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EVENTS

Virtual Events are Back for 2021, Though There are Questions Around Their Relative Value

Despite the good news about COVID-19 vaccines, it's clear [the pandemic is far from over](#). For communicators, a major question is when will the business world exit the pandemic? Similarly, when can business travel and events restart safely in the US and abroad?

The answer to these questions depends on reaching herd immunity via vaccines. Unfortunately, scientists don't agree on the percentage of the population that constitutes herd immunity.

For example, Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief of the U.S. **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**, admitted estimates he's offered, ranging from 70 to 90 percent of the population, are just that—estimates. "We have to realize that we have to be humble and realize what we don't know. [These are pure estimates](#)," Fauci told **CNN** Dec. 27.

FOURTH QUARTER 2021

So, it seems safe for communicators to assume live events won't return, at best, before late summer or Q4. That leaves some eight to nine months for companies to continue to stage virtual activities, including trade shows, press conferences, media interviews and other events.

Late in November, weeks before [the first vaccine jab](#) in the UK made global headlines, we asked communicators what the spate of virtual activities in 2020 taught them about operations. In addition, we asked whether or not a virtual event is an efficient method of attracting business leads, enticing prospective clients and creating revenue.

We'll consider operations first.

'DON'T REPLICATE; REINVENT'

True, it's no longer considered unusual for a company to mount a physical event on an online platform. From an operations viewpoint, though, a major issue, communicators say, is the changes to make to what formerly was a physical event. It's key, communicators say, to reimagine the event in today's virtual setting, rather than simply putting a physical event and agenda online.

For example, in-person conference sessions often run 45 minutes or longer. Expecting attendees to sit that long in front of a computer screen, though, is no longer feasible, says Jenny Wang, a VP at **kglobal**.

"With so many virtual meetings and events now, it's important to keep sessions short. No one wants to be on **Zoom** for hours and hours at a time, especially 10 months into the pandemic." Zoom-fatigue "is real," she adds.

That sort of thinking was applied to the "Summit on the Future of Communications Measurement," a gathering **PRNEWS** columnist and **Paine Publishing** CEO Katie Paine holds each fall at her New Hampshire farm.

For 2020's virtual summit, Paine's motto was "Don't Replicate; Reinvent." First, she considered how people at physical events spend their time. Half the day, she reasons, they're in sessions. The other four hours revolve around networking, checking email and social and making phone calls.

Similar to Wang, Paine asks rhetorically, "Now, do you want to have people spending four hours looking at Zoom?" Accordingly, what usually is one day of presentations at Paine's summit stretched over three, to accolades, she says.

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At the pandemic's outset, using virtual technology to replicate a ballroom or networking table offered attendees a novel experience. Yes, there might be tech glitches and navigation wasn't always smooth, but in the pandemic's early days, such creativity was a plus.

Almost one year in (at least in the US), expectations and patience have changed. Glitches are tolerated less, as are fancy, hard-to-navigate software that attempts to replicate the before-world. For some attendees, these bells and whistles are reminders of what they miss most about pre-COVID-19 times. Moreover, attendees can end up spending more time navigating channels than listening to speakers, Paine argues.

Instead, she emphasizes making access to content as easy as the one-click-buy button on **Amazon**. Paine prefers recording all presentations in advance and allowing attendees to search easily for sessions they wish to attend. Again, put the emphasis on one-button ease, she says.

Another question concerns Q&A sessions. Here it's a toss-up. Do you schedule live Q&As on Zoom for a certain time and hope attendees show, sometimes hours after they've heard a taped presentation? Or, do you prefer a captive audience, running the live Q&A right after a taped session is offered? We were unable to find a consensus.

EFFICIENCY AND BUSINESS LEADS

Similarly, there are diverse opinions on whether or not virtual events are an efficient way to gather leads and engage potential customers.

For **Mower** group VP Mark O'Toole, who specializes in working with technology companies, virtual trade shows "simply don't serve the same lead-generation function" for tech products that live, in-person events did pre-pandemic.

In fact, his advice is that for much of 2021, companies may need to employ other channels to engage target audiences. He admits, though, it will take a large quantity of such channels "to even come close to replicating the exposure of a physical show booth."

Even with some virtual events charging little or no admission, "it's become difficult to attract attendees," Wang adds, again citing Zoom overload.

EMPTY THE HOLSTER

Indeed, this is why O'Toole suggests PR pros with ample budgets consider deploying as many communication channels as possible to engage customers.

Communicators can treat virtual events as an account-based marketing activity, O'Toole suggests.

So, for example, they can try to engage customers with email marketing, content-generation from virtual event presentations, paid and organic social media posts, press releases, blog posts and even direct mail, as people return to offices.

'DYNAMIC VISUAL PRESENCE'

In terms of content at virtual events, it's critical that the event has "a dynamic visual presence," O'Toole says. Such a presence, he adds, calls for compelling imagery, "captivating" video and animation, meaningful taglines and CTAs.

In addition, these elements should work in concert, he says. Ideally, they will "surround" prospective customers before an event, and engage customers during and after.

Much of this returns to operations. The restart of the 2019-2020 **NBA** season illustrates O'Toole's "dynamic visual presence" well. [The league added several elements](#) to bolster awareness and excitement around its restart, despite being unable to have fans attend games in its indoor Florida venues.

For example, working with broadcast partner **Turner Sports**, the league repositioned 30 cameras closer to the court to provide viewing angles not seen on TV previously. Such camera placement was not possible when fans were in arenas. Audio quality also was strengthened with microphones placed around the court, giving viewers the feeling they close to the game.

And what's a game without crowd noise? The NBA made sure the gym sounded full with simulated crowd noise, as well as in-venue public address announcers and DJs, who offered music and other effects.

Working with **Michelob**, the NBA also created virtual cheering sections. 300+ fans each game were invited to appear live on the Michelob Ultra-Courtside, 17-foot video screens surrounding the court. Thanks to another alliance, with **Microsoft**, those fans were able to cheer live as well as interact virtually with those 'sitting' nearby. Microsoft's *Together Mode* removed fans' individual backgrounds and gathered them in a virtual arena that was seen and heard during the TV broadcast and in the actual arena, providing a more realistic environment for players.

As with physical events, businesses need to establish metrics to determine what a good result looks like.

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Worst Crises of 2020 Expose a Lack of Transparency and Strategic Action



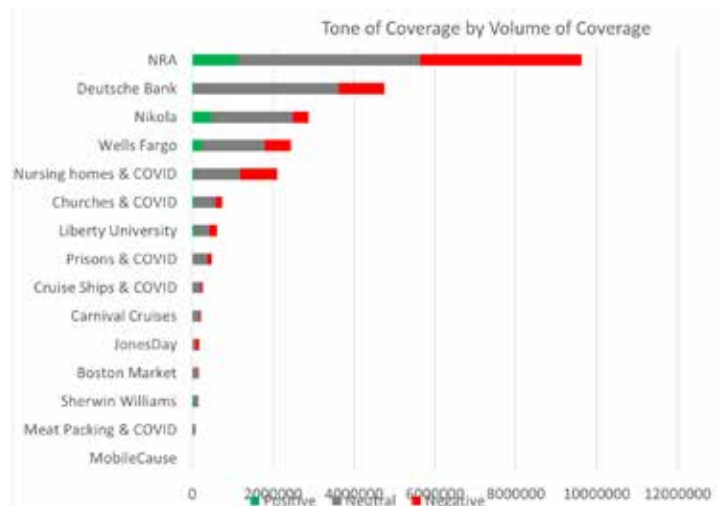
If you are a crisis consultant, 2020 was your banner year. It's not as if we were all stuck in our houses with nothing better to do than rage tweet about some real or perceived transgression on the part of a big-name brand or celebrity. Oh, wait. That was 2020. But when we look back at the year, clearly there were societal changes that contributed to a proliferation of attacks on brand reputation.

- ▶ Just because we *think* it's a crisis doesn't mean it is. There were many times during this dumpster-fire year that my heart went out to PR folks for some brand thinking, 'Oh my god, this is a disaster.' Yet it all went away within a few hours.
- ▶ For all the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, the most long-lasting may be the visibility it provided to the incredible inequalities in society and the power of empathy (or the liability of lacking it.) We got used to doctors and nurses taking to the airwaves to beg people to wear masks and get them more PPE.

