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## CRISIS

# Mixed Bag: 88% Bullish on PR Returning to Size After Pandemic, but 70% Concerned about Future

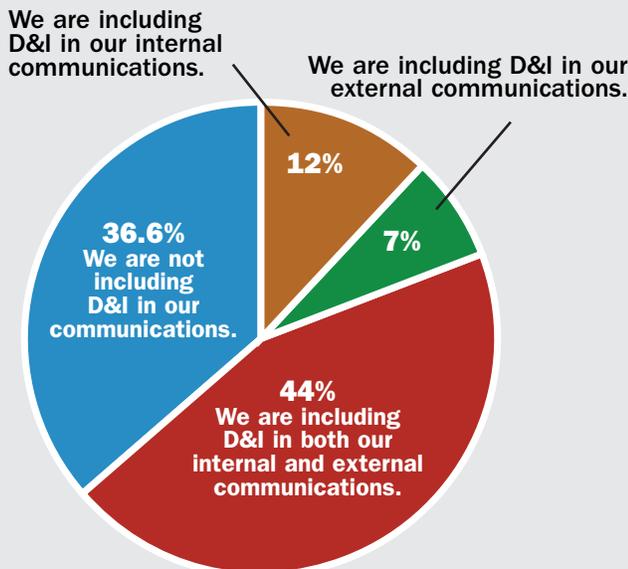
With most crises, it's relatively certain there will be an end. As we enter yet another month of the pandemic, even some medical experts are unsure when, if or how it will end. Some medical experts believe the novel coronavirus may never depart, despite a vaccine. It could become an endemic disease, joining measles, chicken pox and HIV.

Likewise, our latest PRNEWS survey of 200 PR executives found 70 percent believe "uncertainty about the future" is the most difficult part of the pandemic (see chart 5). And a troubling trend the survey exposes is a lack of communication about diversity and inclusion (see chart 1).

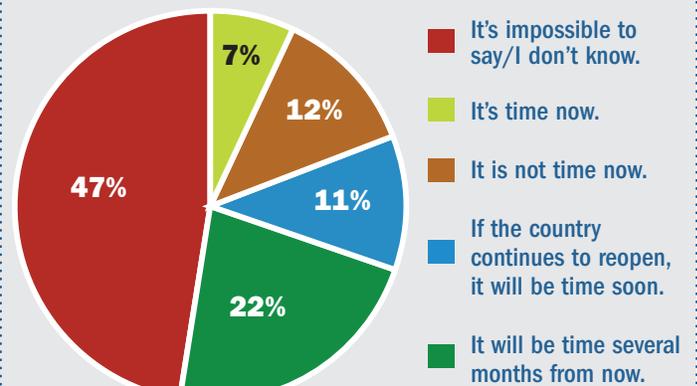
On the upside, 88 percent of respondents believe PR will exit the pandemic stronger than it was before, or roughly the same size, though not immediately (see chart 8). This is a remarkable response, considering the dire state of the economy and layoffs and furloughs within the industry. In addition, nearly 70 percent said the pandemic has made them

*Continued on page 2*

### 1 How are you including diversity and inclusion information in your internal communications?



### 2 When will be the right time to slow the cadence of internal communications?



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 SEPTEMBER 30, 2020  
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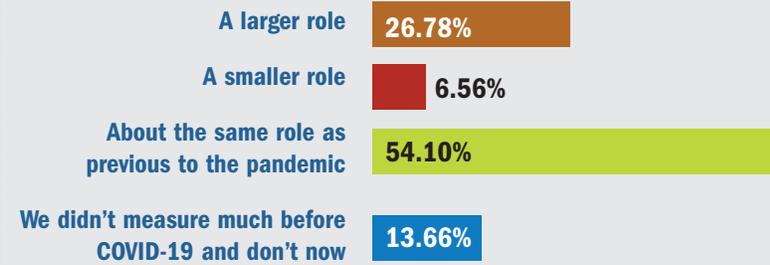
3

### How has your internal communications changed since April? (check all that apply)



4

### What role has measurement played for your team since April? (check all that apply)



and organizations we represent, she said. "We've never been closer to them...It's a unique time for PR."

In addition, PR's ability to provide strategic guidance from a wide perspective, inside a company and across industries, is making communicators valuable. "If there ever was a time to be there" for those



**Laura Ryan**  
 EVP  
 Ruder Finn

rethink crisis response "a bit" or significantly (see chart 7).

For **Laura Ryan, EVP, Ruder Finn**, the pandemic has allowed PR to shine. "It's ironic," but in a business that centers on face-to-face relationships, "we've never had more conversations" with companies



**Nigel Glennie**  
 VP, Corporate Communications  
 Hilton

you represent, "it's now."

Says **Nigel Glennie, Hilton's VP, corporate communications**, communicators can help companies seeking a stronger connection to their people and customers, and the scenario planning and stakeholder analysis skills PR

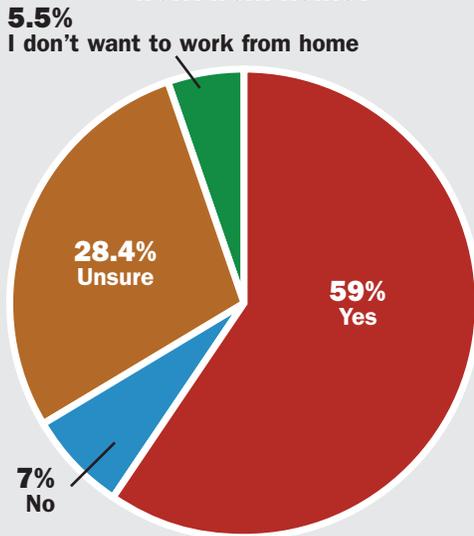
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### What has been the most difficult thing(s) to adapt to since the pandemic began? (check all that apply)



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**6** After the pandemic is over, will your employer permit you to work from home?



pros offer are in demand. “And just as important, the empathy and sensitivity we bring to the conversation has never been more needed.”

**POSITIVITY IN PR**

Much of the survey reflects the positivity of Ryan and Glennie, though some of the data is tinged with uncertainty.



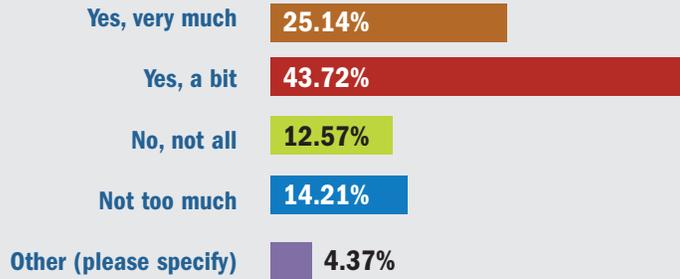
**Angela Chitkara**  
Researcher  
*World in 2020*  
Report

For example, chart 2 shows nearly half (47 percent) think “it’s impossible to say” when it will be time to slow the cadence of pandemic-related internal communication.

