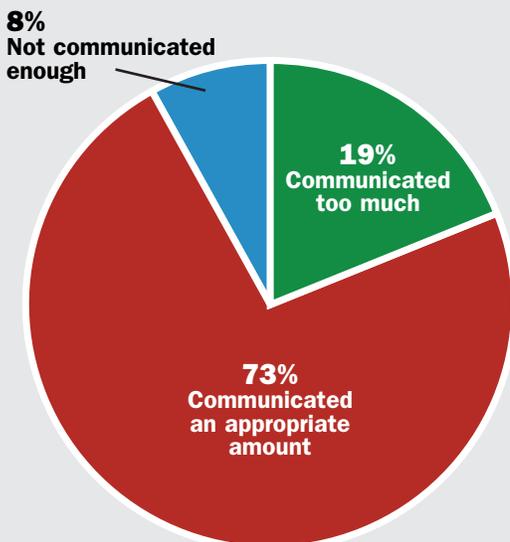
CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

73% Like COVID-19 Messages from Companies They Buy from, 60% See the Rest as Unhelpful PR

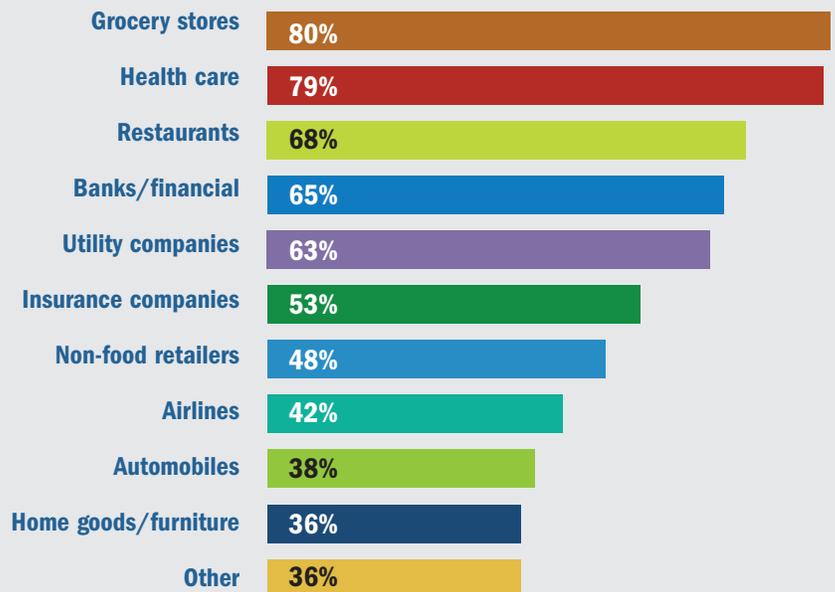
As we move into the third full month of the novel coronavirus, data keeps coming in about the communications from brands and organizations. Some are flooding the zone with messages that are important and useful to recipients. Others simply are adding to the noise, assuring you that the

health and safety of their employees is paramount (you hope that's always been the case, right?). Still others are telling you that they will deliver A, B and C, but when the package or their employees (gloved, masked and distanced) arrive at your home, you find only a fraction of what was promised.

1 When you think of the companies you do business with and their COVID-19 communications, would you say they have:



2 When/if you receive COVID-19-centric updates from the following, how likely are you to read it?



Source: The Clyde Group/Ipsos (April 6-7, 2020, 1,000 respondents)

Continued on page 2



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Published monthly by Access Intelligence, LLC
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 Rockville, MD 20850

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 SEPTEMBER 30, 2020
 NYC

Continued from page 1

That’s a poor example of integration of operations and communications.

In this uncertain time, communicators are wary and are asking questions: Am I communicating too much or too little? Are people reading my communication or tossing it so they can

binge the new **Netflix** series?

Those were some of the questions D.C.-based **Clyde Group** and **Ipsos**, the global marketing research firm, asked 1,005 US adults in early April. The data from that survey is shared with PRNEWS exclusively.

In short, the messaging PR pro generated during the first few weeks of the pandemic was well-received, the survey indicates.

Yet much of the country remains undecided about how the private sector’s coronavirus efforts, says **Alex Slater**, Clyde Group’s founder.

For example, when asked whether corporate America was exceeding expectations around the virus, 48 percent agreed it was, but 34 percent were unsure. “The onus is on companies to win over those ambivalent Americans,” he says.

As chart 1 shows, a significant majority (73 percent) is satisfied with the amount of COVID-19-related-communications “companies they do business with” are sending.

Yet when respondents were asked about companies generally (as opposed to companies they do business with), they were less upbeat. Chart 4 shows 59 percent “strongly believe” or “somewhat agree” that companies’ coronavirus responses are “mainly PR efforts.”

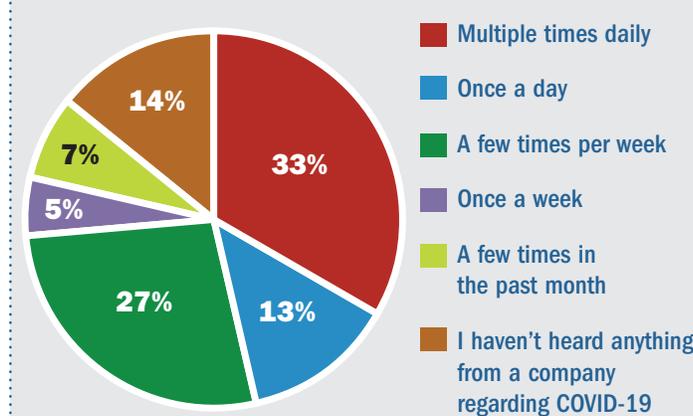
HATE CONGRESS, BUT...

For Slater, chart 4 is “tremendously troubling,” especially the 21 percent who strongly agree.

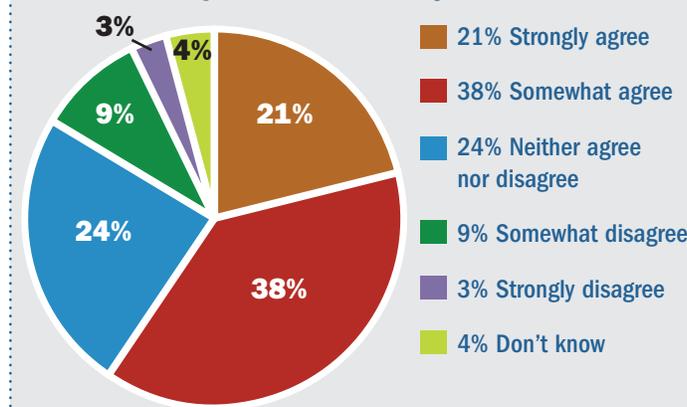
He likens it to how voters hate Congress but like their Congress members. As chart 5 shows, 56 percent of respondents reported satisfaction with the communication from companies they do business with; for women, specifically, it was 65 percent.

The takeaway, says Slater, is “simple to advise yet hard to execute; focus on your customers and making your brand relationship stronger. Your stakeholders are craving—and will reward—authenticity, loyalty and empathy.”