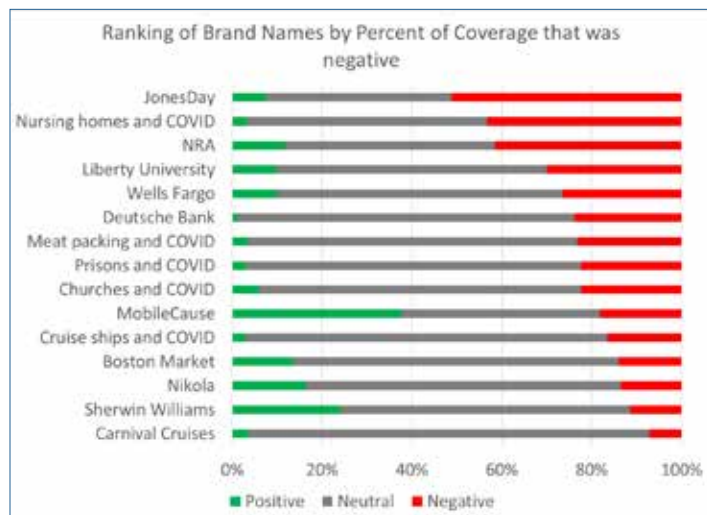
Pictures of what goes on in meat packing plants horrified us, nevermind endless food lines contrasting with the very wealthy retreating to yachts and [private islands](#). Every image on every platform showed us the chasm of disparity that is our society, all of which made tone-deaf CEOs, and their brands, fair targets for rage.

- ▶ Flat-footed, clueless brands that thought they could keep on keeping on doing the same old same old, were inevitably called out, made fun of, and probably lost market share to other nimbler competitors. [Sherwin-Williams](#), are you listening? If so, we have two words for you: [Ocean Spray](#).
- ▶ Social now matters as much if not more than traditional media—[Boston Market](#) took a good idea and gave itself one of the biggest blackeyes of the year. Dangling the

possibility of an easy take-out Thanksgiving dinner, and then leaving people standing in unsafe lines for hours, it earned the enmity of millions of former consumers. It wasn't a big news story because most of the rage was vented and shared on social media, but the damage was no less real.



Source: Talkwalker



Source: Talkwalker

- ▶ Everyone is mad at "The Machine." For anyone who grew up in the 70s, 2020 provided a lot of déjà vu. Between BLM protests that brought people of all ages into the streets, to the fights between protestors and cops—add in a general feeling of rage against the establishment—and it all felt very familiar to many of us.

This universal rage at corporate and political establishments meant many brands perceived as out of touch were held accountable. Employees walked out at [Amazon](#), [Facebook](#), [Google](#), [Wayfair](#) and others to protest tone-deafness and discriminatory behavior. Unions, specifically those representing meat packers, health care workers and flight attendants, moved into the vacuum left by HR departments and company spokespeople, reluctant to wade into the morass of diversity and inequality.

- ▶ Getting rid of the leader, doesn't always help As we saw with the [Liberty University](#)/Jerry Falwell crisis, as well as the [Richards Group](#), just getting rid of the offender in chief doesn't necessarily make the problem go away. Liberty U's negatives continued throughout the year, and the Richards' Group lost most of its major clients.

Continued on page 4

With that perspective, we took two-dozen or so major brand crises that surfaced in 2020, and used **Talkwalker's** technology platform to analyze them by volume of coverage and percentage of coverage that was negative. We were surprised by what we found, in both negativity and volume.

One caveat: In both volume and negativity, **Facebook** tops

the list. However, given the nature of its brand, we didn't feel the numbers we were getting were comparable to others we analyzed. ■

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Company and/or Issue	Crisis	Grade	What We Learned
Jones Day	<p>Its involvement in the post-election effort to overthrow the results of the 2020 election by filing dozens of flawed lawsuits landed it at the top of the most negative press of the year in the crises we analyzed. Fueled by negative ads from The Lincoln Project, and the discomfort expressed by firm employees, Jones Day was vilified in legal journals and mainstream media. Coverage was not extensive, but it was very negative thanks to a tone-deaf response full of denials and mealy mouth explanations.</p> <p>Jones Day tried to have it both ways—declining to comment on the record, of course, but also indicating that it would continue to support its client, Donald Trump. At the same time, some lawyers within the firm were leaking their discomfort with the association. As a result, Jones Day was left vulnerable to attacks from all sides.</p>	D	2020 was not a time to mince words. Stand up for what you believe in, or don't expect the negative press to go away. Also, if you're not used to being in the headlines, there's a good chance that if you don't perfectly nail your crisis communication, a very high percentage of your coverage will be negative.
COVID-19 and key industries	Quick, think of an industry that COVID-19 hit hardest. If you said, 'Cruise ships and travel,' you might be correct from a financial perspective, but in terms of the media, they were close to the bottom of the list. I conducted a separate analysis of key industries and COVID-19 to see which suffered most. Not surprisingly, death drove negative coverage. Nursing homes had the most fatalities. So, it topped the list in the percentage of negative coverage. But what was surprising was how effectively meat packers tamped down its bad news, compared to other afflicted industries.	C	For organizations and industries accustomed to the spotlight, they appear to have handled this crisis as well as might be expected. Whether or not people will trust them again, i.e., take a cruise, work for a meat packer, or put a loved one in a nursing home—we will have to wait a few years to determine.
NRA	<p>Similar to a number of brands in the news a lot in the last few years, even the public's distraction with the presidential election and COVID-19 didn't slow negative coverage of the NRA. As the chart shows, it garnered the highest amount of negative coverage. While the NY state attorney general's investigation certainly drew headlines, much of the 2020 coverage focused on how little money NRA had on hand to spend during this year's election.</p> <p>The group's defiant stand in response to critics, as well as the lawsuits, did little to turn around the situation. Membership revenue fell 33 percent, to a 7-year low. In addition, debts rose, more scandals came to light and layoffs ensued.</p>	F	While defiance may soothe a CEO's ego, it seldom helps to reduce negative media coverage. A little humility and empathy go a long way toward making a crisis go away faster.
Liberty University & Jerry Falwell Jr.	Liberty University's attempts to distance itself from founder Jerry Falwell Jr., after he posted inappropriate photos and then was involved in a three-way relationship with a pool boy, failed miserably. While Falwell attracted most of the negative publicity, Liberty almost always was mentioned and thus its brand was dragged into the mud along with its leader.	F	Hypocrisy is guaranteed to get you bad press these days, so when a university that touts its religious values is discovered to have a randy and kinky founder, the results were inevitable. If you want to survive a crisis in 2021, hold true to your culture and purpose and make sure leaderships acts on those values.
Wells Fargo	Not again, you're probably thinking. But some organizations just don't learn. The year kicked off with the former CEO being kicked out of the banking business forever and paying a \$17.5 million fine. His replacement, Charles Scharf, didn't fare much better. He was caught on a Zoom employee meeting giving the classic excuse as to why the bank lacks diversity: "Not enough minority talent." That might have worked when Scharf was in business school, but it did not go over well in the middle of BLM protests and heightened awareness of health and income disparities in these COVID-19 times. To his credit, unlike many of his predecessors, Scharf apologized and took personal responsibility , saying that his comments reflected "my own unconscious bias...there is no question Wells Fargo has to make meaningful progress to increase diverse representation." The bank also announced that it would tie executive compensation to increasing diversity hires, as well as upping its anti-racism training programs.	B	The reality today is that many executives who grew up in a different era with different rules occupy a great many senior leadership positions in corporate America. PR pros will need to screen every word they say, hit them over the head when they utter something dumb, or better yet, encourage replacing them with younger, more diverse individuals.

