

Communications strategy for brands at this time of crisis

As the current crisis threatens to affect us all in ways we could have never imagined, businesses face some of the greatest challenges their leaders have experienced in their lifetimes. With this crisis, given its unique nature, notably the reductions in personal freedoms, businesses are in uncharted territory.

So, what should marketers and communicators consider and how should they adjust their strategies and communications to reflect the fast changing societal, business and media landscape?

Here are a few insights from the Brands2Life leadership team.

COMMUNICATIONS PRIORITIES

First of all, what should be the communications priorities right now? In Europe experts say we're now at the epicentre of the virus so brands must be at their most attuned to the public mood. Few businesses and consumers are buying anything but essentials so 'selling' of any form is out. Any communication a corporation makes must be focussed solely on support – support for employees and their families, customers, suppliers, local communities and, of course, the public sector workers at the front-line. It is time for simple messages about putting business aside and focussing on those that need help.

SILENCE NOT AN OPTION

Whilst we know some brands have stopped talking completely, especially on social, right now, we don't think this is time to go totally silent as people want to know what the brands they respect are doing. Moreover, poor and insufficient communication at this time can destroy trust hard won over time and will mean brands will have too much to ground to make up when we finally reach the other side.

The sharing of information about corporate initiatives to support key stakeholders, especially staff, will be of interest to both the media and the world at large. Political, market and customer intelligence, including social listening, will need be ramped up so that the latest developments can be digested and acted upon.

Managers must be equipped, immediately, with the organisation's response to the latest developments so staff can understand the implications and share information with their loved ones before they hear about it from elsewhere.

Also, any initiatives to support beleaguered suppliers or local communities should be highlighted. There are lots of examples of businesses switching resources to help the afflicted, their families and the health services. These need to be told in a factual, humble, un-self-aggrandising way.

With so much going on many stories from businesses will get lost. We recommend concentrating on a limited number that are important, relevant and align with the business's core values.

Communications strategy for brands at this time of crisis (cont'd)

GETTING THE TONE RIGHT

The right tone of voice is crucial, and many brands are adapting fast. We probably haven't ever seen such high levels of empathy in corporate communications. As this crisis is both very personal as well as global, CEOs realise they must appear truly human. It's not inconceivable that this crisis will change the way businesses communicate forever.

Maintaining this humane tone-of-voice will grow harder as, inevitably, some businesses fold, lay off staff, cut suppliers and disappoint customers. Possibly this will happen at a time when those individuals affected are also experiencing bereavements and other hardships. The scale of this crisis will challenge the values of the most compassionate employer. Those statements of purpose will be thoroughly tested. John Harrington of PR Week did a very good article recently about how coronavirus may wash out some of the 'purpose washers'. Communicators are going to have to work hard to encourage leaders to keep their open and empathetic stance as they go through that painful phase, both internally and externally.

TALKING TO BUSINESS

In the world of B2B marketing we think there is a current role for some well-chosen, low-level communications. All the above advice still applies. Businesses may not be willing to buy anything, but they will want to know how to use the products and services they already have to tackle challenges they haven't seen before. For example, a video conferencing provider might give its product away free to its customer's suppliers so they could get help. If an IT services business has expertise in using AI to help overwhelmed delivery companies, there is value there. When brands have expertise relevant to current challenges it is more than legitimate to keep communicating. And there is a critical role for social selling and ABM techniques in listening, engaging and supporting key contacts at key accounts through this period.

LOOKING FORWARD

At some point, no-one knows when, business and society will be in a position to move beyond this crisis phase and start to look forward. By then the way we live our lives will have radically changed and many organisations will look very different. Businesses will need to evolve both the strategies and the communications they were employing before the crisis.

But that discussion is for another day. In the meantime, from all of us here, look after yourselves and your loved ones and stay safe.