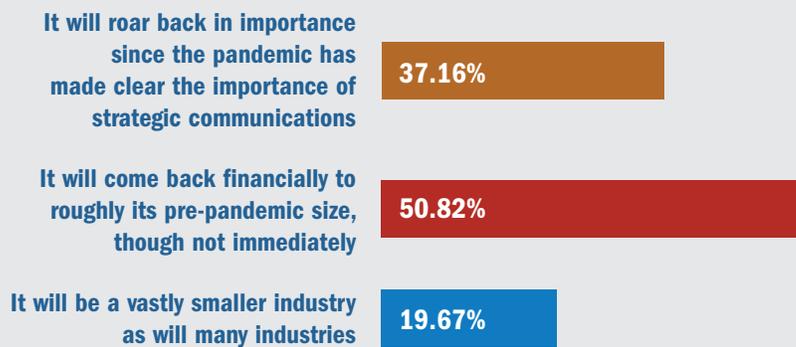
Contrast that with responses to a question about advance planning. A total of 24 percent of respondents said the virus “has not changed our advance planning” and just 10 percent said “our inability to plan ahead during this moment is a concern.”

In addition, just 11 percent believe they are “barely planning ahead at all.” 54 percent are planning 2-4 weeks ahead.

**7** Has your thinking about or procedures for crisis communications changed as a result of the pandemic?



**8** How will the PR industry rebound after the pandemic? (check all that apply)



**DIVERSITY ISSUES**

The question in chart 1, about diversity & inclusion in internal and external communication, is relevant in light of recent racially charged events in the U.S. Nearly 40 percent of respondents said D&I is not part of their communication.

The survey began May 11, days after a video surfaced of two white citizens shooting **Ahmaud Arbery**, an unarmed black man, in suburban Atlanta. Video of now-former Minneapolis police officer **Derek Chauvin** kneeling on **George Floyd**'s neck followed the survey's close on May 22.

“These numbers are telling,” says **Angela Chitkara**, a researcher on D&I issues with the “World in 2020” report. She sees two camps: those who are keeping D&I central to their

*Continued on page 16*

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# Ch. 11 Communication: Consistent, Goal-Based Messaging in a Fishbowl



COVID-19 continue to weave its way across the globe, bringing physical and economic sickness. Cutting off manufacturing and in-person shopping and browsing, the pandemic has brought an unprecedented downturn for retailers.

The retail sector is not a stranger to turmoil, enduring the continuous pivot of online shoppers and decline of foot traffic. Going to the mall is no longer an essential teenage or family activity, with new online entertainment and outlets launching virtually.

## COMMUNICATING BANKRUPTCY

Passage of the federal CARES Act in March promised financial protection for many industries and their employees. However, certain industries cannot exist on this supplemental aid for long. Many are looking at filing for bankruptcy.

Companies do not take filing for bankruptcy lightly, since it can have an irreparable impact on a business's reputation. And not all bankruptcies lead to a business closing, so the proper language and delivery is critical.

We spoke to financial communications pros **Jennifer E. Mercer**, partner, **Paladin Management Group**, and **Douglas Hesney**, EVP, corporate and financial services at **Makovsky**, to explore bankruptcy best practices. While there are numerous nuances in bankruptcy communication, best practices resemble standard PR principles, including alignment with strategic goals, consistency, clarity, authenticity and transparency. Their edited responses are below.

### PRNEWS: Where do you start when exploring a communications strategy for bankruptcy?



**Jennifer E. Mercer**  
Partner,  
Paladin  
Management  
Group

**Jennifer E. Mercer:** You must understand the legal and financial strategies. Is the goal to reduce debt? To facilitate a sale?

It is imperative that the communications plan reflects the goal. As federal law guides bankruptcy, it is critical that the communications strategies parallel the legal and financial proceedings. As such, the communications team becomes an extension of the company's internal team and works closely with its other advisors.

**Douglas Hesney:** While each bankruptcy brings unique challenges, there are critical questions to ask when beginning to craft a communications strategy.

These include: Will the bankruptcy lead to a liquidation? If not, what does the new entity look like? Who are the key stakeholders during the bankruptcy? Creditors, consumers, regulators or potential buyers



**Douglas Hesney**  
EVP, Corporate  
and Financial  
Services,  
Makovsky

may be on that list, but it's vital to determine the priority.

And how can we best align with legal to ensure that the communications supports the process smoothly?

### PRNEWS: What's included in a bankruptcy communication?

**Mercer:** Communication should stand on three pillars: communicate early and often, be open and honest, and express empathy. These are at the center of plans for all constituents, from Main Street to Wall Street, and [address] how to communicate with them, and when.

### PRNEWS: What are best practices for announcing a Chapter 11 bankruptcy?

**Mercer:** Once a Chapter 11 petition is filed, the communications cascade should begin. Try to reach as many constituents simultaneously as possible. However, given that a legal proceeding is driving the process, communicators must be flexible and prepare accordingly.

When a company is operating in Chapter 11, it's in a fishbowl. Everything is public; so, having a proactive media strategy is important to control the narrative. Size of a company and whether it is public, private or high-profile will determine how proactive to be [with media relations].

### PRNEWS: What are the most important distribution channels for bankruptcy communication?

**Hesney:** It depends entirely on the nature of the bankruptcy. Bankruptcy can put creditors at odds with corporate employees and consumers, and often with each other.

As communications consultants, our role is to align with leadership and counsel to support the bankruptcy's goals. In today's fragmented communications environment, it's likely we will need to use traditional media, direct communications (e.g. letters, emails, etc), and less frequently, social media.

Our role is to ensure that the company is communicating clearly and consistently to stakeholders—and that it is using mediums and outlets that are most impactful to ensure the desired level of visibility.

Ultimately, there is no one *right* way to communicate through a bankruptcy. An effective communications strategy must be nimble, stakeholder-focused and be clear and consistent in its message.

**Mercer:** If constituents can access information [from a platform], use it. Use social media to impart information, not engage in questions or comments that are not tied to communications goals. [This includes] conference calls, and in our current crisis, **Zoom** and other video conferencing platforms.

## Plus and Minus: J. Crew's Bankruptcy Filings

While the retail industry has been declining for months, a lack of foot traffic into brick-and-mortar establishments in the wake of the pandemic gave many companies a gut punch.

On May 4, **J.Crew** became the first national retail brand to file for Chapter 11 protection during the pandemic's economic downturn.

(Though J. Crew was first, J.C. Penney and Neiman Marcus quickly followed with bankruptcy filings. Car rental company Hertz and restaurant chain Le Pain Quotidien are among other companies joining the ranks. More are expected to follow.)

We asked our bankruptcy communications experts what J.Crew did right in announcing the filing and what could have gone better.

### The Plus Side

"J.Crew communicated well and has historically addressed challenging financial news with transpar-

ency. Because it is part of the severely depressed retail market and was the first major retailer to file during the pandemic, it continues to be caught up in numerous media cycles," said Jennifer E. Mercer, partner, Paladin Management Group.

### And the Negative

"J.Crew failed to directly communicate with consumers, letting the story be told primarily through the media and third-party social activity," said Douglas Hesney, EVP corporate and financial services, Makovsky. "Numerous viral and speculative social media posts implied that J.Crew was going away for good; the significant nuance that J.Crew was going through Chapter 11 (which allows for restructuring and breathing room) rather than Chapter 7 (completely out of business) was not acknowledged, allowing for further damaging speculation."

Eventually it will be good to see a wider use of the town hall, since nothing really beats a face-to-face meeting.

### PRNEWS: After the initial release, what steps come next to protect brand reputation?

**Mercer:** Companies are filing during the stay-at-home mandates, and are not open to operate, making the *open for business* message impossible. But, if you are a business that is partially open or will open soon, plan marketing around those messages and continue to remain part of the discussion.