Deutsche Bank	<p>Another old favorite that can't seem to escape bad press. This time it was leaked documents that revealed the breadth and depth of Deutsche Bank's involvement (i.e. responsibility for) the 2008 financial meltdown, as well as its role in helping Russia and Iran circumvent sanctions. And all that was before any news broke about the extent of the debt that will come due to Deutsche after Donald Trump leaves office.</p> <p>The bank's new CEO seemed to be doing a good job of keeping Deutsche's name out of negative headlines, but, as with any organization, past misdeeds are inescapable and always lead to increased media scrutiny.</p>	C	Just because you bring in a new CEO and a new communication team to wipe the slate clean doesn't mean the old ghosts have left your closets. Your only option these days, when dirt on your company is a click away, is to come clean up front, and do something that proves that you are fixing things.
Mobile Cause	<p>Non-profits use MobileCause widely as a way to process contributions. So, when this popular platform crashed on Giving Tuesday—when charitable donations are at their peak—it was the ultimate PR disaster. And, of course, poor communication did nothing to help. The brand made an announcement on Twitter and continued to issue updates on a social platform that only about 22 percent of Americans use, while 62 percent of Americans participate in Giving Tuesday. So, the 40 percent not on Twitter were hopping mad that MobileCause waited hours before issuing an update via email. It was the usual apology that said the company was working on the problem. Users had better suggestions, like refunding fees it charges non-profits for using the service. MobileCause's clients, the charities, were left to inform donors. And, of course, competitors like Kickstarter were quick to offer an alternative.</p>	D	In 2020 and henceforth, “we're working on it” is not an acceptable excuse. You need to solve problems, or people will go somewhere else. It was different when everything wasn't online, but now, if consumers aren't offered a solution or an answer quickly, they look elsewhere for an alternative.
Boston Market	<p>Boston Market was another example of a company not understanding today's marketplace. We'll cut everyone some slack for not realizing in the spring just how large demand might be for take-out meals. But, after six months of COVID-19, you'd think Boston Market would realize that lots of people, unable to travel because of the virus, would love a take-out turkey at Thanksgiving. Clearly, the company underestimated and underprepared, but what made it so much worse was the lack of response when complaints started to fly. Instead of listening to customers, and perhaps offering an explanation, Boston Market continued to send out scheduled promotional posts that only infuriated customers further. As we go to press, we couldn't find an apology or explanation from Boston Market anywhere.</p> <p>Once again, poor communication between operations, inventory management, local stores and the PR and communication teams were responsible for the mess.</p>	F	Companies need to get over their siloed approach to communication. If you keep the PR and Communication teams out of the loop, they can't help you when things go wrong.
Nikola	<p>Nikola is a start-up electric car and truck manufacturer that has captured a lot of attention on Wall Street for being the next Tesla, but many see it as the next Theranos. The big difference is that its founder, Trevor Milton, actually stepped away from the company when he was accused of fraud, unlike Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes, who goes on trial in March. Nikola's stock performance was erratic in the wake of numerous high-visibility announcements, many of which turned out to be not exactly fact-based. A deal with GE was renegotiated after a contract to make garbage trucks for Republic Services fell apart in late December. Through it all, the press releases that Nikola issues continue to be nothing but good news.</p>	F	One of the lessons of 2020 is to watch what people do, not what they say. In an increasingly skeptical world, company announcements are greeted with a mountain of salt until people see proof that you can do what you promised.
Sherwin-Williams	<p>While it didn't get a ton of press, Sherwin-Williams' incredible stupidity to fire an employee who had become something of a TikTok star for his paint-mixing videos, stands out as at least one of the dumbest corporate moves of the year. Tony Piloseno was everyone's ideal employee—ambitious, dedicated, passionate about the product and the company. So much so that he began making compelling and fun videos about mixing paint colors. Some of them were made during working hours, which is why he got fired. Now Piloseno is working for the competition. Never mind the knowledge and following that he takes with him to a rival company, but the move sends terrible messages to current and future employees of Sherwin-Williams: don't come here if you are creative and innovative, because we might fire you.</p>	F	One thing good companies are realizing is the value of their employees and the importance of sending them the right message, not a message that says, ‘We don't value creativity, innovation and loyalty.’

Tools Abound for Media Relations, but Personal Relationships Continued to Dominate in 2020

If 2020 taught media relations professionals a lesson, it's about the importance of relationships.

Meeting media contacts in person, securing press tours and catching up over coffee have taken a backseat amid the COVID-19 pandemic. For savvy practitioners, though, continuing to build relationships with the media endured, and in many cases, thrived.

TRACKING RELATIONSHIPS

It's not a surprise that 2020 wreaked havoc on media. With declines in advertising and subscription revenue occurring prior to the coronavirus' economic debacle, it was inevitable that local and national publishers would experience layoffs in 2020. In addition to furloughs and layoffs for journalists, entire departments were killed and, in some cases, publications closed. In other instances, some content creators—whether by necessity or choice—launched newsletters on platforms such as **Substack** in an attempt to monetize their brands.

Despite this, relationships remained more important than anything else in media relations, said Nati Katz, **Honeywell's** senior director of external communications, during the **PRNEWS Media Relations Virtual Event** last month.

To that end, it's best to get to know reporters beyond their beat, said Lauren Young, an editor of digital special projects at **Reuters**. Such relationships can yield dividends “down the line,” Young added, noting that she has contacts at many organizations she can turn to for sources or introductions.

Clearly, with so much movement in the industry, sending regular check-in emails is a best practice. Be prepared, though, for bounce-backs. A new year definitely calls for an update of your digital **Rolodex**.

One relatively simple way to track journalist movements is through **Twitter** profiles, which reporters tend to update more frequently than other platforms, said another speaker at the event, Laurie Goldberg, group EVP of PR, **Discovery** and **Science Channel**.

A new tool in this area is **Cision Connect**, which, according to the company, allows users to discover “profiles of journalists and influencers that are most relevant to them” through “intuitive searching and intelligent filtering technology.”

According to the product description, the tool works similar to customer relationship management software. It allows users to manage media relationships “through automatic team activity tracking, pitch performance metrics and the ability to measure the outcomes of their outreach.” In other words, data provides a grander look at what pitches are working, which lets media relations pros to adjust their strategy.

SOURCE VERIFICATION

Another aspect of media relations, of course, is pitching thought leaders and their content. This demonstrates that your company's executives or those you represent are ex-

perts in their field.

For years, universities and educational platforms like **ProfNet** or **HARO** helped connect journalists to expert sources. However, much outreach today happens either directly or through a **Google** search.

Especially with today's war on disinformation and the public's loss of trust in the media, journalists are working hard to ensure sources are legit.

Along comes **Vetted**. The platform, which completed its soft launch at the end of November, “makes it easier for experts to be more of a media magnet, and less of a media megaphone,” CEO Jon Amar claimed. Instead of mass-distributing a press release about a launch or project to reporters, encouraging them to reach out to you for more information, Vetted does that verification work for journalists.

This doesn't mean media relations pros don't have their work cut out for them in this area, though. Making executives media-friendly remains as critical today as it was prior to the rise of social media.

“People who are knowledgeable, charming [and] educated...get invited back,” said Kristal Howard, director, corporate communications and media relations at **Kroger**. In preparing for a televised interview, it's critical to “understand the planned topics and some of the unexpected topics [and] ensure [your executive] is equipped and prepared to address any question that might come at him.”

TARGETING THE PITCH

It's a tale as old as time: targeting the pitch. But a new media landscape calls for renewed attention to correct targeting. And with the rise in popularity of tools such as **Muckrack** and **Meltwater** to help streamline the process, media relations pros have no excuse not to do their homework and know who is covering what beat.

Creating a multi-tiered approach is a good place to start, said Michael Lamp, SVP, social & digital media at **HUNTER**. Micro-lead media opportunities are a must-have consideration in your approach. These allow you to secure broadcasts on **Reddit** or chats on **IGTV**, for example, much more quickly than long and short leads in more traditional media allow.

Regardless of which tools you utilize, it's important not to forget the fundamentals of media relations, pointed out Deshundra Jefferson, chief strategic communications officer, **Credit Union National Association**. Oftentimes, she says, media relations pros may use software to create a list, and then turn around and spam the list.

“You don't want to be the person who is known for spamming and having irrelevant pitching. [Otherwise], when you do have something good for a relevant reporter, they won't read it,” she said. “You have to create a relationship.” ■

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How the Pandemic Changed SEO and Trends You Need to Know in 2021



We know 2020 forced business to make a lot of changes. This was true for SEO too.

Online services took a huge step into how we navigate our lives. A business's online presence came under increased scrutiny. As a result, standards rose.

While 2021 may promise a return to previous practices, SEO and the online landscape are permanently altered. We see the below as major themes for 2021. Many spring from forced changes brought about in 2020.

► **Site Usability will Grow as a Major Ranking Factor.**

Recently, **Google** shifted focus to analytically tackle the nebulous concepts of site usability and user experience. Promoting sites that meet users' needs over those trying to *play* the algorithm was long the goal. Google has relied on indirect factors, like keyword density, to provide metrics for its algorithm.