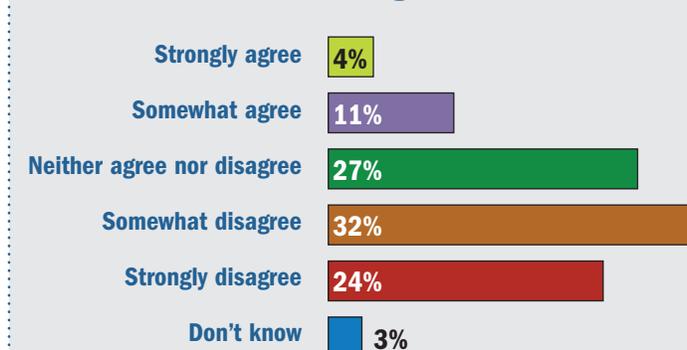
3 How often do you receive email from any company about COVID-19 and its response?



4 Many companies' COVID-19 responses are mainly PR efforts



5 The companies I do business with are not communicating well with me during this crisis



Continued on page 15

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Cruise Lines, Care Facilities Fail After COVID-19 Media Attention Arrives



The coronavirus pandemic is a perfect example of why increasing awareness is a terrible PR objective. I've been aware of cruise ships since I was a child. My father decided to celebrate retirement by taking me, his only offspring, around the world. The first leg of the journey was aboard the **QE2**, from New York to LeHavre. I was 16 and found the cruise dull, but was fascinated by the extent to which my father was the center of attention for so many attractive, elderly (in my eyes) ladies.

But when news and photos began to appear about COVID-19 infections on board several vessels, my awareness quickly turned to horror. The thought of thousands of people stuck at sea on ships in which a highly contagious and frequently deadly disease ran rampant made my skin crawl.

My thoughts also turned to friends in places like Sitka, Alaska and Fort Lauderdale, and all the other ports of call who would be unwitting recipients of the disease, courtesy of ships that were even then continuing to sail. The more aware I was of what was happening in the industry, the more certain I was that I would never again set foot on a cruise ship.

AWARENESS TURNS TO OUTRAGE

Like most, I am aware of the importance and necessity of long-term care facilities. I have family members in them. But once again, that awareness turned to outrage and fear when news broke that most of the deaths in many states, including my own, were happening in those same places.

The reality is that COVID-19 has raised the visibility of many industries that we probably didn't give much thought to before: meatpacking, supply-chain, food pantries, prisons, janitorial services. The list goes on. What happens to those industries now that they've had their visibility raised to levels previously reserved for sports teams and presidential candidates?

Some may return to relative obscurity when we finally realize we have enough toilet paper, thermometers and flour. Others will see their reputations and recognition enhanced by their philanthropic efforts – **Steak-Umms** and **Dean Kamen**

come to mind – the latter a name some may remember as the inventor of the **Segway**, but who has more recently been credited with orchestrating delivery of badly needed PPE, among other important contributions. Others may go down in history as bad actors whose words and deeds helped prolong the COVID-19 nightmare.

Below we will examine how two of those now highly visible industries are responding: cruise lines and nursing homes.

THE CRUISE LINE INDUSTRY

Back in March, when news of infected cruise ships began to surface, the volume of cases, and even deaths, seemed staggering. Since then, those numbers pale next to death tolls and infection rates elsewhere in the US.

The Miami Herald has been tracking the numbers. To date, there have been 2,787 cases and 74 deaths associated with cruise ships.

What truly tarred the industry was its insistence that ships were safe and its persistence in continuing to launch cruises and visit ports even after the initial cases and death were reported in early February.

The **CDC** issued warnings against boarding cruise ships on March 8, yet cruises continued to launch through mid-March. As of April 7, there were 6,000 passengers at sea. In late, **Carnival Cruise Line** said it had 10,000 healthy crew members aboard 18 of its ships.

The industry's lobbying group, **Cruise Lines International Association**, issued a statement saying, "Upon declaration by the **WHO** of a pandemic, (March 11, 2020) CLIA-member cruise lines voluntarily suspended operations worldwide – making the cruise industry one of the first to do so."

Daily headlines refuted this, of course. In addition, it didn't help the industry's credibility that **President Trump** weighed in on its behalf. **Carnival Corp.** chairman **Micky Arison** is a close friend of the president's and a former sponsor of "The Apprentice."

Continued on page 4

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The industry also didn't win friends when it lobbied for CARES act relief funds, despite avoiding paying US taxes, as most of its vessels are registered overseas.

Yet Carnival unveiled plans on May 4 to resume cruising from US ports, on a limited basis, by August 1. The resumption is subject to CDC approval and likely will include daily temperature checks, distancing and containment procedures. Still, Carnival says people are booking.

NURSING HOMES

Relative to the cruise line industry, COVID-19 has dealt a far bigger blow to nursing homes. All over the US, once the media or health care officials started tracking data by source,

the numbers of cases and deaths from nursing homes skyrocketed to more than 11,000, according to the AP. Sadly, there has been such limited testing in these facilities that there is widespread acknowledgement that those numbers are underreporting cases and fatalities.

Unfortunately, the industry's message focuses more on being granted immunity from liability and lawsuits than concern for the sick and families of those who have died.

The **American Health Care Association**, which represents more than 14,000 for-profit nursing homes, issued a statement that said: "Long-term care workers and centers are on the frontline of this pandemic response and it is critical that states provide the necessary liability protection staff and pro-

Cruise Line Industry

Criteria	Grade	Comments	Advice
Extent of coverage	F	Because the cruise industry was one of the first hot spots, and images and video interviews with stranded passengers filled the media, the sector received more than its fair share of attention.	When you're one of the first to become a victim of a natural disaster or global pandemic, try to do everything right, since all eyes will be on you. Later, there may be others to distract the media.
Effectiveness of spokespeople	F	Passengers and industry spokespeople were contradicting each other daily, and the passengers made much better copy, so whatever industry spokespeople said had less credibility than the social media posts of suffering passengers.	Don't forget that the media is constantly beseeching anyone affected by a tragedy to tell his or her story, and it's easy to respond to their pleas on social media. Visuals of victims make for a much better story than a stiff spokesperson standing at a podium.
Communication of key messages	D-	The industry began explaining how it was planning to change its practices, but only after lawmakers started calling for stricter legislation. This industry response was far too late.	Getting ahead of a crisis means taking swift and bold action before you it's mandated, before lawyers start filing lawsuits and victims call their representatives in congress.
Management of negative messages	F	No amount of corporate speak could drown out the torrent of complaints and photos from passengers on board.	Assume that anyone hurt by your actions, or actions that touch your brand, will have a mobile phone and a camera. They will broadcast the negative messages you don't want people to know about.
Impact on customers	C	Bookings for 2021 are looking strong, according to the industry, which is offering generous discounts. So, for the true cruising fan, there seems to be little damage.	If you don't have data such as future bookings, survey your target audiences and existing customers ASAP to find out how bad the damage really is.
Impact on stock price	F	As the COVID-19 era continues, everyone wants to predict winners and losers, and most people seem to think the cruise industry will be at least a short-term loser since almost all the publicly traded companies have lost about 75% of their stock value in the last four months.	When a crisis hits a country, or the world, and your industry is at the forefront, and you are a public company, the best thing to do is take financial losses early, act quickly to stop the problem, make sure employees and customers are on the same page as you are, and then worry about your stock price.
Impact on employees	F	Weeks after passengers were brought home, thousands (possibly tens of thousands) of crew members remained stranded at sea because cruise lines didn't want to be held responsible for the cost of bringing them home. As a result, the attractiveness of working for a cruise line has been severely diminished.	Prioritize employees over profits, or you will find it very difficult to attract good talent when you need it.
Overall score	F	Learn from your mistakes. This wasn't the first time that the cruise industry has been hit with negative news. Yet its focus continues to be on profits over trust, credibility and reputation.	Just because your current crisis seems different from all others should not preclude you from going back to earlier crises and doing a thorough data analysis to determine what works, and what doesn't, to salvage your reputation.

viders need to provide care during this difficult time without fear of reprisal.”