**Hesney:** Communication should not cease with the initial release. As proceedings continue, brands should continue to communicate with stakeholders, including sharing relevant updates. If the company plans to emerge from Chapter 11, communicate positive news using forward-thinking messages to position it for growth.

### PRNEWS: Are there other best practices practitioners should consider?

**Mercer:** There's a need for PR specialists not generalists for bankruptcy communications. Expertise is needed in part to understand and communicate the legal process in layman's terms.

If communication must be redone, it can be costly. The ideal is to invest in communications on the front end to control the narrative to avoid panic and speculation.

**Hesney:** The most important thing is communicating to your core audiences—keeping those channels open and active is critical to establish transparency and a sense of continuity, both critical elements of bankruptcy communications. ■

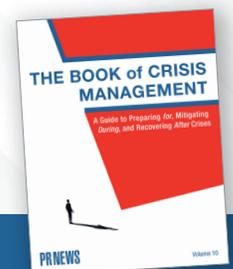
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# Measurement is More Important as Layoffs Hit Brands, Burrelles' First Female Chief Says

**[Editor's Note:** As part of our coronavirus interview series, we spoke with **Cathy Del Colle**, who recently was named president of **Burrelles**, the data analytics firm founded in 1888. Del Colle is the company's first female president. A three-decade veteran of Burrelles on the sales side, Del Colle is admired inside and outside the company.

In a wide-ranging interview, we asked her about how measurement is reacting to the pandemic, the current and future demands on analytics vendors, and what 'data beyond automation' means. Her edited responses are below.]

## **PRNEWS: What do you see changing in communications measurement as a result of the pandemic?**



**Cathy Del Colle**  
President,  
Burrelles

**Cathy Del Colle:** Executives are looking to cut operating costs wherever they can. Layoffs are a reality. While you might think budgets for vendors are being cut, I've found many clients are leaning on us more than usual after layoffs. Client service has to be a top priority for providers.

In terms of communications measurement and how it's being used, as a result of the pandemic, ROI is critical.

As I mentioned, layoffs always are a possibility, so teams need to make sure they are justifying their worth. Use the tools you have! If you aren't using analytics, get to know your numbers and make sure you're promoting your team's worth and how PR is an essential part of the company.

Understand how analytics help the C-suite make smart business decisions. If you're using a communications measurement platform, employ it to the fullest and be comfortable communicating how data informs business decisions.

## **PRNEWS: What can the PR industry do to improve the state of communications measurement?**

**Del Colle:** Media intelligence and monitoring tools can help PR pros explain the value of communications to organizational leaders. The industry needs to ensure that communications measurement is understood and valued.

This is important so that we can continue to invest in advancing and elevating technology, driving ROI for communication teams and their companies.

## **PRNEWS: What services are clients asking you to provide?**

**Del Colle:** Clients continue to ask for quality products with continued innovation. That will never change. What will change is the media they need analyzed. We recently expanded our services to monitor blogs, podcasts and logo

“**Clients are leaning on us more than usual after layoffs. Service has to be a top priority for vendors.**”

recognition. In addition, we provide print monitoring because it still matters to clients.

## **PRNEWS: Are acquisitions part of your strategy for continuing to provide services in emerging areas?**

**Del Colle:** We've brought on industry partners that can monitor appearances of logos, because image brand presence is an advancing element of how communications professionals compute the efficacy of their outreach effort.

We've also partnered with multiple social media monitoring companies, like **Talkwalker** and **Awario**, which enable scalability for clients to curate their budgets.

## **PRNEWS: Burrelles rebranded recently with a tagline of 'data beyond automation.' What does that mean?**

**Del Colle:** Data is growing and so is the business of data. There is a need for simple, immediate and personalized connections to your media data. But when it comes to this key element of our brand, it speaks to the most important part of our mission: human curation of content.

We believe the power of human insight will always be essential to the application of data. This is because data deals with human consumption of human-created media.

Our new tagline reflects a digital approach to cultivating interaction between people and data, and how they work to make business better, while staying true to our core value of providing human insight into our content curation.

## **PRNEWS: A constant concern in PR is recruiting and retention. What did you admire about the presidents and the firm that kept you at Burrelles for more than three decades?**

**Del Colle:** I've admired the way our leadership has secured a family environment. That's a good way to keep, build and grow a team. We feel a communal responsibility to each other and our clients. I think that's why we have so many people—like myself—who have spent many decades building here. ■

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# Virus Communication at U of Oregon: Consistent with Reasonable Repetition



**[Editor's Note:** This article is a collaboration between PRNEWS and the **Institute for PR**. **Juan-Carlos Molleda**, Edwin L. Artzt dean and professor at the **University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication**, relates lessons he's learned during the pandemic.]

In February, the **University of Oregon** activated an emergency preparedness plan to address the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite having a plan, our president noted: "We're going to come out of this situation different than when we went in, and we're going to make mistakes."

I surely have, but I am working hard to make things right for my school community, which needs timely and accurate information, encouragement and hope. The aim is to reduce the high levels of anxiety and uncertainty felt by all. Our responses follow a central guiding principle: to prioritize the safety, health and well-being of our student body.

“Everyone is facing fears, questions and concerns that deserve nuanced responses and collective action.”

## THE NEED TO OVER-COMMUNICATE

Initially, I felt strict communication policies would constrain me. Messages from the university president, provost and chief resilience officer were the only stream of information faculty, staff and students received at the outset. However, colleagues made it clear they wanted to hear from me, the dean, as well.

I initiated conversations with my executive team, faculty and staff about school-specific information, core messaging from university officials, and genuine expressions of concern and team spirit. Messages were crafted from daily consultations with university administrators and the campus Incident Management Team (IMT).

These conversations have resulted in strategies and techniques to keep the community closely informed, encouraging behaviors to protect and support us all. This was critical in serving the university's priority to preserve academic continuity for the benefit of students, and ultimately, the full university community.

## BALANCING URGENCY AND CALM

These are some of the lessons I have earned:

- ▶ The pandemic requires us to strike a balance between a sense of urgency and a call to remain calm. The lev-

els of anxiety and uncertainty are high; clear policies, processes and procedures, combined with necessary agility and flexibility to address circumstances we cannot predict, will reflect a sense of control and intentionality.

- ▶ Some updates are relevant to all members of the school community, but often specific groups expect guidance and insight that pertain directly to them. Finding efficiencies when email boxes already are flooded strengthens voices of our leaders as trusted sources of critical information.
- ▶ We need to be as coordinated as possible ahead of major announcements. At the university, the provost communicates general messaging to the deans, and we tailor the announcements to our units.
- ▶ Consistency and repetition (within reason) are important as we try to capture the attention of our internal audiences and convey information clearly. This is critical especially when messages internal audiences are receiving externally are conflicting.
- ▶ Everyone is facing fears, questions and concerns that deserve a nuanced response and collective action.
- ▶ Multiple brains are better than one. Empowering those with specialized knowledge and responsibilities—such as Human Resources, Facilities, Finance and Student Services—is critical to an informed and functional community.
- ▶ This moment demands empathetic and ethical communication. Faculty, staff, students and students' families need reassurance of, and solidarity with, their individual and collective circumstances. People are juggling family and work lives, with greater pressures at home. Despite the stress of this situation, everyone is working hard, sharing resources and tips to teach remotely, something many of our faculty had long resisted and found intimidating. I encourage this synergy and regularly recognize the inspired work they are doing to adjust to the rapidly changing academic landscape.