This changes with **Core Web Vitals**. Released in 2020, it will become a ranking factor this May. Its three metrics provide numerical values for what Google has found to be prominent factors in a site's user experience. Currently, the initial loading process is the main focus. How long a site takes to show content and if that content drastically shifts location during loading. We expect Google to expand Core Web Vitals in what it tracks and shows. This should give SEO experts more specifics on what to address and how to improve performance and ranking. For example, this year we hope to see a complete list of URLs that Core Web Vitals report flags.

► **The Pandemic Changed Shopping Behaviors, and They're Here to Stay.**

As the pandemic, *hopefully*, winds down in 2021, we will see a different dynamic with digital marketing and the value of SEO. The mass implementation of services like curbside pickup and online ordering, paired with the shift toward ecommerce, aren't going anywhere.

In the example of curbside groceries, it's not enough to have a functioning online ordering experience. Before COVID-19, customers were happy to take what they could get. These services were a bonus, not as a staple.

Consumers now are growing accustomed to shopping this way. They're changing shopping behaviors for the long term. Businesses will not only need to continue to improve online curbside shopping, they'll need to bring out all the bells and whistles. Look for feature updates like product ratings, full nutritional information and wish lists to start rolling out this year.

► **As the Battle Against Misinformation Rages, Google's EAT System Evolves.**

Online misinformation was at the forefront of Americans' minds leading up to and through 2020's election. **Twitter** instituted fact-checking measures for organic content, **Facebook** completely pulled

political ads off its website. These moves created a shift toward individually hosted political websites promoted through SERPs, which involve more SEO and digital marketing for political campaigns.

Google already has a system, EAT (Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness), for determining the credibility of a source. It's had EAT for years but finds itself in a more difficult landscape due to the political climate. The official stances of candidates sometimes cannot meet EAT's standards, forcing Google to *take a side* in political debates.

Websites that are not inherently political will fall under more scrutiny if their topic of focus is pulled into political conversations. For example, medical sites fall under twice the attention as they have an inherent duty to be trustworthy and now are part of the political discourse, whether they intend to be or not.

Regardless, if a site's topic is one of Google's misinformation focuses (health, news, laws, finance, race, etc.), it's still important to play into the EAT system. At the core of optimizing for EAT, websites simply need to strive to build themselves as a reliable expert in their field. Building authority should be the core of everyone's content strategy moving forward. Specific methods for websites to achieve this include:

- 1. Focus Your Content.** It is better to be an expert in one field than to have general knowledge in many. Focus content on your brand's primary field of expertise and avoid exploring fringe and tangential topics.

- 2. Keep Updating.** Don't only rely on evergreen content. Frequent updates about changes in your field will show Google that your site is not only knowledgeable, but it is continually adding to that knowledge base.

- 3. Establish Real Experts.** Authors of content should be people that have an established background in the field. In addition, they should be visible on your site. Connecting real experts to the content on your site legitimizes what is being said and creates verifiable trustworthiness. You can still use freelancers to build content, but be sure to have your subject-matter experts consult on large-scale content projects. If possible, they should get the byline for the final product.

- 4. Stay Up-To-Date On Site Security.** Maintaining the basics, such as HTTPS and other security and performance certifications, indicates to Google that a website is trustworthy and legitimate. A basic in SEO, but still relevant. ■

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For example, technology companies sometimes feature complex offerings and sales cycles that can last nearly one year. Often the target audience for these companies is a small group of decisionmakers.

For these businesses the key to success is engagement, “getting a prospect to attend an event, participate and respond,” O’Toole says.

For companies with mass-market or consumer products and services, lead volume matters. “The approach and efficiency of lead generation is entirely dependent upon which type of prospect or sales cycle is at play,” he says.

In terms of what events are most efficient, that also varies. For many of the tech companies O’Toole advises, the struggle to measure results “is that there is no uniformity in approach and opportunities” for third-party virtual events.

On the other hand, he falls back on advice mentioned above. He urges companies to stand apart with “a unique rallying cry and a distinct, differentiated look and feel.”

He’s also learned smaller virtual events, such as webinars, Zoom Q&As, **LinkedIn** Live sessions and other “focused and more intimate opportunities” deliver the best engagement.

As for cost, common wisdom is that mounting a virtual event must be less-expensive than a physical event. There are no transportation costs or construction costs. Budgets for travel, food and hotel are gone, right? Not so fast.

“Sure, for [virtual events] attendee costs are lower. But not necessarily for event hosts,” says Paine.

For example, Paine spent a significant sum on a virtual platform. She also attempted to put her farm in a box, sending attendees local food and drink so virtual happy hours could be more enjoyable. While these innovations worked for the most part—attendees in Australia found drinking at 4 am local time taxing—they cut into profits.

Indeed, O’Toole says, “Cost for virtual events is a big variable.” If a company is hosting a large virtual event on an existing event platform, costs may be much lower than a live event.

“However, building a robust, interactive virtual event platform that works hard to replicate the actual event experience can be expensive.”

While brands were forced to quickly learn about virtual platforms, O’Toole is confident “we’ll go into 2021 with a bit more experience.” Still, he considers virtual events “a radical shift in doing business, so the right event opportunities and related costs are still very much a work in progress for most businesses.”

The good news is virtual events emit a load of data, so they easily measured, Paine says. If the purpose of an event is to generate sales leads, compare the online event to last year’s in-person activities. See which provided the most leads for the least costs. Make a similar measurement for events whose goal is generating revenue. ■

MESSAGING

Communicators Face Multiple Hurdles as They Race to Erase U.S.’s Vaccine Hesitancy

Veteran communicator Andy Gilman of **CommCore Consulting** remembers taking the **Sabin polio vaccine in the 1960s**. “It was a sugar cube [with the vaccine on it]. Everybody wanted to take it.” Kids liked the sugar, and adults felt getting vaccinated was patriotic. So far, the atmosphere surrounding coronavirus vaccination in the US isn’t like that.

How could it be? The definition of patriotism seems cloudy in a country with a significant political divide. In addition, the virus and steps to slow its spread have become political. Not surprisingly, there’s a correlation between a person’s politics and his/her attitude toward the vaccine.

In a December 2020 **Associated Press-NORC** poll, **60 percent of Democrats said they’d take a vaccine; just 40 percent of Republicans said they would**. Overall, about half of those surveyed say they will vaccinate (see chart, page 9).

Moreover, well before the vaccine arrived, messaging around the virus was mixed, confusing the public. Early on, the president downplayed the novel coronavirus. Later, he largely ignored the White House task force’s recommendations about masks and social distancing.

After it was apparent the virus was becoming a health, political and PR crisis, the president stopped mentioning the pandemic during public appearances. Adding to the confusion, he maintained a lively correspondence about the virus on social media, touting progress on the vaccine and attacking scientific and medical groups that published more sobering assessments, including government-run organizations, such as the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** and the **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)**. The president’s attacks on science, the CDC and FDA added to the public’s confusion. It’s set up a trust morass that plagues the vaccination process.

A CONFUSING VIRUS

It’s not that coronavirus needed help confusing people, since it’s often masked in **asymptomatic** or presymptomatic cases. As such, it’s believed that many Americans have the virus, but aren’t displaying symptoms. Those who are presymptomatic, though, **can transmit it**.

The issue for communicators is that the virus may appear

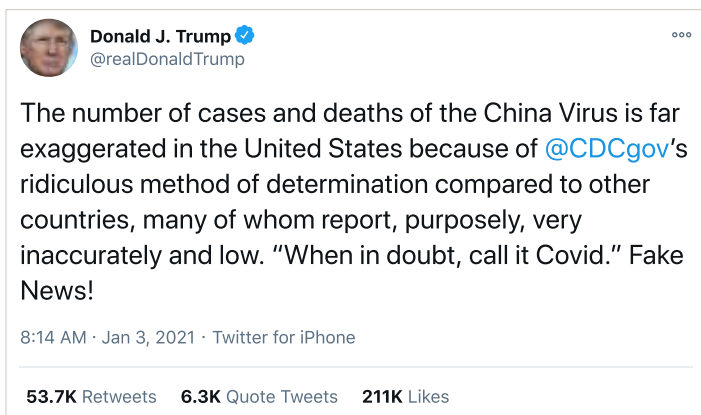
as less of a threat than it actually is. This reduces the public's interest in cautionary messages.