There’s no sign of empathy in those 39 words.

Media reports as of press time say at least 11 states issued executive orders shielding health care providers from some form of liability during COVID-19. In addition, states like Kentucky, New York and Wisconsin have passed legislation to protect health care providers from liability during the global pandemic.

Advocates for occupants in these facilities argue that granting immunity without requiring reporting and adherence to certain standards is an even bigger disaster waiting to

happen. In many cases, family members, advocates and inspectors have been barred from entering the facilities.

“The rule waivers, diminished inspections, reduced oversight, and chronic understaffing in long-term care facilities may be a toxic combination,” says **Toby Edelman**, senior policy attorney at the **Center for Medicare Advocacy**. “There’s a lot of neglect in nursing homes in the best of times,” she adds, “and these are not the best of times.”

It’s an image disaster in the making. ■

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Nursing Homes

Criteria	Grade	Comments	Advice
Extent of coverage	F	After being relatively under-covered by the media, the nursing home COVID-19 crisis now is an issue on nearly every newscast. Many governors are including nursing home numbers in their daily briefings. As the numbers climb, attention will grow.	There’s nothing like a good crisis to make an industry that frequently runs below most radar screens top of the news. No matter how low visibility you may be, at least make sure you have a crisis and disaster plan ready. Dust it off at least once a year.
Effectiveness of spokespeople	F	If the thought was that somehow industry association presidents, who frequently are seen and described as lobbyists, would be effective spokespeople, then the industry was mistaken.	Credibility of spokespeople is critical. Having an industry lobbyist as your official spokesperson is not likely to engender credibility.
Communication of key messages	D	The key message should have been care and concern for patients, residents and families of those who died. Instead, the industry is asking for immunity from liability for what happened in their facilities, which is precisely the wrong message in any crisis.	In the scrum of a crisis, the media will, at best, take away one message from your statement, if any. So, when there are victims, it is best that your main message convey sympathy, empathy and apologies, or else you are doomed.
Management of negative messages	F	The moment the industry started talking about liability, most people assumed that there was some. The stories that were filling the news about hidden bodies and families left in the dark, sadly, made for excellent TV. There was no way that negative messages wouldn’t dominate the headlines.	Bringing up legal issues and potential lawsuits in the middle of a crisis implies that you know you did something wrong. Lawyers generally are less interested in protecting your reputation than they are in avoiding lawsuits. Both are equally costly.
Impact on employees	F	Most nursing facilities already are understaffed and staff is notoriously underpaid. The fact that you want immunity and aren’t providing PPE or compensation commensurate with the risks the staff is taking will ensure that it will be harder than ever to find talent going forward.	Communicating with employees, whether you are conveying concern or instructions as to how to fix a problem, has to be your number-one priority in any crisis.
Impact on citizens	F	There are millions of family members who now are frantic about their loved ones since the media has portrayed nursing homes as the source of a majority of COVID-19 fatalities. It could be years before confidence is restored. In addition, many voters will be petitioning their legislators for more oversight of the industry	Your first message has to be one of compassion for those hurt in any crisis. If not, you will end up with a reputation as an organization or an industry that doesn’t care and won’t listen. It is essentially an entity with which no one will willingly do business.
Impact on investors	F	Hedge funds and other for-profit public companies own many of the infected facilities. There is no doubt shareholders will be thrilled to see that states are granting immunity when asked.	The fact that of all your stakeholder audiences, your shareholders are the only ones who did well, will not enable you to succeed in a populist, or, frankly, in any, post-crisis environment.
Overall score	D-	We have yet to see a facility manage communications well to any audience, except perhaps to shareholders. If such facilities weren’t a necessity for so many families, the resident population would decrease dramatically. Immunity or not, we predict more legislation and regulation in their future.	Don’t leave communications to lawyers or lobbyists. Your response to a crisis, especially one involving the health and safety of staff as well as customers, has to begin with compassion and empathy, not protection from lawsuits.

The Future of Travel: Mapping Predictive Trends in the Tourism Industry



One of the most jarring consequences of a pandemic in our interconnected world has been the restriction of individual movement. The freedom to travel, locally or abroad, has been limited. Beyond canceled vacations and business trips, the travel, tourism and hospitality industries have been crippled. Only recently have experts begun imagining travel in a post-COVID-19 world.

To better understand predictions about the future of travel, **APCO Worldwide's** digital team compiled an informal database of 100 forecasts published recently in more than 30 unique media outlets. Using a Natural Language Processing algorithm to group predictions by thematic similarity, the team analyzed common trends between the forecasts. Communicators in all industries can use similar predictive landscapes to understand trends.

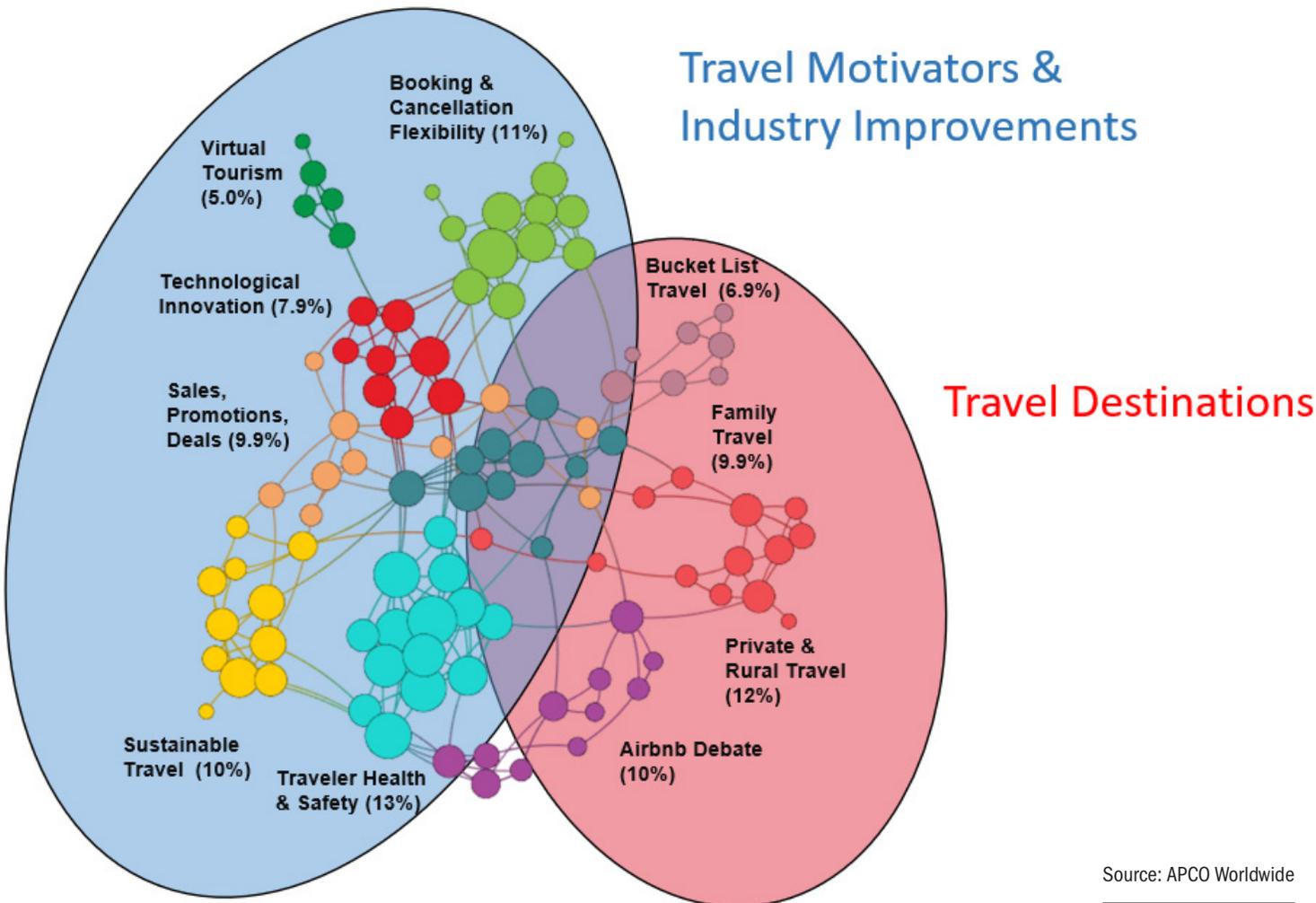
In our travel example, two primary categories, or themes, emerged: Travel Motivators and Travel Destinations.