It's uncertain when the pandemic will conclude. The way we live, work and communicate will be different when it passes. How we navigate it may result in unanticipated silver linings that guide us to innovative futures. ■

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# Ensuring Authenticity in Your D&I Messaging During Pride Month

**[Editor's Note:** In honor of Pride Month, we will be highlighting initiatives that brands are undertaking. For our first spotlight, we spoke with **Kim Matsoukas**, senior manager, corporate social responsibility & sustainability, at **Vans**, the shoe and apparel company. Visit [prnewsonline.com](http://prnewsonline.com) for more featured stories throughout the month.]

## PRNEWS: How does Vans embrace diversity and inclusion initiatives internally and externally?



**Kim Matsoukas**,  
Senior Manager,  
CSR &  
Sustainability,  
Vans

**Kim Matsoukas:** As a global brand that enables creative self-expression, we are inclusive by nature. Vans welcome you into our family no matter where you're from, who you are or what you believe in.

Internally, our Employee Resource Groups have been driving many efforts, including celebrations of cultural moments like Black History Month and Pride, as well as partnering with community and non-profit organizations that support marginalized communities.

Externally, we are focused on ensuring that our messages remain authentic and continue to represent the inclusive nature of our brand.

## PRNEWS: How is this carried through in your communication strategy?

**Matsoukas:** Our goal always is for our communications to reflect our brand in an authentic way. Because our brand is inclusive by nature, we strive to communicate inclusivity when speaking to consumers.

## PRNEWS: Has COVID-19 changed your D&I communications or initiatives?

**Matsoukas:** COVID-19 has not impacted our commitment to

our D&I initiatives. We think it's [always] important to celebrate cultural moments.

But to uphold the health of our employees and consumers, we've had to pivot how we celebrate. Whether that means postponing due to stay-at-home orders or switching to virtual events.

## PRNEWS: What is the brand doing for Pride this year?

**Matsoukas:** For Pride we are releasing five special episodes of [skateboarder] **Jeff Grosso's** "Love Letters to Skateboarding," which are dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community. These will launch June 4 via Vans' **YouTube** channel, with new episodes released each Thursday throughout Pride month.

We're also giving back to the community by donating \$50,000 to **GSA Network**, a next-generation LGBTQ+ organization that unites trans and queer youth for racial and gender justice. Internally, we are hosting a virtual panel conversation with several guest panelists and partnering with our parent company, **VF Corp.**, to host breakout groups to discuss what we can all do to uplift and support the LGBTQ+ community beyond the month of June.

## PRNEWS: How have you had to pivot your plans for Pride in light of COVID-19?

**Matsoukas:** With many of our stores still closed due to COVID-19 and the fact that many Pride celebrations were canceled or postponed across cities, we've had to put our retail activations on hold.

That said, when it is safe to do so, we are striving to launch these in conjunction with the postponed Pride celebrations. As mentioned above, our employee education and celebration events have pivoted to virtual gatherings, but we remain committed to uplifting the LGBTQ+ community even if we can't be together in person. ■

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# How to Position Companies for Re-Entry and Communication in the Post-COVID-19 World

**[Editor's Note:** In the wake of the pandemic, some PR pros are emphasizing communication and strategy in the post-COVID-19 world. Some, like **M Group Strategic Communications**, are launching practice units in this area. As part of our coronavirus interview series, we spoke with M Group CEO **Jay Morakis** about what communicators should be doing to now to reshape communications and strategy now and for the post-pandemic world. His edited responses are below.]

**PRNEWS: How do you respond to the argument that it is too early to re-work communications for the new landscape?**



**Jay Morakis**  
CEO,  
*M Group Strategic Communications*

**Jay Morakis:** Some of them may be right. Our approach is not about overhauling entire strategies. It's about managing communications in the current version of the new landscape, positioning businesses to take leadership positions in the economy to come, and building communications strategies to leverage opportunities in the new marketplace.

With respect to your question, though, it depends on the business and the industry. Extensively reworking a plan for one scenario when the situation is fluid could be a mistake.

Preparedness planning is critical. Companies laying out strategic plans should be mocking up multiple communications strategies. Those who will thrive in the current and post-pandemic world will be nimble and able to pivot.

While for some companies, now may not be the time to extensively rework plans, we believe that for most, it is time to begin corporate positioning and thought leadership. Thought leadership can drive entire industries forward and have a direct correlation to business success.

**PRNEWS: What should a communicator who's a PR army of one do to prepare for the new landscape?**

**Morakis:** First, prepare a tactically focused, day-to-day media relations program. The pandemic has impacted what were already sparse newsrooms, with many outlets reducing their core editorial staff and relying on a freelancer network.

In addition, with many editors/reporters now working remotely, simply calling a news desk will not guide practitioners to the right place. During these times, sole practitioners do not have the bandwidth to properly build targeted lists. Instead, take advantage of tools such as **ANewsTip.com**, **Help A Reporter Out (HARO)**, **ProfNet**, **Qwoted**, etc.

**PRNEWS: And second?**

**Morakis:** The second item involves broaching business conversations with executives. Having a firm grasp on operation-

al strategies and how they may be evolving will be critical to developing communications for emergence.

Speak to management and understand changes in the approach to sales and marketing, distribution networks and supply chain management. What caused these changes? Was it simply finding operational efficiencies, or was it more to do with changes in audience behavior?

Understanding the business to the core will set the foundation for strategic planning and forward-moving recommendations.

**PRNEWS: What questions should communicators ask to begin audience re-examination and rethinking?**

**Morakis:** Changes in stakeholder values and priorities will continue to evolve over the next few years. Communicators need to ask:

- ▶ Have our key stakeholders shifted their priorities? If so, what is their new list in order of importance?
- ▶ How do our audiences feel about globalization? What is their view of it in a post-pandemic world?
- ▶ Do our audiences understand our mission, vision and values? Do we as managers?
- ▶ Has our workforce fundamentally changed its outlook, given prolonged teleworking?
- ▶ As a business, are we involved enough in social and political issues that can have an impact our business?

Messaging preceding the pandemic may no longer apply or resonate with key stakeholders. Even worse, they may now sound tone-deaf or hollow, given changes in priorities and behaviors. Before creating new messaging, we must ask:

- ▶ How do our offerings match audiences' new priorities and behaviors?
- ▶ Is our vision aligned with our view on the new landscape?
- ▶ What value does our organization bring to our audiences in this new landscape?

The final element to reconsider is communication channels. The pandemic has not necessarily altered the way audiences consume news, but it has made certain demographics more open to...digital media. As stakeholder behaviors change, communicators need to find new channels to deliver messages. Questions to consider include:

- ▶ How do I connect with my audience now that in-person events are on hold?
- ▶ What new ways are audiences using established channels to communicate?
- ▶ What channels can we to sell to our audiences?

*Continued on page 12*

# Marilyn Laurie: How She Emerged from Humble Roots to a Woman in Charge

**[Editor's Note: Marilyn Laurie (1939-2013)** was a PR pro who worked on the first Earth Day in New York City. This helped her land a position as an environmentalist at **AT&T**. She switched to PR, moved up the ranks, eventually becoming the company's first woman CCO. She also was the first female to join AT&T's executive committee. **Shelley Spector**, founder of **Museum of PR**, interviewed **Dick Martin**, who succeeded Marilyn at AT&T. He is the author of "Marilyn: A Woman in Charge" (**PR Museum Press**, August 2020.)]