Moreover, many cases are mild, with patients recovering within weeks, at home. Again, the perceived importance of virus-related messages is lowered.

It's not a surprise, then, that getting enough people to believe coronavirus is real and requires vaccination is challenging.

With emergency approval of vaccines, the need to communicate the importance of prompt vaccination seems obvious: Without 75-80 percent of Americans vaccinated, herd immunity, leading to a return to normalcy, will not be reached. And now, with the discovery of an additional, more contagious virus strain, [getting Americans vaccinated promptly seems even more critical](#).

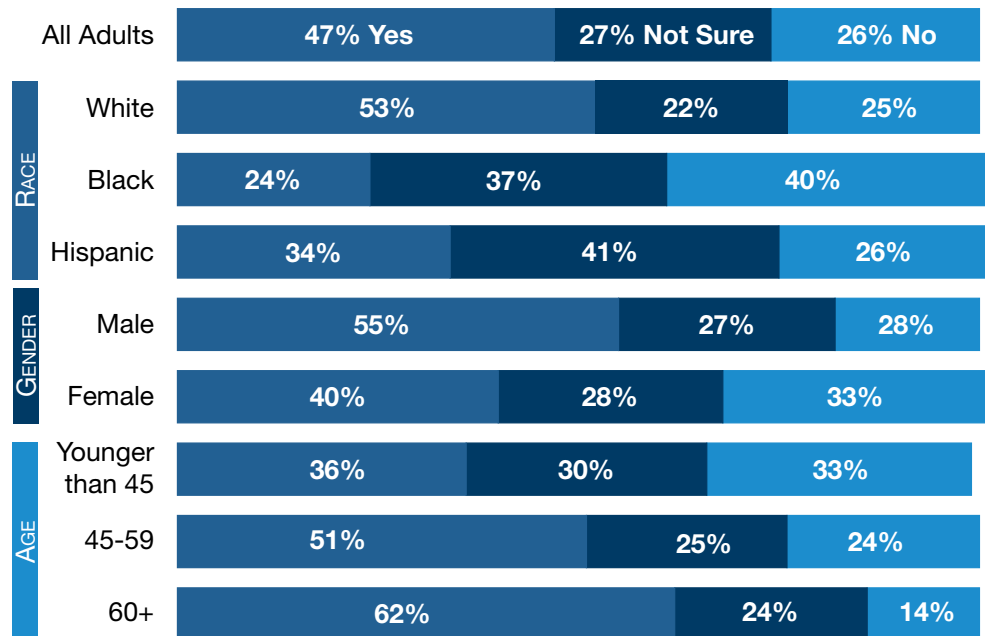
Yet, the situation remains muddy for several reasons. The lack of a solid federal roll-out plan has damaged the vaccination process, further reducing public confidence. [Washington has shifted responsibility for vaccination onto the states](#), but they're starved for resources. Since December was the worst month since the pandemic began, the US healthcare system is overloaded, slowing vaccination. Roughly 4 million Americans received the vaccine as of early January, though the goal for 2020 was to vaccinate 20 million. At our press time, another source of confusion were reports that doses of the **Moderna** vaccine might be [reduced to speed up the roll out](#).



And more confusion. Just days into the new year, the president again tried to downplay the threat. On Jan. 3, he blasted reports of how many Americans have been lost since the pandemic began. The death total, he tweeted, is "far exaggerated" owing to the CDC's "ridiculous method" of reporting. It's "Fake news!"

And the president is not alone. Weeks earlier, incoming

Only Half of U.S. Adults Want the Vaccine



Source: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 1117 U.S. Adults, Dec 3-9, 2020

House member Bob Good, a Republican from VA, told a rally in DC that [the pandemic is "phony."](#) Gathered to support the president's attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election result, the crowd cheered.

These messages only foment what medical professionals are calling *COVID disbelief*. In short, it's that people don't believe the virus is a serious threat to them. As a result, messaging may fail.

In a survey of U.S. physicians, nearly half (48 percent) said [disbelief in the virus's being a significant threat to them](#) will be one of the top three factors deterring their adult patients from taking the vaccine. The other two top factors were concern over vaccine safety and potential side-effects (87 percent) and doubt about the vaccine's efficacy, making it not worth the trouble (61 percent).

Trouble might be the best word to describe the vaccination process in the U.S. so far. *Slow* and *confusing* also are appropriate. In the period between Christmas and New Year's, media was filled with reports about the [slow pace of vaccination](#). Where states offered vaccines on a first-come, first-serve basis, reports of [long lines, jammed web sites and busy phonelines](#) were ubiquitous. These media reports did little to inspire public confidence in vaccination.

HEALTHCARE WORKERS ARE RELUCTANT

In many states, elderly facility patients, health workers and other frontline employees were designated as the earliest vaccine recipients. Still, there were issues.

Ohio governor Mike DeWine said early this month that [60 percent of healthcare workers in his state elected not to take the vaccine](#). Only about [half the frontline and healthcare workers in NYC and LA](#) were willing to get vaccinated.

The **Orange County Corrections Department** surveyed its 1,500-person staff late last month about interest in taking the vaccine if offered. PRNEWS requested the results. Of the 52 percent of corrections staff who responded, just 33 percent said they were interested in taking the vaccine now. Corrections staff is diverse, and the minimum education for employment is a high school diploma, an Orange County Corrections communicator tells us.

There are several reasons behind this reluctance. A **Kaiser Family Foundation survey last month found** they include a concern about side effects (59 percent), lack of trust in government (55 percent), worries that the vaccine is too new (53 percent), and concerns over politics' role in the development process (51 percent).

GOOD NEWS ON MESSAGING

Fortunately, messaging to promote vaccination is in the works. For example, late last month, **The Ad Council** debuted an effort **aimed at raising confidence in healthcare workers about the vaccine** via educational videos. A partnership with the **COVID Collaborative**, the videos were created with several scientific groups, including the CDC, and membership associations, such as the **National Association of Hispanic Nurses** and the **National Black Nurses Association**.

In addition, The Ad Council is **behind a vaccine PSA campaign** aimed at the general public. Set to debut this month, it will include celebrity PSAs [see interview on page 13]. PR trade groups **PRSA** and **PR Council** are expected to unveil efforts this month to help communicators spread messaging in corporate settings. And a group of communicators debuted an effort last month to advise companies and organizations on vaccine-related messaging. [More on these below.]

THE OPPOSITION

Before examining messaging to mobilize support for vaccination, it's important to understand what other hurdles communicators will face in spreading the message.

We mentioned months of mixed messages from the federal government, leaving a significant portion of the public distrustful of Washington and/or unconvinced that the virus is a threat to them.

Moreover, there are members and followers of anti-vaccination groups, which despite **recent measures to curb their social media activity**, remain a powerful force.

Another group is made up of those who'd prefer to let others get the vaccine first. Once it seems safe, they'll get vaccinated. Misinformation or disinformation have caused some of this group's concern. This narrative, though logical, might have been averted with better communication.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

Missing from Operation Warp Speed, the federal initiative to quickly find a vaccine and administer it, was a strategic communication component.

The public received scant reports about Warp's process, knowing little more than that it was moving at an unprecedented pace. Without messaging from the government or

the pharma companies, all sorts of narratives took hold.

One was rooted in common sense: Things done fast can be riddled with mistakes. In truth, much of the science in coronavirus vaccine development was completed years ago, **to fight SARS and MERS**. Had that story been communicated to the public, confidence in the vaccus might be higher.

In addition, during Warp **there was little transparency from Washington and pharma** about Black and Brown participation in vaccine trials, Dr. Nikhila Juvvadi, chief clinical officer, **Loretto Hospital** in Chicago, told **NPR**. This led to mistrust in the very communities the virus hit hardest. On top of that, for Black community members, the legacy of the amoral experiments done during the **Tuskegee Syphilis Study** and the use of **Henrietta Lacks' cells without her knowledge** remains powerful.

US Breaks COVID-19 Records Again

	Dec. 17, 2020	Records
Cases	263,872	291,824 (1/2/21)
Hospitalizations	114,237	125,379 (12/31/20)
Deaths	3,597	3,750 (12/30/20)

Record Breakers: 6.3 mill of the U.S.'s 20 mill COVID-19 cases were posted in Dec, which also had a record 77,572 deaths. Sources: NBC News/COVID Tracking Project

In addition is the public's declining trust in government, business, media and NGOs, according to the 2020 **Edelman Trust Barometer**. All had roles in vaccine development.