On the left, there are predictions that can be largely categorized as industry improvements necessary to motivate people to travel in the post-COVID-19 world.

Beyond the more obvious actions, such as increased promotions and cancellation flexibility, there also are predictions about promoting sustainable travel options that take environmental health into consideration. Emerging environmental and sustainability themes include predictions about reducing overtourism and carbon emissions of airplanes and cruise ships. In addition, there are efforts to ensure that natural landscapes are protected from people and people from nature (e.g., viruses).

Technological innovation also features prominently in these predictions about industry measures needed to encourage tourism, notably around health and safety issues. Robotics or automation services can be used to minimize human contact in airport queues and hotels, biometrics to track unhealthy travelers or radically rethinking interior design to accommodate social distancing within modes of transportation.

Several predictions speculate that shifts in destination choice will influence post-pandemic travel behavior. Instead of global cities, many experts believe travelers will prioritize



Source: APCO Worldwide

rural or remote destinations off the beaten track, where proximity to nature could be perceived as being healthier.

Another cluster of predictions focused on bucket-list travel, and the potential increase in once-in-a-lifetime vacations following the current period of travel restrictions.

While there were numerous predictions concerning the future of economy accommodations, opinion was divided: some see private vacation rentals increasing, as long as the properties are isolated and close to home. Others think that smaller-scale private operators will be unable to guarantee sanitation in each lodging, as opposed to hotels, some of which are investing in apartment-style rental properties.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Last, two themes dominate the center of the network and reveal priorities for future travel: health and safety and the expected increase in family travel.

Once travel restrictions are lifted, the first trip that many will take is to visit family and close friends. Some industry observers expect to see that trend evolve into increased multigenerational travel, as families rediscover the importance

of spending time together and seek to save on travel costs.

Most important, all actors in the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors will need to adopt technologies and procedures to ensure the health and safety of potential travelers. Cleanliness and healthiness may soon even become key factors that airlines, hotels or tour groups use to differentiate their services from the competition.

TREND MAPPING IN ANY INDUSTRY

While no one can predict the future, we can examine common themes in expert predictions and use them to map trends likely to shape the future of an industry. As this global crisis evolves, we can update this model to take into consideration changing predictions and revise projections accordingly.

Communicators can use prediction landscapes to understand wider industry trends that are likely to influence business strategy. In addition, communicators tracking forecasts will be better positioned to navigate changing circumstances and deliver a future-forward response. ■

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ROUNDTABLE

Researched Carefully and Done Sensitively, Media Pitches, Product Launches Can Work During Virus

Late last month, PRNEWS gathered a panel of senior communicators for a webinar: "Media Relations Strategy in the Midst of a Global Crisis."

The nearly 100 attendees submitted more questions than could be handled during the 60-minute session. To tackle the questions left unanswered, we gathered a virtual roundtable of PR practitioners to respond to some of them.

Those communicators were: **Annie Scranton**, founder and president of **Pace PR**, **Todd Hansen**, principal of **O'Malley Hansen Communications** and **Tarn Morrison**, director of PR & partnerships at **TULA**, the skincare company.

The questions and edited responses are below.

PRNEWS: What are your recommendation for companies that have major brand or product launches in the coming months of 2020? Should they postpone or continue with them?



Annie Scranton
Founder, President
Pace PR

Annie Scranton: If you've postponed a launch, use the down time to make sure your messaging and branding are well-thought-out and consistent across all of your social media platforms for when you conduct the launch.

If you are planning a launch in 2020,

you need to make sure it is thoughtful, given that we are in a pandemic. Make certain you have the cash flow to support a launch and also feel very confident about sales. To attract media, build your lists only with journalists you have researched and that you know are covering news other than the coronavirus.

Todd Hansen: The primary inclination is to hold off right now, while much of the country shelters in place. But every case is different, so here are questions you should ask:



Todd Hansen
Principal
O'Malley Hansen
Communications

- ▶ Is there a good chance [the product or service will be] purchased in the short-term because it would be appealing to the stay-at-home lifestyle?
- ▶ Is there a compelling business reason that will help you determine your timing?
- ▶ Is there a way to redesign the launch so that it more appropriately fits how people are getting their information and living their lives now?



Tarn Morrison
Director of PR &
Partnerships
TULA

Tarn Morrison: Communicate with internal and external stakeholders. It's important to get a range of opinions about the content of campaigns and language used in any external communications.

While it can feel like the wrong moment to launch a campaign or product right now, if executed well, it can actually be a welcome distraction.

There are examples of recent product releases that were successful. A key is that the companies ensured the launch materials emphasized benefits that were relevant to consumers in this moment.

TIMING FOR BRAND AWARENESS

PRNEWS: What recommendations would you give to companies that are planning to roll out a brand awareness campaign for the post-COVID-19 period? What is the ideal timing on this type of campaign?

Hansen: Sensitivity to the concerns of your key target audiences is the primary factor. It's an unusual balance. For many people, life now is routine and a little monotonous, so there is a desire to do something different. Trust your instincts and run ideas by members of your target audience.

Scranton: I think it's fine to start initial conversations with media you are close to now for brand awareness campaigns [later]. I would, however, hold off on launching those campaigns until we are closer to a resolution of COVID-19.

READY FOR NON-COVID-19 PITCHES?

PRNEWS: How will you judge or measure when it's time to pivot to non-COVID-19 pitching?

Scranton: You can pitch non-COVID-19 issues now, but you have to make sure the journalist you are pitching actually is covering those issues. Some fashion reporters, for example, are still on their usual beat.

Hansen: It's not nearly as straightforward as everyone thinks. Monitor the news and talk to your journalist targets. Many of them are still working and need content for their stories.

JUDGING MESSAGE TONE

PRNEWS: How do you assess whether your pitch is right or tone-deaf for this moment?

Scranton: I can't say it enough: research the journalist you're pitching. By reading what they have recently written, you will be able to assess if your pitch is on track.

Morrison: As always, but especially during this time, our focus is on the well-being of our team, our community and our rela-

“ **Research the journalist you're pitching. By reading what they have recently written, you will be able to assess if your pitch is on track.** ”

tionships. We've been looking at our plans through this lens, and prioritizing this view, which has helped us to gauge if the tone of our plans will land as we've intended them to.