**Shelley Spector: What lessons can we glean about women and leadership from Marilyn Laurie?**



**Dick Martin:** All I can do is repeat some of the lessons Marilyn suggested.

The first is triple-barreled and came to her in her final days, as a summation of her path to the top of her field: 'Have the ambition to influence the future, the courage to stand up for your ideas, and the stamina to make yourself heard.'

Perhaps knowing many people don't think of [these] as feminine characteristics, she suggested, 'maintain defiant belief in new possibilities.' In other words, don't lean in for the sake of getting promoted. Lean in for the sake of getting something meaningful done.

**Spector: Marilyn dealt with more than a few crises at AT&T. Which one do you feel best exemplified her ability to handle crises well?**

**Martin:** In the 1990s, AT&T handled about 80 percent of long distance calls in the US. The company had been in the business for more than a century, and the quality of its service was generally considered excellent. In fact, if someone got a wrong number, they assumed they had mis-dialed and not that AT&T was at fault.

Then on Jan. 15, 1990, the AT&T network stopped working. It just died, and it didn't come back to life for 9 hours. How Marilyn handled that crisis was typical. She left hour-by-hour management [of the crisis] to her staff because she had empowered her team to update employees and the media in real time. That gave her the space to look at the situation from a much broader perspective.

To her, the network outage didn't mean people couldn't make phone calls; it meant they had lost something they thought they could count on. "It was a betrayal," she said. "And an apology just won't cut it." That's why when the problem was resolved, she persuaded the CEO to brief the media rather than assign it to an engineering VP who understood

the nuts and bolts better.

She also pressed for the company to give something back to make its apologies real. From then on, 'give something back' joined 'tell the truth, tell it fast, take responsibility, and fix the problem quickly' as her rules for crisis management.

**Spector: What lessons can young PR pros learn from Marilyn's climb up the ranks during the 1970s?**

**Martin:** One of the secrets to Marilyn's success was her ability to come at problems from the perspective of those affected. It was a way of thinking that does not come naturally to most businesspeople, whose success depends on being laser-focused on a small number of goals. In many ways, she provided the company peripheral vision.

Marilyn saw it as her role to be a voice in the boardroom for the company's employees, customers and the communities in which it operated. She believed that was the value she could bring to the decision-making table, and it was the foundation of how she explained the purpose of PR: 'to bring the policies and practices of an institution into harmony with the needs and expectations of the public.' Sometimes that means persuading the public the institution is doing the right thing. At times, it means persuading the institution to change its behavior.

Marilyn believed that purpose is meaningful enough to warrant the exercise of your full capabilities. And as she said, always 'Choose meaning over busy-ness.'

**Spector: You've describe Marilyn's initial struggles at getting AT&T's all-male leadership to accept her. How did she win the C-suite's confidence and respect?**

**Martin:** She not only had to disabuse them of gender stereotyping, but she also had to change their perceptions of her job. At best, some thought of PR as free advertising. At worst, some considered it the *Department of Being Nice*.

Marilyn made it her business to *know* the business. Reading the trades and business papers was not enough. "Listen deeply to all kinds of audiences—through all kinds of media—so you bring a convincing, uniquely outside perspective to the table," she said. "A broad understanding of public opinion and trends will bring authority to your advice."

Of course, providing that advice required one more thing: courage. As she said, "You can't be afraid. We have to constantly be trying to affect policy, trying to deal with actions that come up, trying to be there before decisions are final—and sometimes change decisions even after they are final. The capacity to relate to operational leaders without fear, as



*Continued on page 15*

# A Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls and Reaping Benefits of Influencers During COVID-19



Many marketers are hesitant to engage influencers during the pandemic owing to a fear of seeming out of touch with the virus's grim reality.

Indeed, marketers could face significant PR backlash for running influencer campaigns that promote luxury items to consumers who need basic necessities. In addition, campaigns could subject marketers to legal liability if influencers go off-script and make unsubstantiated claims regarding health benefits of products to treat the novel coronavirus.

Despite these risks, influencer marketing *can* reap significant benefits during COVID-19. Influencers are uniquely poised to capture consumer attention, particularly as social media becomes many consumers' primary communications outlet, replacing friends, co-workers and even family.

Faced with a largely homebound fan-base, marketers can harness the power of influencers to connect with consumers in a genuine and authentic way, provided campaigns are structured appropriately.

Below is a list for structuring influencer marketing campaigns during COVID-19.

## BUILD GOODWILL

While marketers hire influencers to tout the benefits of their products, this is not the messaging most consumers want to hear now. Instead, they want to hear about positive steps that brands are taking to help those in need during these tumultuous times.

Influencer campaigns should shift their messaging from product benefits to an organization's charitable endeavors, such as a recent donation to a COVID-19 non-profit organization, or efforts to support small businesses.

Influencers should encourage their followers to promote the same worthy causes, thereby promoting positive messaging that ultimately builds consumer goodwill.

## PROVIDE HELP

Consumers are becoming increasingly bored and isolated as they run out of stay-at-home activities. Indeed, there are only so many times a person can watch *Tiger King*. Influencers could provide activities that fill up the monotony of consumers' days.

Influencers should offer projects and other at-home activities that do not require substantial purchases. Food influencers can promote recipes that are easy to make with ingredients that most people likely have on hand, while travel influencers can take followers on a virtual tour of some of their favorite places. Mommy bloggers can share helpful homeschooling tips.

## TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TECHNOLOGY

Consumers typically want to go to the same restaurants, bars and hotels as the influencers that they follow on social media. For many, frequenting restaurants, bars or hotels at this time is not possible.

Instead, influencers can encourage their followers to meet on **Zoom** and similar platforms, where influencers could eat, drink or discuss a new product.

Influencers can also use video-conferencing software to connect consumers with unique first-to-respond-type experiences. For example, they can offer virtual cooking classes with themselves or other celebrity partners. Influencer live streams or virtual *meet and greets* also may go over well with fans who are feeling increasingly isolated as a result of COVID-19. See, for example, **Lin-Manuel Miranda's** Zoom performance of "Hamilton" to surprise a 9-year-old fan.

## BE AUTHENTIC

People follow influencers with whom they have a connection. Influencers need to be themselves in order to make that connection. During these challenging times, brands should allow – and even encourage – influencers to post more 'authentic' content that does not specifically plug the marketer but is more personal.

One such example might be talking about a relative or friend who is sick. However, influencers should generally avoid posting about receiving a test for COVID-19, due to the perception that celebrities are getting tested more easily than average people.

## DON'T NEGLECT HUMOR

The goal is to strike the right balance between grasping the gravity of the situation and consumers' need to find levity in the everyday. Marketers should brainstorm ways for influencers to be humorous without downplaying the situation or making inappropriate jokes that could backfire (e.g., the K-pop star's April Fools **Instagram** post falsely claiming that he had COVID-19).

## STRUCTURE PROMOTIONS APPROPRIATELY

Sweepstakes and promotions are a powerful tool for marketers to connect with customers, particularly now. Influencers can be a marketer's best mouthpiece for generating interest in promotions, provided those efforts are structured appropriately to respond to the pandemic.