Another problem relates to timing. For months, videos and viral posts have circulated baseless claims about vaccines. For example, one holds that the **Pfizer BioNTech** vaccine contains tracking microchips that allow Washington to follow peoples' movements. Now that the Pfizer vaccine is in the field, the company is beginning to fight back. It's crafted messaging around **the 10 ingredients in its vaccine**. The conspiracists, though, had a large head start.

Yet another concern is rooted in science, but communication played a part. It holds that the vaccine may do harm to those with severe allergies. Indeed, after two British health workers developed adverse effects, regulators there initially recommended patients with severe allergic reactions not get jabbed with the Pfizer vaccine. Later they amended their language to patients with **"a history of anaphylaxis to a food, medicine or vaccine."**

Communication around the two British cases was opaque. As communicators might expect, the result was confusion. That situation jumped the Atlantic when the Pfizer vaccine was granted emergency approval. The FDA is tracking anaphylaxis.

The last hurdle is political. Simply put, some people lack trust in a vaccine associated with President Trump. Another group may be reluctant to heed vaccination efforts of the incoming Biden-Harris administration since 77 percent of Republicans believe the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent, **according to a recent Quinnipiac poll**.

Data around vaccination is only a bit more encouraging. As noted above, the AP-NORC poll, from early December, days before the Dec. 11 FDA emergency authorization of the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine, showed about [half of American adults saying they'd take the vaccine](#). Racial, gender and age breakdowns are significant [see chart, page 10].

A **Gallup** poll is more encouraging; [63 percent said they'd take a vaccine that the FDA approved](#).

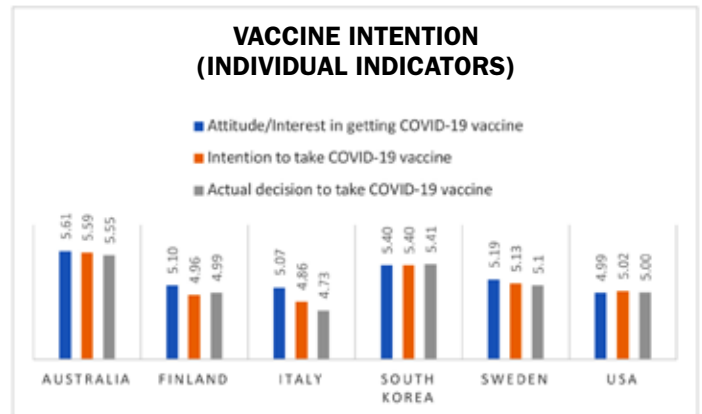
Where does that put the U.S. in terms of other populations' attitude toward coronavirus vaccines? A survey of 500 adults in Australia, Finland, Italy, S. Korea, Sweden and the U.S. finds America on the lower end of vaccine attitudes, perception and behaviors, ahead of Italy only (see chart). Responses in the **Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics**-led study were measured through a **Likert**-type scale, where 1 indicates "completely disagree" and 7 indicates "completely agree." Part of a two-year study, the data is shared exclusively with PRNEWS. Overall, Australia (5.58) led, with S. Korea (5.40), Sweden (5.14), Finland (5.01), US (5) and Italy (4.89) behind.

Interestingly, there was little correlation between Italians' trust in government and their intent to vaccinate. A better indicator, this study found, was between trust in media and intent to vaccinate. Besides Italy, U.S. trust in media was the lowest among countries in the study. Note there's a lot of skepticism in Italy toward vaccines and their efficacy, with several anti-vaccine movements reaching a wide audience.

Other takeaways: age is a good predictor of vaccine intention, with older adults favoring vaccination; U.S. adults with higher income levels are more willing to take the vaccine; communicators should be mindful of cultural, education and demographic differences and tailor messages accordingly.

Into this difficult position come communicators. Despite the degree of difficulty, Gilman, who was recruited to lead a consultancy aimed at assisting companies and organizations about pro-vaccine communication, is ecstatic. "I haven't done anything in years that's gotten me more excited," he says. Gilman likes tough assignments. He counseled **Johnson & Johnson** during the **Tylenol crisis in 1982**. Reaching herd immunity via vaccination, he says, will be harder than restoring trust in Tylenol.

While Gilman acknowledges the need for the sort of messaging the Ad Council will offer, he believes "the last mile" on health for most Americans is their employers. "The employer



Source: University of GA. Funding: Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics, IULM University (Italy), Helsinki Sanomat Foundation. Leader: Dr. Chiara Valentini

is their healthcare center," he adds.

As such, the approach he'll take with **Project RESTART**, the consulting unit he's started to advise companies on vaccine compliance and other COVID issues, is to make vaccine acceptance similar to the Sabin sugar cube he took as a kid. "You have to make it something people want to do," he says.

Most important, urging employees to get vaccinated, he says, should be an opportunity "for a company to build trust with its staff."

A brief overview of Gilman's approach includes:

- **'We care about your safety':** Companies should proactively send communication to employees, emphasizing staff safety is paramount. Avoid making this content cold and impersonal. Instead, use an empathetic, understanding tone.

- **Determine the message:** Decide what the company's policy will be regarding vaccination. With herd immunity estimates at 75-80 percent of the population, do you want your staff at 100 percent, 95 percent vaccinated? Will you require proof of vaccination? What sort? Will you allow un-vaccinated employees to return to the office if 80-90 percent of your staff is vaccinated? If a staffer tested negative recently can he return to work without the vaccine?

- **Choose the messenger(s)**

- **Get ready to answer difficult questions:** What if employ-

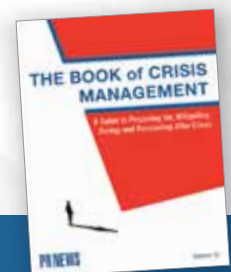
Continued on page 13

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Brand Communicators Toss the Product Launch Playbook of Yesteryear

In years past, launching product was a boon for publicists. It was fairly easy. In 2020 and beyond, not so much.

In addition to breaking through the noise of COVID-related news, brands with product launches were forced last year to compete with stories about social justice and the election. Combine that with shrinking newsrooms and an inability to host live events and the appetite for product launches was just not the same.

While press coverage is never a guarantee, the 2020 news cycle was especially challenging, says LT Taylor, senior director of communications of online furniture company **Burrow**, which launched 11 products in October and November—a move that was not in the brand's initial 2020 plans.

While the first inclination early in the pandemic was to hold off on launches, some companies may see the moment as an opportunity, Todd Hansen, principal at **O'Malley Hansen Communications**, told us [early on](#). Companies should ask:

- ▶ Is there a good chance [the product or service will be] purchased 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

TIMING IS EVERYTHING – OR IS IT?

Product launches are becoming more of a marketing play, and need to be part of a more newsworthy moment, says brand communications strategist Erin Grant, who recently helped men's care line **Huron** launch into the haircare category.

With shrunken mastheads at most newsrooms, journalists are less likely to write about a launch just for the sake of reporting on a new product; they need to understand how a new product fits into a larger story.

At Burrow, like many others, the pandemic impacted manufacturing timelines and made the brand reevaluate its messaging strategy.

Given the timing of the product launches, “we leaned into the holiday positioning to explain the rationale behind our strategy” of launching so many products in a shortened time span, says Taylor. “We anticipated holiday promotions would carry extra weight this year.”

The team bundled news of the launches with Black Friday and Cyber Week deals, including holiday imagery to incentivize media to include the products in their roundups.

“Out of respect for our reporter friends, we got ahead of our outreach: sharing assets, information, sales tiers and promo codes all well in advance to allow them to plan their editorial calendars” for the holidays, she says.

LAUNCHING INTENTIONALLY IN A CRISIS

There are some who planned to launch amid a pandemic.

“When COVID was thrust upon the world...our spaces that were historically used to recharge, relax and refresh became

a space of stress and constant demand,” says Mike Fretto, co-founder of outdoor furniture brand **Neighbor**. “Our brand identity was directly inspired by this.”

The company name, he says, was intended to evoke a sense of community for which so many people longed during statewide shutdowns.

Phrases like “your living room, outdoors” were used to appeal not only to the aesthetic of the line, but also to the context of the transformation of home spaces.