PRNEWS: How do you respond when your brand is hit with continued criticism about something it's handled poorly during the pandemic, even if it's on the rebound? For example, we have recently heard about companies that received PPP loans only to return them.

Scranton: When your brand has been hit hard with criticism, and the court of public opinion has ruled that your company erred, the only thing you can do is to apologize thoughtfully, and then make sure you have consistent messaging on your website and social channels about how you are making an effort to change.

Hansen: It's important to make amends as quickly as possible and change your business practices so that it doesn't happen again. People will have long memories about how brands behaved during this time; organizations that have the public's best interests in mind will benefit in the long term.

DO YOU HOLD POLITICAL MESSAGES?

PRNEWS: What recommendations do you have for political messages? Since these will remain relevant until early November, should these announcements be postponed until the fall?

Hansen: Generally, political announcements are held to the fall because the country tunes out politics during the summer. This year that will be impossible, so we would not consider the traditional timeline this year, especially with the conventions coming up. Decide when to make the announcement based on when it will best capture people's attention. ■

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Note: You can listen to a replay of the webinar, "Media Relations Strategy in the Midst of a Global Crisis." Register at: shorturl.at/hqJ05

Advice for Leaders Who've Discovered Their Vulnerable Side: Explain Your New Approach

[Editor's Note: As part of our interview series, we spoke with **Miri Rodriguez**, the award-winning storyteller. Known for her work with a software giant and as an advisor to **Adobe** and **Walmart**, among others, we asked about brand storytelling during the pandemic.]

PRNEWS: What are you counselling brands about selling and pitching during the pandemic?



Miri Rodriguez,
Brand Storyteller
and Author

Miri Rodriguez: Indeed, brands are scrambling to find the right tone, angle, space and moment to show up—and to do so authentically and not tone-deaf during a time where everything is rapidly changing, including customer emotions, commerce evolution and financial woes.

I am getting a lot of questions around exactly that: How to act best and if there's opportunity to continue advertising during this global pandemic. The answer to the latter is yes. However, brands should lean into empathy as a behavioral blueprint to answer the *how*.

I am advising brands to consider customers from a human perspective. What are they feeling? How are they acting because of these feelings?

Social media is flooded with consumers connecting with each other, talking about uncertainty, mixed emotions and how they are trying to cope. Brands can leverage these stories to make decisions about pivoting, offering extended customer experiences or simply aligning their messages to the sentiments of their customers.

Some brands even ask if they should tone down their typically colorful, animated attributes. They will know the answer if they take time to understand the experience their customers are having. It's OK to go off brand—or not. Customer feelings and their conversations are your best guides.

PRNEWS: Many brand leaders are attempting to add emotion to their internal communication. Is it working?

Rodriguez: I've been hearing from employees that...some leaders are aiming for a sensitive approach. They are sharing personal stories of working-from-home chaos or feeling a little bit of burnout.

Ironically...employees do not relate to these attempts; these communications feel dissonant. This usually happens because the leader has not spent time building trust with stakeholders. And during a time of crisis, even if leaders mean well and want to appear relatable and approachable, audiences may find it hard to embrace it.

PRNEWS: OK, what can a leader do then?

Rodriguez: If leaders who never showed up vulnerable in the past are intending to do so now...their communication should first explain this new approach so that the audience has a chance to become receptive.

PRNEWS: What's working in internal communications?

Rodriguez: Internally, stories cutting through the noise are those that first take time to create a setting and explain to audiences the *why* of communication before the *what*.

Stories cutting through the noise are filled with empathy and sprinkled with hope. Human, relatable, emotional and inspiring—but also authentic—to remind us that we really are in this together and that we will get through it together.

PRNEWS: Has storytelling changed in this virus moment when people are worried about the future, their kids, their health and their jobs? Do they have the attention span to listen to stories? Are you monitoring storytelling?

Rodriguez: Yes. I've been using my social media channels and **Google Alerts** to monitor storytelling trends...and finding on a daily basis that people are tuning into storytelling as an essential business-forward tool for personal branding, entrepreneurs, startups and industry giants alike. Storytelling is bigger than ever now.

PRNEWS: Why?

Rodriguez: Because it provokes an empathetic connection, invites a human-to-human approach and is driven by vulnerability—the very behaviors customers are expecting from brands during this moment.

People are reading more, doing more self-reflection. Even essential workers, who are working longer and don't have a lot of extra time, are bombarded by the buzz words of *story*, *creative*, *empathy* and *vulnerability*. So it is top of mind.

I don't know that storytelling has changed in essence, but it has found its way more poignantly into people's hearts and minds today as everyone (people and brands) desperately does what they typically do during a crisis: attempt to connect with one another. And storytelling does this best.

PRNEWS: How can brands be creative in this moment?

Rodriguez: Brands have an incredible and historic opportunity to do something they possibly wouldn't have thought of before the pandemic. They can reassess their value proposition to new and upcoming generations, smart consumers and digital commerce. This is the time where brands can look at their brand mission and ask: 'Why do we exist? Does my customer know this, and love it? Does the market know this and love it?'

Continued on page 10

If the answer is no, or they're not sure, it's a great time to go storyboarding on the brand mission, purpose and future. This isn't a rebrand. It's more a narrative angle evolution to showcase new perspectives the brand can offer today.

PRNEWS: Your book, "Brand Storytelling: Put Customers at the Heart of Your Brand Story," emphasizes empathy and vulnerability. How much is too much? How do you convince executives to communicate with empathy and vulnerability?

Rodriguez: I understand how these soft skills can be taken further than needed, running a risk of negative effects and backlash from audiences. Balancing empathy and vulnerability in communication and engagement is important.

I recommend brands identify key messages they want to share while also creating boundaries around those they are unwilling to convey. If done well, stories rooted in empathy and vulnerability will awaken emotions from audiences.

A good way to judge how much is too much is by measuring audience engagement with stories. If the audience

responds...the story is just right. If not, this is where prototyping stories comes in.

Prototypes are low-cost, low-effort story concepts that are tested with audiences progressively to learn their responses and receive guidance on whether the stories, the level of empathy and vulnerability, are landing.

Brand executives, and as a result the brand entity as a whole, who reject the notion of empathy and vulnerability are, in essence, rejecting the notion of having emotional intelligence and a growth mindset.

We can all hypothesize what will happen to them as technology advances make their way into organizations. Newer generations will continue to demand a more connected, human approach to the consumer experience. Modern employees will seek to work for brands that have a social stance and purpose beyond the bottom line. Those are the arguments I use. ■

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CRISIS

BY JOSHUA J. SMITH, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, ROBERTSON SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND CULTURE, VCU

Apologize or Advocate: Choices for Crafting Statements During Pandemic



As stores and businesses suspended operations in the wake of the pandemic, many sent customers updates of new business hours, closures, delays and service suspensions.

There's an important question every organization should ask at the start of a crisis: What do we tell our customers, audience and stakeholders?

But at the heart of that quest lies a deeper question: *How* should we tell them?

Let's say there are three stages of a crisis: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis. Others break down the middle stage into several additional steps.

ALL CRISIS PLANS ARE THE SAME

Some crisis plans are cyclical, others are flat and some never end. If you look back at crisis communication case studies over the years, you'll notice a consistency. Every communication plan demonstrates an organization trying to come out of a crisis with as little damage as possible. The goal is always the same: getting to post-crisis as soon as possible.

In some instances, businesses come out better off than when they went into a crisis. An example is the famous **Tylenol** crisis in 1982.

Others do their best, ending up with an A for effort, but an F in public trust. The example here is the 2016 fiasco with batteries in the **Samsung** Galaxy Note7.

