



CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS:

What Do I Do Right Now?

March 18, 2020 | Jay S. Winuk

Eight Actions To Take From A Master Crisis Communications Expert

You are now facing cancelled fundraising galas, golf tournaments, annual fund drives and the challenges of asking for financial contributions when the economy is unstable.

Your communications during the COVID-19 health crisis must convey confidence that the essential work you do either continues, even if in an altered way, or will resume when life and business return to normal.

Further, the ground keeps shifting. Every day now brings new and unwelcome surprises, ones to which we must all adapt in real time. This requires you to be diligent, timely and responsive in your communications.

You would be wise to follow these [eight core tenets of crisis communications](#) as you navigate through this storm.

- **Visible Leadership:** Your communications should come from the top. Your leadership should be visible and actively engaged in developing and in the delivery of messaging. They need to own the messaging and lead your nonprofit in living by it.
- **Consistency:** Ensure that your organization's messaging stays consistent. Speak with one voice, though not necessarily delivered by one spokesperson. Avoid confusing your audiences with mixed or contradictory messages.
- **Be Truthful.** Sooner or later, mistruths come back to bite you, and people see through them. If you have hard truths to tell because of this crisis, then do so, but craft them in a way that also shines a light on the potential for positive eventual outcomes.
- **Visibility:** This is not the time to go into hiding. Instead, stay in regular contact with your constituencies. Be open, transparent to the degree appropriate and responsive in your communications. This will help build the trust you need.

- **Empathy:** Your audiences are going through their own challenges right now. It's not just your crisis but theirs, too. Acknowledge that and accommodate to it. Show empathy.
- **Facilitate Dialogue.** Invite feedback. Don't make communications a one-way street. Engage your audiences, keep them involved with you and learn from and act upon their feedback. Encourage them to share their experience. For fundraisers, this may be the time to make more phone calls than ever before and listen to your donors' experiences.
- **Communicate Internally.** Your employees, support staff and volunteers must know what direction your organization is taking, when and what it is saying to third parties, and what this crisis may mean for their job security and roles. These are your ambassadors. Keep them engaged. They must understand that the organization considers them vital, and that they have a key role to play in getting through this.
- **Think Past the Crisis.** Be creative and communicate your plans and ideas to funders and constituents. What specifically is your organization doing to steer through this? Where do you expect your organization to land when this is over?

At the nonprofit that I co-lead, [9/11 Day](#), for example, we're advising our sponsors and prospects *now* that the annual large-scale meal packing events we will again stage throughout the nation on September 11 (or perhaps later, if COVID-19 conditions dictate) will be needed more than ever by people who are at risk of hunger in those cities, and therefore *sponsors' financial support will be even more impactful when the smoke clears*. Our sponsors are universally receptive to and appreciative of this messaging.

During a crisis, it can be tempting to batten down the hatches until order is restored, or to just go into reactive mode. Don't do that. Be proactive, be clear and consistent in your messaging and be nimble. It will serve you well.

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