Much of the brand's values were communicated through the visual as-

sets, says Fretto. “Photography and video of kids jumping on furniture, cuddling with pets, or [people] enjoying a glass of wine with a partner are ways that we have communicated our values and feature our product in a time when people are getting inundated with messages all day.”

FUTURE LAUNCHES

If there's one thing brand strategist Grant would advise for those planning to launch amid so much global uncertainty, it's to “plan for the best but expect the worst.”

“For a long time, there was a playbook, and everyone was [working] off a similar cadence,” says Grant, who previously led brand communications and product launches at **Freshly** and **Bonobos**. Those days, she says, are long gone.

Instead, though timing for restarting large in-person launches remain uncertain, Grant advises that brands look to creating smaller, more personalized “IRL experiences.”

She also embraces affiliate marketing and podcasting for her clients. “Work with your team to craft messaging for podcast hosts,” she advises for the latter. “Become the communications pro that can help your digital team maximize its brand advertising.”

And, for those seeking press attention, she suggests reaching to reporters who have started their own newsletters. These changes to the media landscape are “shifting how we, as publicists, can be more helpful to media.” ■

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Much of Neighbor's brand values are communicated via its visual assets.

ees believe they don't need the vaccine? Perhaps their politics or belief systems put them among those who downplay the virus and the need for a vaccine? What about pregnant employees or those with health issues?

•**Listen and diversify:** Perhaps most important, be willing to listen to employee concerns and, of course, avoid belittling any. In addition, ensure your messaging is not tone-deaf via testing and by having a diverse, senior team create content and policies. Besides ethnic and gender diversity, get input from around the enterprise. "This could be a great way to build relationships with other departments," Gilman says.

•**Tailoring:** Similar to every communication endeavor, there's no one correct way to do this, Gilman emphasizes. Adapt the process to your company's needs.

Late this month, PRSA plans to release an online toolkit, *Voices for Everyone*. It will include help for PR pros in identifying mis- and disinformation, including around the vaccines, says Michelle Olson, managing director and partner at **Lambert** and the new PRSA president. She envisions the crowd-sourced toolkit helping members identify false narratives around the vaccine. In addition, it's expected to include examples of vaccine messages PR pros can tailor to the needs of companies they represent.

FACTS NEEDED

The onus is on PR to spread "factual information" about the vaccine to counter what PRSA anticipates will be a mountain of false narratives, she says. Her assessment tracks with a recent report from **Crisp**. It points to at least 10 false anti-vaccine narratives floating around the internet. Claims include the vaccine causing infertility, death, narcolepsy and changes in DNA, among other **dangerous things**.

Another PR effort may be in the planning stages. In an interview in late December, PR Council chief Kim Sample confirmed rumors that the organization is considering an effort to combat the public's vaccine hesitancy. The effort could include grassroots campaigns targeting school nurses and religious leaders, she told us. Data would help refine the campaign, she said.

Complicating things, Sample noted, is that some of the Council's 110 agency-members already are doing similar work for "paying clients." Still, she expressed enthusiasm and emphasized the need. "The public is so confused," Sample says. She's right. ■

THE AD COUNCIL'S 360-DEGREE APPROACH

With the CDC projecting 80,000 COVID-19 deaths in the first three weeks of January, there's little doubt the country needs to shake off its vaccine hesitancy. An "all-points, 24-7 PR and ad campaign" must emphasize vaccine safety and build trust, says Andrew Blum of **AJB Communications**. It should include facts, **but also plain language**. In addition to celebrities, he says, real people should be featured in radio and TV PSAs. He also advocates a snail-mail effort and, where plausible, a Census-like activity, where citizens are approached about taking the vaccine. The Ad Council's effort to wipe out vaccine hesitancy will include some of these elements, Lisa Sherman, president & CEO, tells us. Her responses were edited for space.

PRNEWS: What will the phases of messaging look like?

Lisa Sherman: A one-size-fits-all message is not the solution to a challenge as complex as mass vaccine adoption. We'll have an air game and a ground game: the traditional media and placements...as well as grassroots, community and faith-based outreach...A core component will also entail uniting trusted influencers and messengers—including local doctors—to help Americans feel confident about getting vaccinated. Once our messaging is in market, as we do for all our campaigns, we'll use a rigorous evaluation framework to measure our impact.

PRNEWS: What about diversity?

Sherman: We believe an education campaign is particularly important to ensure populations hardest hit by the virus are empowered with facts about vaccines.... Every step of the way, we'll be guided by campaign research. We'll reach diverse audiences through strategic media placements, culturally-relevant content and community-based outreach.

PRNEWS: How will you build trust?

Sherman: We recognize that there is currently a lack of confidence and credible resources for people to go to for the vaccine, leading to mass hesitation, fear, misinformation and complacency. We've found that the messenger can be just as important as the message itself. We know working with trusted messengers and influential voices will be another key component of the effort.

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The Landscape Analysis: Five Steps to Start 2021 Off Right



To succeed in 2021, we recommend “the Landscape Analysis” as the best way to catalog, evaluate and improve your situation. The analysis answers:

- ▶ What is the environment?
- ▶ What place do we hold within this environment? Why is this so? Is it likely to continue?
- ▶ What do we need to know now to improve our position?

Even if you think you know the answers, the current atmosphere indicates a need to reassess the communication environment.

The *landscape* of which we speak is the business environment. It is comprised of external actors: your customers, competitors, shareholders, regulators, journalists, social media influencers, politicians and local community groups in cities where you conduct business.

It also incorporates the changing business, cultural and societal norms that dictate what it takes to be an admired organization. Last, it includes internal stakeholders, such as senior executives, employees and peers, to address in-house factors such as new developments within your organization.

THE LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS ENABLES COMMUNICATORS TO:

- ▶ Detect and evaluate the viability of PR opportunities
- ▶ Accurately forecast potential risks and opportunities
- ▶ Set objectives that are meaningful and measurable
- ▶ Adapt strategies and tactics to markets, trends and stakeholder priorities
- ▶ Identify ways to differentiate a value proposition
- ▶ Reaffirm understanding and gain direction among internal stakeholders
- ▶ Evaluate competitors and aspirational peers

To begin, fully understand senior executives’ expectations, preferences and values as they relate to communication: What do they value most? Least? How does PR perform against these priorities? To succeed, uncover the metrics by which senior executives measure PR success. You must also reaffirm the professional attributes they consider most and least important, as well as how well you perform against those preferences.

The Landscape Analysis involves setting the stage for what comes next: objectives setting, planning, activation and evaluation. To accelerate your Landscape Analysis and efforts to achieve a clean-slate PR rebirth, we offer five steps:

1. The most essential step in any discovery process is to know its purpose. What do you hope to learn? Which

questions must you ask, and of whom, to achieve your goal?

2. Once you set objectives, determine the research’s breadth. One meaningful factor to consider is the organization’s priorities. Does it aspire to a purpose beyond sales? In addition, think about the priorities of your internal and external stakeholders. Include executives with influence over PR funding. And those who will evaluate the PR function, as well as employees and peers in adjacent departments. The Landscape Analysis should reveal the degree to which your messaging aligns with the objectives of your organization as well as priorities of your stakeholders, domestically and internationally. Aim to gain new insight into your competitors’ activities and the extent to which they’ve succeeded or fallen short in reference to your objectives.

3. The third step requires communicators to identify what they need to know about each stakeholder. For every group, seek to learn what’s important and how PR is performing. For example, with media coverage and social media activity, assess message frequency, reach, tone and the degree to which PR delivered the intended, as well as unintended, message. For customers, demographic and firmographic information help to identify the media stakeholders favor. Media analysis, social media listening and surveys reveal the answers to these essential questions.

4. Once you understand the objectives, scope and data intelligence you need, it’s time to conduct research and probe the data with a variety of tools and methods to produce the analysis. You must also answer the essential quality-related question of ‘What’s good enough’?

5. The final step involves synthesizing and analyzing the data to uncover insight and explore implications. To draw insight from research, consider engaging marketing and HR colleagues. Only after thoughtful vetting, should you present to senior leadership findings and recommendations along with implications. Leadership’s buy-in enables you and your communication team to proceed with minimal risk. Catalogue any conclusions drawn from the Landscape Analysis meetings with top executives and attain final authorization before executing the recommended steps.