In some instances, businesses never recover fully, such as when **United** violently removed a passenger from one of its planes and CEO **Oscar Munoz's** statements to the press and to employees actually made the situation worse.

WHAT'S THE BEST ROUTE?

We know that no two crises are the same. However, the best indices of public opinion in a crisis often is the first statement, quote or release the organization issues. It's a defining and critical piece of evidence that sets the tone for the organization. It's also the official position that an organization takes with regard to its audience, and it's a critical first step in crisis mitigation.

Crisis communications often means breaking, or responding to, bad news. There are many ways to communicate bad news, and the tone and verbiage go a long way toward framing audience opinion.

Here, organizations have to make a choice: Do they want to take a firm position of advocacy or apology? This presents a communication paradox.

PR scholars have researched crisis communications for decades. Theories and models have emerged to help practitioners articulate and map out these situations. These in-

clude the Contingency Theory of Accommodations and the Contingency Continuum.

With these, an organization must choose a position on a scale of advocacy to accommodation. Similarly, when crafting statements, quotes and releases to the public in a time of crisis, organizations must take a stance.

THE ADVOCATE

Consider this hypothetical situation: a community gym closes to limit the spread of COVID-19. In an email to members, the business says:

"In an effort to flatten the curve, and reduce the rate of contamination among our members, we are closing all gym locations until further notice. We believe this is the right thing to do, and that it is our social responsibility to put the health and safety of our community first. We hope you will continue to stay active at home, and we are providing a list of at-home workouts to keep you moving. We thank you for your understanding, and will see you again when we reopen."

Here, the organization is clearly taking a stance of advocacy. It starts with a goal "to flatten the curve, and reduce the rate of contamination."

The note goes on to say, "we believe this is the right thing to do" and "it's our social responsibility." While the gym thanks its members for their understanding, it never apologizes for inconvenience or short notice. This organization comes off as an authority, standing by its decisions.

THE APOLOGIST

Now, consider the same organization, but in this instance it is taking an apologetic stance:

"As suggested by health officials, to reduce the rate of contamination among our members, we have decided to close all gym locations until further notice. Your health and safety are our top priority and ingrained in our mission. We know the gym is a haven for many who use working out as a healthy means of dealing with stress, preventing illness and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

We hope you will continue to stay active at home, and we are providing a list of at-home workouts to keep you moving. We apologize for any inconvenience or added stress this may cause. We hope to see you back again when we reopen."

Here we see the organization putting the onus on another entity, and an ambiguous one at that. The gym is not claiming responsibility; rather it frames the statement by putting the members' best interest in the second line: "Your health and safety are our top priority and ingrained in our mission."

Most notably, the note ends with an apology: "We apologize for any inconvenience...."

Let's go back and look at the examples cited earlier. In the example of the statement from Samsung (see [link below](#)), did the company take a stance of advocacy or apology? If you're thinking advocacy, you're right, especially when you compare

it to the video statement COO **Tim Baxter** put out later, which is clearly apologetic.

What about the United statement to employees? Read it again. Advocacy or apology? If you're saying advocacy again, you're right.

PUT THE AUDIENCE FIRST

- ▶ You can do both, advocacy and apology. But one will always outshine the other. When crafting a narrative during a crisis, consider both sides of the paradox.
- ▶ Put audience members first. Meet in the middle and tell them what they need to know.
- ▶ Advocating doesn't always mean being firm. In the hypothetical example above, the gym statement indicated, "We believe this is the right thing to do, and that it is our social responsibility to put the health and safety of our community first." This is an organization taking a stance of advocacy for the greater good of the community.
- ▶ Apologizing doesn't necessarily mean you're at fault. There's always something to apologize for in business.
- ▶ Write your statement, then reread it to see how much you favor one side over the other. Then ask, 'Is that the stance you want to take?' How likely are you to change that stance? What does your audience need to know? How does your stance affect that? Should the legal department weigh in?
- ▶ Whether you advocate or apologize, make only promises you can keep, and remind your audience when you do. You'll have ample time to make good on promises and even make changes that result in positive outcomes. **Starbucks**, for example, during the racial incident in Philadelphia in 2018, held mandatory training for employees, clearly following up on its promise.
- ▶ Mix the good with the bad. Offer remedies, solutions and resources to help audience through the crisis. Think beyond what you can offer and point your constituency to resources from other organizations. It shows you care about more than your bottom line.
- ▶ If you're going to purely advocate, expect pushback. Some might see it as rude, insensitive or irresponsible. Brands that advocate have to be mature and stand by their statements. Taking a stance of pure advocacy requires conviction and strong leadership. Make sure you have both.
- ▶ Apologize when you have solutions in place. You can't just say sorry. You have to apologize and explain that you're taking steps to avoid a recurrence.

Note: Links for examples of apology and advocacy statements mentioned in this article.

Samsung: shorturl.at/NO456

Starbucks: shorturl.at/iuGP5

Starbucks: shorturl.at/diLT4

United: shorturl.at/dozAW ■

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The Pandemic's 'Infodemic' and Facebook's Face-Saving Response

In the midst of a global pandemic, we are simultaneously experiencing a massive global *infodemic*. The **World Health Organization** (WHO) defines this as “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”

On social media, misinformation often is shared at accelerated rates. In early April, approximately one-third of social media users reported seeing misinformation about COVID-19 on social media in the United States, Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain and the United Kingdom in a study conducted by the **Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism** at the **University of Oxford**.

Social media plays a crucial role in this infodemic, especially on **Facebook**. It still is the largest social media platform in the world, with approximately 2.6 billion monthly active users. In the past, Facebook has rendered enormous control over what content, including news, its users see and share. Unlike traditional media, though, it often took little responsibility for content and turned a blind eye to misinformation.

COVID-19 CHANGES

Uncharacteristically, Facebook has been proactively targeting

COVID-19 misinformation and enacted a number of crisis communication strategies:

- ▶ Launched a COVID-19 Information Center, which is featured at the top of the Facebook News Feed (it includes real-time updates from health organizations and vetted world authorities, such as the WHO)
- ▶ Gave the WHO free ad space and granted ad credits to other health organizations
- ▶ Removed COVID-19-related misinformation that could contribute to imminent physical harm (see sidebar)
- ▶ Employed fact-checking partners in 45 languages to address claims that don't directly result in physical harm, like conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus
- ▶ Partnered with the **International Fact-Checking Network** (IFCN) to launch a \$1 million grant program



Facebook and the President: A Delicate Dance

As Professor **Leilani Carver-Madalon** notes in her article, **Facebook** has been uncharacteristically proactive. Similar to other platforms, it's been slow to remove posts. Facebook's removal of COVID-19 misinformation reverses earlier policies that for years rendered it a worry-free vehicle for posters.

Several years ago, when it was apparent that Facebook would need to change its laissez-faire editorial stance, it did so carefully. Facebook said it would remove posts that advocated violence or other dangerous behavior.

To this day, a sticking point is the posts of political leaders. **Twitter** and Facebook refused to pull these posts, claiming they're important for political discourse. Facebook came under the spotlight as US conservatives believe it's biased against president **Donald Trump**.

Moving to the present, in a March 2020 **NY Times** interview with **Ben Smith**, Facebook founder **Mark Zuckerberg** said it's easier to monitor health content than other posts. COVID-19 material is relatively black and white compared with political content, which can be nuanced, he said. Facebook, he added, is monitoring coronavirus “misinformation that has imminent risk of danger, telling people if they have certain symptoms....” On the other hand, Zuckerberg said,

“Things like ‘you can cure this by drinking bleach.’ I mean, that's just in a different class.”