For example, instead of awarding trips, influencers could award gift cards for restaurants and retailers that the economic situation has hit hard. In addition, influencers could

*Continued on page 12*

promote contests that award grocery prizes to consumers who are in most need of them. An influencer could help marketers select and notify winners, thereby leading to greater one-on-one communications between influencers and the marketer's customer-base.

### GRANT APPROVALS JUDICIOUSLY

Like all marketing, it is critical that influencer campaigns avoid appearing tone-deaf. An example is upbeat posts in the days following the **George Floyd** killing.

It is also imperative that influencers not make unsupportable claims, especially as they relate to health and wellness.

Marketers need to review and approve influencer content before it is posted to ensure that it does not result in a PR backlash. For example, if an influencer video showcases physical contact, improper handling of masks or lack of social distancing.

Marketers should review content for setting and tone as well. As an example, consumers may not connect with influencers who complain about isolation from their mansion. Marketers also need to ensure influencers are not overpromising on products' benefits. Such claims could lead to regulatory action, particularly if influencers are making unproven claims about treating COVID-19.

### DON'T FORGET CLEARANCE ISSUES

If influencers are self-producing content at home, marketers should give them clear guidelines with respect to intellectual property rights, such as third-party music, videos, photos and GIFs. For example, if an influencer posts about self-isolating at home with her movies and books, and shows actual movie footage, actors and book covers in her content, the post could expose the marketer to legal liability. A good rule of

thumb, influencers should avoid mentions of **Disney**, "Star Wars," the **Kardashians** or the Super Bowl—unless you have explicit permission.

### UPDATE INFLUENCER CONTRACTS

World events are changing so quickly that no one knows what the next day will hold. Accordingly, marketers need to have maximum flexibility administering and possibly postponing or terminating influencer campaigns. Marketers should update influencer contracts to ensure they have the ability to postpone and terminate campaigns at any stage – even if they must pay the influencer for services performed to date.

Influencer contracts should include alternate campaign dates in case efforts cannot launch on time. Consider: (i) reducing travel requirements or including a contingency clause where the influencer can render services from home; and (ii) adding pandemic situations or similar public health crises to *force majeure* clauses (but building in recourse if talent is not prevented from attending a future shoot later in the year but is simply nervous about doing so).

### ENSURE COMPLIANCE WITH FTC

In today's chaos, remember the **FTC** continues to focus on deceptive influencer marketing practices—perhaps even more so given the proliferation of online influencer campaigns. Remember to ensure influencers understand their obligations under the FTC's Endorsement Guides, including disclosures (e.g., #ad, #sponsored). Monitor and terminate influencers who fail to comply. As noted, marketers are responsible for influencers' unsubstantiated claims. ■

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### PRNEWS: How are businesses planning for what you call the new landscape?

**Morakis:** Stakeholders are shifting priorities and companies need to change as a result.

This will have a direct impact on business operations, and everything from manufacturing to sales and marketing to back office and supply chain will need to be managed through different lenses.

There will be questions as to which behavioral changes will become permanent...Will corporations reduce their physical footprints in favor of a remote workforce? Will consumers permanently change their attitudes on discretionary spending and/or significantly decrease international travel?

### PRNEWS: Why did you launch M G Emergence, your post-pandemic unit, now? Why not wait until the economy begins to recover?

**Morakis:** With the rapidly changing new landscape we find ourselves in, we believe that now is absolutely the right time to engage...so that businesses can manage the present and position themselves for the future.

Our strategy development consists of a global team mining for and providing market intelligence, issue identification, trend analysis, perception audits and more, in real-time. This same team provides strategic counsel, strategy development and unparalleled execution on programming initiatives.

With the rapidly changing new landscape we find ourselves in, we believe that now is absolutely the right time to [launch] so that businesses can manage the present and position for the future.

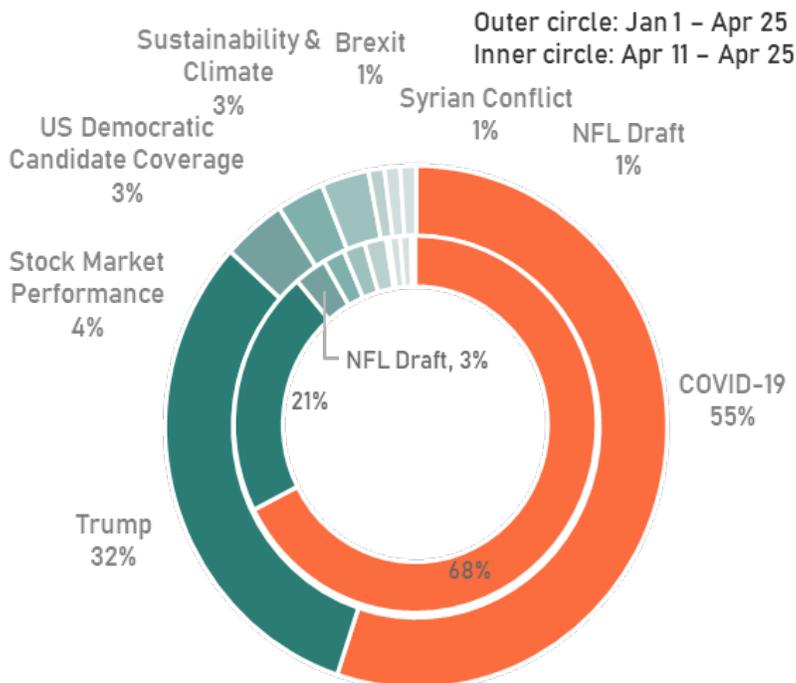
**CONTACT:** [mcarey@mgroupsc.com](mailto:mcarey@mgroupsc.com).

# Applying Communications Research to Solve PR Challenges



## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Climate change coverage increased slightly over the past week



In the realm of communications research, data scientists go beyond data to answer questions, provide guidance and enable better communications and business decision-making.

In better times, PR challenges may involve product introductions, earning announcements, executive interviews and the like. In today's COVID-19 environment, though, communicators confront a universal challenge, across borders, throughout industry sectors and regardless of social strata. Just as daunting, the pandemic may continue to challenge communication convention.

## TRACKING THE PANDEMIC

Communication research helps answer the questions most PR pros are asking: What is appropriate to communicate? When is the right time? What do I do now?

Communication researchers tracking the pandemic make their studies available directly and indirectly through PR associations and publications. For exam-

*Continued on page 14*

Illustration 1: The relative amount of time and space devoted to COVID-19, President Trump and other topics.