We operate in challenging times, but research and evaluation equip us to make better decisions at these moments.■

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Shaping the Toolkit: A Look at PR Services Companies and Founders

More than 100 years ago, [Ivy Lee](#) was creating PR history with theories and practices. One of the duties he and other early PR pros were tasked with doing was relaying news and announcements. The job called for press releases, once they were invented in 1906. Releases were then distributed (via mail, mostly) and results measured. It is a mistake, however, to assume PR pros did all these things alone.

Though PR service companies are underrepresented in our industry's history, they are responsible for much innovation in the sector. In fact, a few services companies date back to the late 1800s. Let's look at some of the people behind these successful businesses that helped shape PR.

MEDIA MONITORING BEFORE IT WAS COOL

In 1888, Frank Burrelle overheard several Wall Street execs complain that they lacked time to keep up with the news, even though it was very important for their work. Inspired, Burrelle leaned over and told the businessmen that he would monitor the news for them.

Burrelle's Press Clipping Bureau was started with Frank, his wife Nellie, and their friends clipping articles at a kitchen table before delivering them to clients. Meanwhile, in the same year, Robert Luce quit his job at **The Boston Globe** to focus on **Luce Press Clippings**, which he started with his brother, Linn.

ADAPTING TO THE TIMES

After Frank and Nellie Burrelle passed in the 1920s, family friends—the Wynnes—took over to keep the business alive, eventually moving the company in 1956 to a large office space in New Jersey. Burrelles successfully shaped itself to meet advancements in media and technology—and that is just one reason why it has stayed relevant, reliable and resourceful since it was founded. In 2003, Burrelles merged with Luce to enhance its media-monitoring services.

Today, the company offers a variety of monitoring and analysis tools. As its president, [Cathy Del Colle](#), says, "We are not just the 'clipping people;' we're the 'media monitoring company.'"

THROUGH THE WIRES

In 1954, Herb Muschel stared at lined-up cabs outside of an office in NYC. He realized that PR pros needed an easier, faster way to distribute press releases.

That year, he started **PR Newswire** out of his townhouse basement in Midtown East. The makeshift home office boasted 12 teletype machines, with real people operating them. Herb's wife, Dolly, graciously fed the staff. Their work resulted in distribution of press releases simultaneously from agencies to major media sources at 60 words per minute—a huge development at the time.

Muschel sparked a wave of press release distribution

services without realizing it. In 1958, Stanley H. Brams started **Press Relations Newswire** in Detroit, with Muschel's blessing after meeting with him in New York.

"We can have same-day news in Detroit now!" Herb said at the time to Stanley, according to his son, Jim Brams. The company opened four branches in Detroit, D.C., Cleveland and Atlanta—which ultimately were sold to PR Newswire in 1985, landing Jim as one of three VPs with the company for more than a decade.

The newswire trend continued in 1961 when Lorry Lokey started **Businesswire** in San Francisco, creating a harmonious rivalry and the only true competitor to PR Newswire.

A 'MOST-WANTED' WIRE

In the late 1970s, Larry Moskowitz started **Mediawire** in Pittsburgh, after accumulating a handful of clients, including the **FBI**, which used his services to distribute its famous "Most Wanted" lists.

Moskowitz ended up selling the company to PR Newswire, then joined the team as EVP, from 1983-86. Eventually, Moskowitz started **Medialink Worldwide**, which promoted the evolution of satellite technology in media and was the first and only PR service to go public.

Muschel sold PR Newswire to **Western Union** in 1971, and it has since gone through a generous number of sales and acquisitions. Today, the company finds its home at **Cision** (as of 2015). It has 35 offices around the world, with its global network reaching upward of 10,000 websites, portals, databases—and 3,000 newsrooms daily.

THE FUTURE OF PR SERVICES

While the role of the PR pro has been translated many times over, one thing is clear: the relationship between communicators and PR services remains strong, positive and mutually beneficial.

Says **IPR** trustee and PRNEWS columnist Mark Weiner: "As PR evolves, so do the services. The technological advancements and innovation in PR come from" them. They "recognized technological applications that were developed elsewhere and applied them to PR. Now, as the business shifts...they're helping PR people keep up...and stay agile."

What would Ivy Lee think of how fast a press release is distributed today? Would Frank Burrelle or Robert Luce have imagined their media-monitoring companies becoming so successful and long-standing, eventually merging? We can't say for sure—but we are fairly certain they would be happy to still be remembered. They'd also probably be amazed at how much technology has advanced and the growth of PR. ■

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Nonprofits Post Most about Vaccine; Highest Engagement for Brands Features Real People

If there's any good news from 2020 it's (for many) that several vaccines were approved and distribution has begun.

From November 1 to December 20, 2020, there were nearly 10 million consumer actions on brand and organization social posts mentioning "vaccine" on **Facebook, Instagram and Twitter**, per **Shareablee**, which provided this data to PRNEWS exclusively. Actions are the sum of shares, comments and likes.

The posts gaining the most engagement were mainly objective reporting or "positive updates about the vaccine," says Madison Busick, a marketing analyst at Shareablee. "If you look at the top emojis (below), though, it is clear that some people have mixed feelings about the vaccine and, often, the discourse around vaccines," she adds.

Excluding healthcare providers and media (the most obvious entities to post about the vaccine), the top poster by volume of content was **AARP**, with 31 posts on Facebook and 42 on Twitter. Confusion over who is next in line for the vaccine continues, and with older adults as one of the highest risk categories, it's not a surprise that **AARP content** reigns over these platforms.

The most consumer engagement on Instagram and Twitter, though, came from **PETA** and **ACLU**, respectively. Both groups issued statements on their positions regarding the vaccine.

Neither of these activist groups reg-



Source: Shareablee

TOP US COMPANIES & ORGANIZATIONS POSTING ABOUT THE COVID-19 VACCINE

Based on Total Actions (reactions, comments, and shares) 11/1/2020-12/20/2020. Excludes healthcare providers, media, and publishing companies. Source: @

RANK	MEDIA COMPANY	ACTIONS	CONTENT	ACTIONS PER CONTENT	AUDIENCE
1	AARP	77,540	31	2,501	2,075,692
2	UNICEF USA	66,459	8	8,307	761,065
3	UPS	25,224	9	2,803	1,924,885
4	The Humane Society of the United States	5,467	1	5,467	2,647,550
5	FedEx	4,411	2	2,206	2,810,966
6	TheaterMania	3,761	3	1,254	551,894
7	Faithful Central Bible Church	3,626	8	453	42,208
8	Delta Air Lines	3,483	1	3,483	3,267,357
9	Alaska Airlines	2,910	1	2,910	1,664,308
10	Johnson & Johnson	2,812	15	187	833,186

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RANK	MEDIA COMPANY	ACTIONS	CONTENT	ACTIONS PER CONTENT	AUDIENCE
1	PETA	28,227	2	14,114	1,411,350
2	Women's March	20,055	2	10,028	1,457,705
3	FIGS	19,285	1	19,285	513,335
4	Tory Burch	14,561	1	14,561	2,564,010
5	American Airlines	14,476	1	14,476	1,052,850
6	NAACP	11,697	4	2,924	1,764,671
7	UPS	11,429	3	3,810	127,955
8	New York Stock Exchange	9,214	5	1,843	437,225
9	Visit California	6,916	1	6,916	544,569
10	Barstool Sportsbook	3,765	1	3,765	442,637

TOP US COMPANIES & ORGANIZATIONS POSTING ABOUT THE COVID-19 VACCINE

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RANK	MEDIA COMPANY	ACTIONS	CONTENT	ACTIONS PER CONTENT	AUDIENCE
1	ACLU	10,139	2	5,070	1,973,989
2	UPS	3,302	8	413	249,131
3	Microsoft	1,105	2	553	9,168,946
4	Uber	1,054	1	1,054	1,050,442
5	United	1,042	2	521	1,088,107
6	Alaska Air	892	3	297	384,430
7	Audubon Society	757	3	252	182,698
8	Ryan Air	735	3	245	492,100
9	Delta	698	1	698	1,598,685
10	AARP	656	42	16	135,095

Source: Shareablee

istered the highest engagement average, though. That honor went to **FIGS**, whose 1 piece of content on Instagram received 19,285 actions. The medical scrubs provider's sole post, of healthcare workers receiving their vaccines

(wearing, of course, FIGS scrubs) indicates consumers' preference for content that is a natural fit for brands they follow. And at this moment **images showing real people getting vaccinated** seem to resonate on social. ■