About one month later, on April 23, the president tested Zuckerberg's policy. During a televised White House briefing, Trump suggested it would be worth testing the merits of disinfectant and ultraviolet light as ways to combat coronavirus in humans. Most of the numerous posts about the president's remarks—the Times found 5,000+ posts, videos and comments promoting disinfectants as a virus cure on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and **YouTube** the week after Trump's comments—remain on Facebook.

The Times found 700+ posts about UV treatments had collected some 50,000 comments and likes. US regulators have said little about this recently. In Britain, though, members of Parliament blasted Facebook for its hands-off treatment of posts where world leaders share false medical information. They cited Trump's April 23 remarks.

Facebook said it will continue to remove “definitive claims about false cures...including ones related to disinfectant and ultraviolet light.” During its most recent investor call, April 29, Zuckerberg reiterated he'd pull outrageous COVID-19 claims, such as using water to fight the virus.

– by PRNEWS

EVALUATING MISINFORMATION

Many people define misinformation as a message with false content that has the underlying intent to deceive. Yet intention is incredibly difficult to measure, especially on social.

In a public health context, misinformation takes on extreme stakes as it may translate into life or death situations.

Facebook has been seriously contemplating effective, evidence-based strategies to curtail misinformation. One concern has been that if you let users know they have shared misinformation, it may lead to further spread of the false message—what in communication theory is called a boomerang effect.

An example is when US voters were notified that Russians had influenced their election choices. No one likes to feel like they have been duped. Facebook knew it needed a new, better strategy.

A FACE-SAVING STRATEGY

In light of the boomerang effect, Facebook enacted a face-

saving strategy from **Professor Stella Ting-Toomey's** "Face-Negotiation Theory." A face-saving strategy is one that protects an organization's reputation.

In other words, users will not be informed directly they have liked, shared or commented on misinformation, nor will they be corrected on the specific piece of misinformation (which some people find disturbing).

Instead, users will be sent a notification from WHO's list of common myths about the virus. They will be encouraged to share it to "help friends and family avoid false information."

Facebook claims that third-party fact checkers will monitor advertisers. It seems to be working. The platform said April 16 it has directed more than 2 billion people to resources from WHO and other health authorities, both through its COVID-19 Information Center and its pop-ups on Facebook and **Instagram**. More than 350 million people have clicked through to learn more. Facebook has also committed \$20 million in matching funds to fight COVID-19. ■

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CRISIS

A Critical Moment: Stakeholders Will Remember Brands' Pandemic Communications and Actions

[**Editor's Note:** It's a coincidence that in this moment **PRSA's** chairperson, **T. Garland Stansell**, also is a veteran health care communicator. Having interviewed him earlier in the year, when he became PRSA's chair, we sought his counsel again in mid-February, when the coronavirus was becoming more than an international story here in the US.

Now, some 10 weeks into the pandemic, we thought it was time to check in again with Stansell, CCO of **Children's of Alabama**, the pediatric health system in Birmingham. He emphasized the importance for the future of how brands are communicating and acting now. His edited responses to our questions follow.]



T. Garland Stansell
CCO, Children's of Birmingham
PRSA Chairman

PRNEWS: What are the 2 most important things brand communicators should be doing now regarding internal communications? With the fragmented, state-by-state response to coronavirus, must internal communicators tailor messages to where the audience resides?

T. Garland Stansell: First and foremost, communicators need to convey to employees that their safety and well-being are the company or organization's top priorities.

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Messaging should be consistent, honest and updated frequently, not only to reflect current situations but plans for the future. This type of straightforward communication will make internal audiences feel more secure and that they are part of a team. This will have a positive impact on the work they do on behalf of the brand, internally and externally.

Brand communicators also need to make sure that all stakeholders understand, and feel comfortable with, what the brand stands for and what it is doing to be most useful and empathic through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic.

People, as employees and as consumers, can have very long memories about what brands did and didn't do during a time of crisis. Taking social responsibility seriously is not only the right thing to do, but *essential* for the viability of future business concerns.

In terms of the fragmented environment, messages need to encompass both viewpoints: what is happening with the brand on a national or regional basis—how it has been perceived both positively and negatively—and how those perceptions and realities are affecting people's lives and choices in specific local environments.

CORONAVIRUS AND THE FUTURE

PRNEWS: In your letter last month to PRSA members, you wrote, "When the crisis finally starts to dissipate—and it will—many of the disruptions will be incorporated in some shape or form into the fabric of our lives." Can you provide two examples of what this will look like and how communicators can prepare for it?

Stansell: One of these will involve the continuation of how and where we work, which as we all know is changing dramatically. Working remotely will become much more of a viable option, giving employees more flexibility in terms of work/life management.

Concurrent with that is the need for communicators to continue what they are doing now, ensuring that remote work doesn't become just that – remote, leaving people feeling too isolated from those they work with and for.

Another example involves brands continuing to think more deeply about how they're viewed and talked about. Some things will change and become more relaxed, such as using humor to convey messages, but brand communicators and their teams will need to continue to act as vigilant strategists and sounding boards in a post-pandemic world.

Actions taken or not taken by a brand during this time will have an effect on consumer and client expectations once things become more normalized.

OVERCOMMUNICATE UNTIL WHEN?

PRNEWS: In late April, we conducted a survey of PR pros. One of the questions we asked concerned overcommunication. Our question was whether or not it's time, now 8 or so weeks into the pandemic in the US, to tap the brakes on

“ Messages need to encompass what's happening nationally and how those perceptions and realities are affecting people's lives locally. ”

overcommunication. More than 60 percent of those surveyed said no, it was not time yet.

In our March edition, you urged our readers to communicate "early and often." Now the advice of the moment continues to be overcommunicate, at least in terms of internal communications.

We'll ask the same question that we asked in the survey: At this point, is it time for internal communicators to throttle back a bit since so much has already been said and you don't want to smother people's inboxes?

Stansell: The term overcommunicate is relative, and should be looked at in terms of individual situations and environments. Each organization has priorities and communications style, and can make the best judgment about what is too much or too little. Having said that, yes, early and often is absolutely about ensuring that employees, colleagues and clients feel safe, informed, engaged.

But no, it is definitely not time to throttle back on internal communication. Instead, extending your metaphor, we should keep moving full steam ahead on communications efforts.

Situations on the national and local fronts are changing virtually every day. And as you and I have talked about previously, there is a constant need to counter the misinformation and disinformation from a variety of sources, which can become overwhelming.

In addition, messaging in the early stages of the pandemic focused on education, processes and calming initial fears.

Now, weeks later, messaging may be needed to continue to reassure, provide self-care information and to continue to inform various constituencies of changes in policies, procedures and expectations that are specific to the industry and possibly to a specific segment of the industry or organization.

MISINFORMATION DURING A HEALTH CRISIS

PRNEWS: Let's follow-up on misinformation. A lot of people are saying that the only thing spreading faster than the coronavirus is misinformation about it. We see Facebook, for example, being proactive about some coronavirus misinformation, at least more than it was previously.

Still, a lot of people are upset with Facebook and other platforms for failing to remove some posts about miracle cures for coronavirus. As a healthcare communicator, are

you surprised at the amount of misinformation circulating globally around coronavirus? What can communicators do to combat this scourge?

Stansell: I am not surprised, but disappointed. People are extremely concerned and distracted, and often do not take the time to carefully review sources and verify credentials.