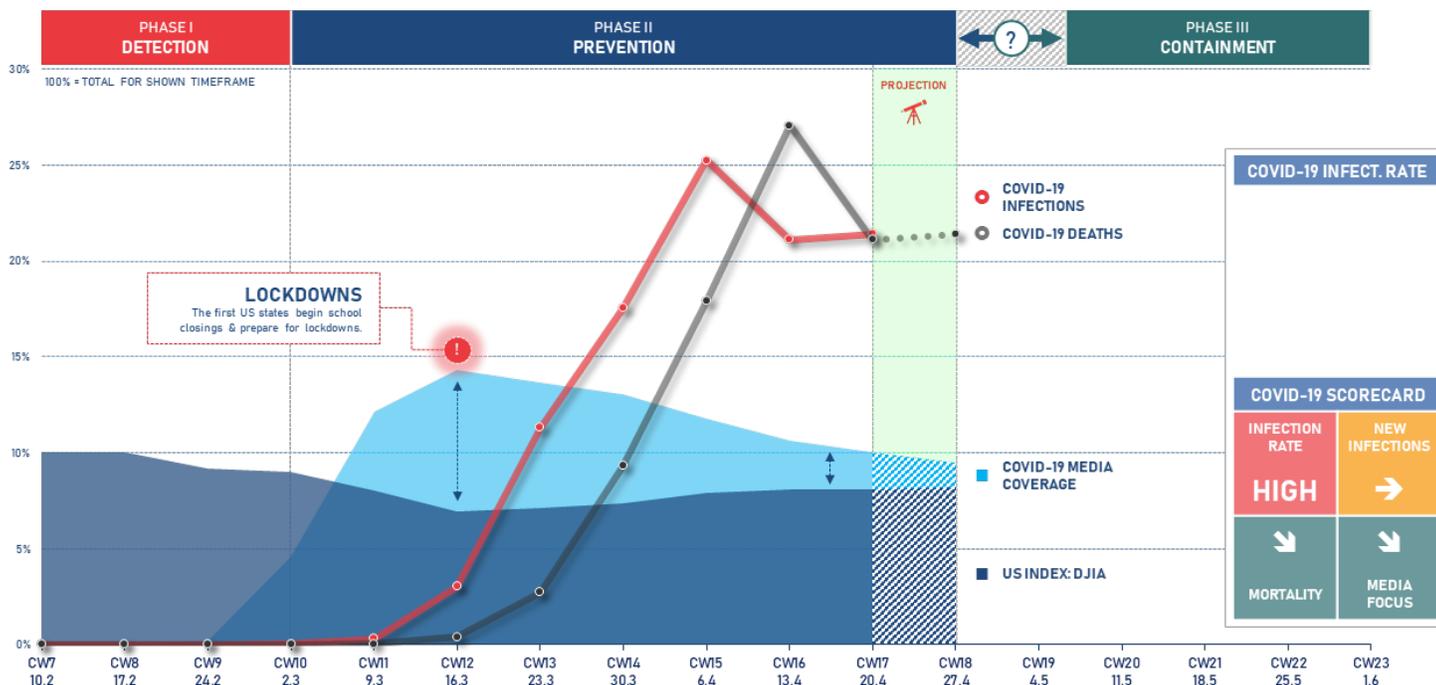


Illustration 2: While stories devoted to COVID-19 have declined along with the new infection rate, the death rate is rising. The combination makes proactive media relations a delicate endeavor. The US ranks second only to Spain for rate of infection.

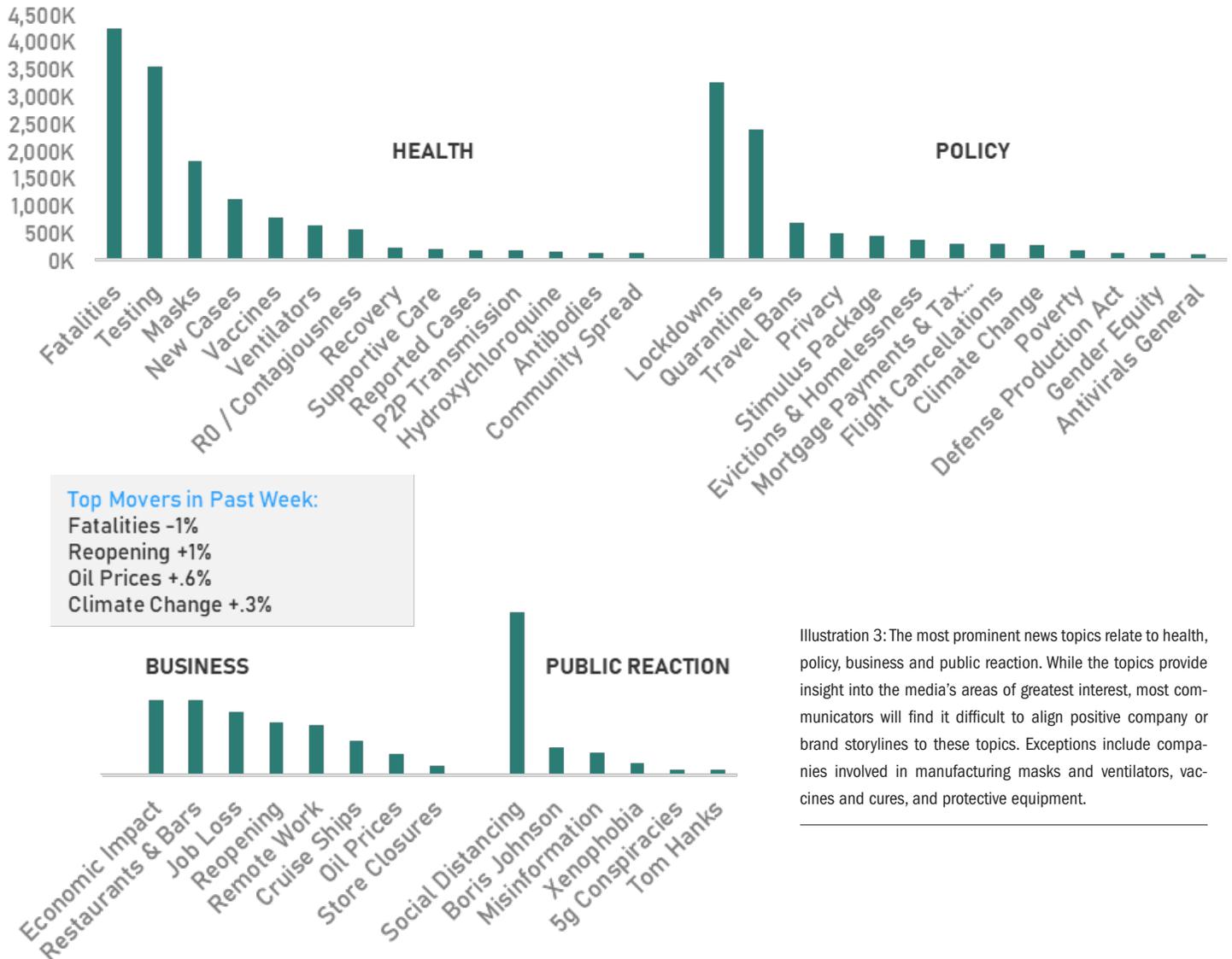


Illustration 3: The most prominent news topics relate to health, policy, business and public reaction. While the topics provide insight into the media's areas of greatest interest, most communicators will find it difficult to align positive company or brand storylines to these topics. Exceptions include companies involved in manufacturing masks and ventilators, vaccines and cures, and protective equipment.

ple, **Page** offers a variety of research resources, including the **Harris Poll** and **FleishmanHillard** insights. **Institute for Public Relations** updates a micro-site featuring dozens of COVID-19-related research studies. And they're free.

At its best, COVID-19 communications research goes beyond retelling what happened to provide insight and guidance on why it's happening and what should be done about it.

### MAPPING TRENDS TO PUBLIC OPINION

In "Covid 19: A Guide to Professional Communicators," **Karinne Smolenyak** and **Bernd Hitzemann** apply a content analysis of pandemic-related news and social media in the US, UK, France, Spain, Italy, Germany and China to map trends that reflect and shape public opinion. (Full disclosure: I assisted the authors in this study.)

In the US, for example, we see one of PR's greatest challenges in the coronavirus environment. The concentric circles in Illustration 1 show that 92 percent of all news pages are

devoted to the pandemic and the president. The likelihood of placing other types of earned media stories is low.

The research indicates that the best opportunities reside with credible stories related to serving communities, supporting healthcare workers and helping employees. However, the vast majority of PR topics are unlikely to break through the media's focus on the pandemic. As shown in illustration 3, the most common news themes relate directly to the pandemic, making it difficult to align your brand, especially to such topics as fatalities, evictions and xenophobia.

### UNCOVERING OPPORTUNITY

The study analyzes pandemic media trends and juxtaposes infection and mortality rates to uncover opportunity. Evidence suggests that when countries flatten the curve, guidelines for news become less stringent. By mapping infection rates and news, communicators can proceed more confidently; you may need to either stand by, get ready or

begin outreach (even if the topics seemed inappropriate just weeks ago).

Trends in the U.S. are not yet as favorable as in other countries. Illustration 2 shows how the rate of infection has declined while fatalities are increasing. U.S. media began to broaden focus when school closings and lockdowns were eased. However, the rise in deaths makes proactive media outreach a nuanced matter. At the time of this report, only two of four indicators favored proactive outreach, which suggests storytellers without a pandemic tie-in should stand by and prepare for better times.

*Continued from page 10*

a peer, as a colleague, is very important.”

Marilyn also realized having the authority to exercise that kind of courage had to be earned. She would say, ‘If you have consistently supported the business, brought insights to it, motivated employees, then...you have a chance of being believed when you say, ‘Don’t cross this line. You will be sorry. Not the enterprise in general. You.’

**Spector: What PR background did Marilyn have at the beginning of her career?**

**Martin:** Very little. Marilyn did not join AT&T as a PR pro. She joined as an environmentalist assigned to get employees interested in recycling, from a perch in HR. She moved to PR after she managed to get her job transferred to engineering, which she thought had more clout than HR.

With no interest in engineering or background in HR, she was added to the PR department, but she quickly discovered most of those jobs were moving to New Jersey. She declared she wouldn’t leave New York, hoping to get a separation offer, and was surprised when she was offered a position in media relations, one of the few PR departments staying in New York. The only problem was that she knew nothing about media relations.

Marilyn claimed her success with Earth Day was a fluke. She didn’t even know how to write a news release. So she did what would become a career-long habit; she looked for a hole to fill.

She knew surveys showed that most Americans at the time got most of their news from television. But AT&T had no particular expertise in broadcast news, other than industrial films it had been producing since the 1920s. So she proposed developing a program to teach senior executives how to handle a news interview. That not only started her PR career; it introduced her to all the company’s senior executives (and them to her). And her career took off.

**Spector: How did Marilyn’s early years in the Bronx contribute to her success?**

Communications research enables communicators to uncover the insights they need to guide better communication decisions and generate a positive PR ROI. The pandemic demands authentic, helpful and truthful communication. Research provides a fact-based foundation for aligning the purpose of your organization with the needs of stakeholders and society. ■

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**Martin:** Marilyn once told several of us a story from her childhood that gave me insight into her character.

She said she brought home a report card with all 99s and ‘caught hell’ for not bringing home any 100s. Marilyn said it wasn’t pressure, but just what she called the “Jewish cultural belief” that education was the road to a good life. Marilyn’s life would turn out to be a long-running argument with that younger version of herself. Was she trying as hard as she could? Was she as fearless as she could be? Was she as successful as she should be?

Even in elementary school she was on a fast track. She skipped many years of elementary school and got used to always being the youngest in the room. Her sister was seven years older, and there were very few girls in her neighborhood on the Grand Concourse. So, most of her friends were boys.

She never thought of herself in a gender-stereotypical way.

Barnard’s president was the only married woman with kids to lead one of the seven sister colleges. She urged Barnard women to take their time after college, to get started on meaningful careers that might prove a rewarding alternative to married life and motherhood.

**Spector: Today it is popular to coach women to ‘bring your whole self to work.’ Do you think Marilyn did that?**

**Martin:** If bringing your whole self to work suggests it’s where she found meaning in her life, that’s almost certainly true. Marilyn’s drive and ambition were at odds with stereotypical notions of female characteristics at the time. This became a source of friction with some of her peers.

At times, even Marilyn’s daughters resented her focus on work. Eventually, as adults, they understood that balancing work and family simply wasn’t a realistic option for someone with their mother’s aspirations. They supported her and believed she should not need to abandon those aspirations simply because she was a woman. ■

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**Soon Mee Kim**  
EVP, Global  
Diversity, Equity &  
Inclusion Leader,  
Porter Novelli

communications and those who do not. The first camp, she says, “understand empathy and the need to connect with stakeholders, primarily, their employees. The other camp seems out of touch with the realities and their stakeholders.”

D&I, Chitkara adds, ties with the inclusiveness and sense of belonging within an organization and expresses its values and purpose through its actions. A lack of D&I, she says, poses social risks to organization, according to the World in 2020 report.

Adds **Soon Mee Kim**, EVP, global diversity, equity & inclusion leader, at **Porter Novelli**, “D&I should be integrated into everything we do. She puts the survey’s D&I question on its head: “‘How are you incorporating sameness and exclusion in your communication?’ In truth, that’s likely a very high percentage, but it should be 0 percent,” she says.

## INTERNAL: EMPATHY AND RAPID CADENCE



**Eric Koefoot**  
President/  
Founder  
PublicRelay

Chart 3 shows the cadence of internal communication remains vibrant, with 68 percent saying they reach out more to employees now. In addition, 46 percent say internal engagement is stronger.

That is likely to be more important after the pandemic, since 60 percent of communicators expect to spend at least some time working from home (see chart 6).

Moreover, 56 percent say communication with employees is “more personal and empathetic than before the pandemic.” That surprised Ryan, who expected a higher number.

“Employees are starved for information in a world without a lot of answers...that’s why you’re seeing town halls

and more communication.” Staff want to hear from corporate leaders even when [corporate leaders] don’t have answers, “and they want a human approach and a regular cadence.” As a result, internal communication has “taken on a very different turn for a lot of companies.”

The feeling of shared experience and that ‘We’re all in this together’ is driving the demand for more and personal internal communication, Glennie believes.

Despite the pandemic’s influence on internal communication, Glennie argues certain fundamentals remain true. Internal communication, he says, must focus on the needs of the audience and delivered through the right channels at the right time. “There may also be new and interesting reasons driving the frequency of internal communications, from sharing stories of much-needed optimism to helping create a more consistent and ongoing connection.”

## MEASUREMENT NEEDED

Chart 4 offers good news for measurement, another somewhat neglected part of communications. 27 percent said measurement is playing a larger role during the virus period.

“This shows a clear shift in mindset: Data analytics in hand during a crisis eliminates a lot of guesswork and gives you the ability to move faster,” said **Eric Koefoot**, president and CEO, **PublicRelay**, the analytics firm. “We’ve seen this positive impact of quality analytics with our clients for years.”

## RETHINKING CRISIS

Though Glennie hasn’t changed his crisis approach as a result of the pandemic (chart 7), “What I might have considered a reputation-impacting crisis six months ago, pales in comparison” to the health tragedy. In addition, he’s thinking more about *pandemic-plus* preparedness. Instead of preparing for a single crisis, he’s thinking of pandemic-plus-hurricane or -plus-earthquake scenarios. ■