Unfortunately, there is a wide range of unreliable and possibly dangerous online resources to choose from during this crisis. It is best always to review sources and to ensure their reliability. As I said previously (see PRNEWS, March 2020), in a healthcare situation the most reliable sources will be grounded in science, evidence-based research and medical expertise.

Communicators everywhere, as I said in my open letter to the profession, need to reaffirm our mission to serve as fierce guardians of and advocates for truthful and transparent communications. People are looking for direction and leadership,

and it is our job to be truthful, transparent, and trustworthy.

PRNEWS: You told us back in mid-February, when the pandemic was barely on the radar screen in the US, that whatever communicators do in a healthcare crisis, they should be consistent, speaking with one voice. With a few large exceptions, it seems most are doing this. Do you agree?

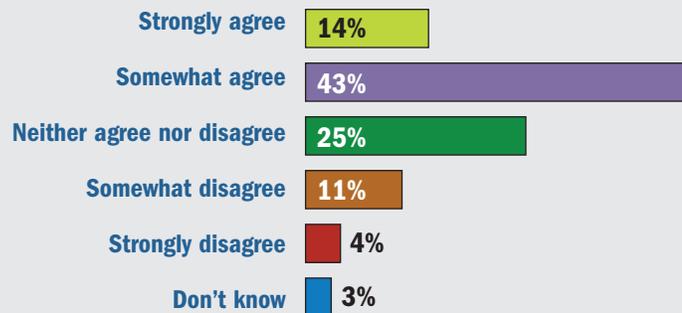
Stansell: For the most part, yes. The ability to speak with one voice actually depends on multiple components, including ensuring that, before they become public, messages are accurate, authentic, and the people delivering them are in sync with each other.

The best health resources are those grounded in science, evidence-based research and medical expertise. People looking for facts should seek out those. ■

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Continued from page 2

6 **The communications I have received from companies about COVID-19 contains useful information**



There's also "a giant hidden gender gap" in the perception of corporate America, Slater says. Sixty-five percent of women believe companies are communicating well, versus 46 percent of men. "That's a massive delta indicating corporate America has a lot of work to do."

The disparity carries across multiple measures. For example, 63 percent of women found communications from companies "useful," but just 52 percent of men did. The overall response is in chart 6: a total of 57 percent either "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that communications from companies about COVID-19 contained "useful information."

FOOD AND HEALTH CARE TOP THE LIST

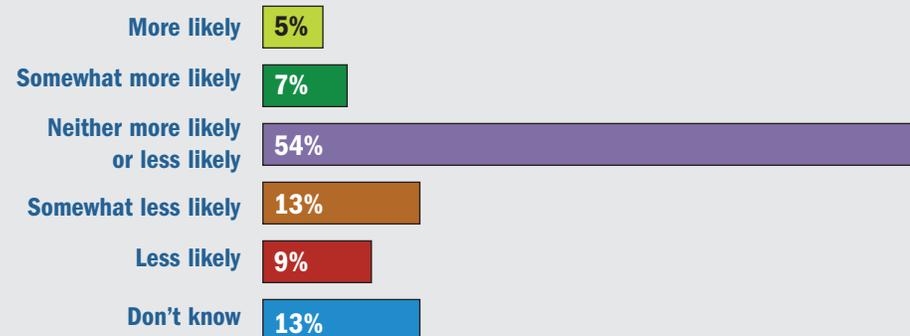
In non-coronavirus times, chart 2 likely looks different. Now, when food, health care, money and insurance are top of mind, communicators in those industries are enjoying a plethora of eyeballs.

Slater agrees Americans are seeking more information, more regularly. But it's a double-edged sword. "They also expect a higher standard of communication from companies," Slater says.

And consumers are finicky. Those receiving multiple corporate emails daily were most likely to say companies are exceeding expectations (chart 3). Yet, 64 percent of those who said they get email from multiple companies daily or multiple times daily are likely to agree that those companies' efforts are PR-driven. ■

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7 **If a company furloughed or laid off employees as result of COVID-19, would that make you more or less likely to do business with it in the future?**



MEDIA RELATIONS

Pitching and Response Rates Rise During Virus; Wednesday, Thursday Become Top Days to Pitch

The latest US jobless figures show another 3.2 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits during the week ending May 2. That brought the seven-week total to 33 million.

Reeling prior to coronavirus, newsrooms continue to shed bodies. Roughly 36,000 journalists were furloughed, lost jobs or had their pay cut during the pandemic, the **NY Times** reports. A sign of the times was a May 4 tweet from **Louisville Courier-Journal** reporter **Joe Sonka (@joesonka)**: “I won a Pulitzer Prize today, and I’m on my second week of unpaid furlough starting next Monday. Please subscribe....”

It’s not much better for PR pros. In a late-April PRNEWS survey, 70 percent said employees at their companies were furloughed, terminated or took salary cuts.

Those left in the media relations trenches are grinding, according to **Propel** data, provided exclusively to PRNEWS.

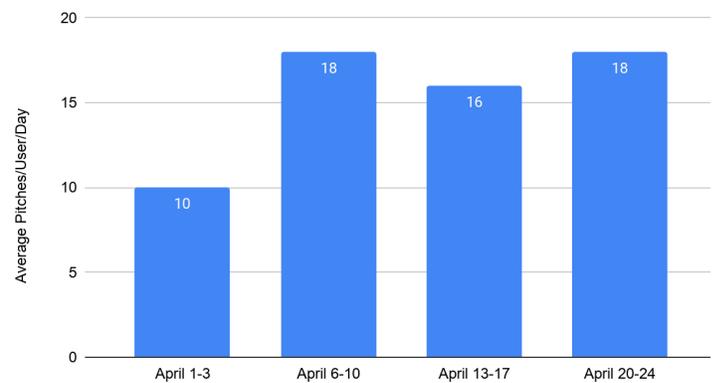
With an average of 17 daily pitches in April (top chart), the month’s average bests March (14), February (13) and January (10). Average open rate in April was 49 percent, while response rate was 9 percent.

January’s rates were 46 and 9 percent, respectively. Incredibly, pitch volume *and* journalist engagement were stronger in April, the pandemic’s worst month, than before coronavirus hit, said **Zach Cutler**, Propel’s founder.

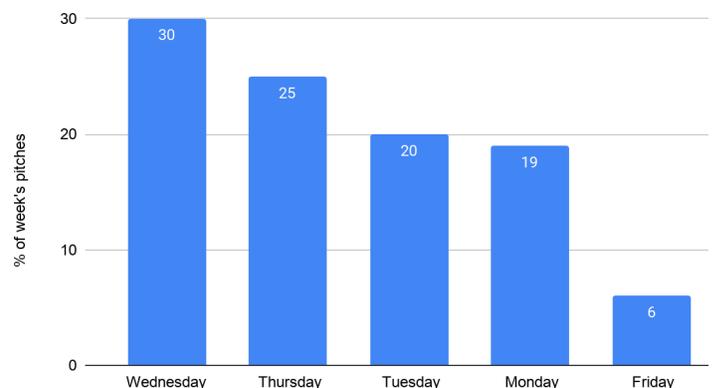
The most-crowded pitching days used to be early in the week. In April, they were toward week’s end, as you see in the bottom chart. The most popular hour to pitch in April was 11am-12pm. It was 12pm-1pm in the three months prior.

Propel analyzed thousands of pitches from more than 100 US PR professionals. ■

Average Pitches/User/Day



April - % of pitches sent each day



Source: Propel (April 2020)

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