

B2B marketing & comms: through Covid-19 and beyond

We're going through an unprecedented moment in history right now. As we sit in a lockdown, marooned in our homes, many B2B marketing and comms leaders are asking us the question - rightly - what can/should we be doing right now?

We are entering a period that is most definitely business-as-unusual. You need only look at the supertanker of British Government and how it has had to keep re-assessing its strategy to know that the same agility is required in business as we all seek to find our place in this most bizarre and frightening of contexts. On BBC's [Coronavirus Newscast](#) this week, Laura Kuenssberg said the Government has had to pass a 'decade's' worth of policies in just a few weeks.

And yet we are still in the first 'act' of this crisis. We are nowhere near a resolution. So, our job now, as communications experts, in this moment of crisis, is to look at what's needed now.

OPEN COMMUNICATIONS

In the short term, a brand's priority lies in ensuring its employees, customers and other stakeholders have an open channel of communications. In reassuring them that the brand is doing everything it can to protect them where it can and that it is doing all it can to contribute to local and global efforts to respond to and mitigate the threat facing us. People are scared, and want sincere, helpful reassurance where we have it, and sensitive transparency where we don't.

For employees, that might be the efforts companies have made to enable WFH measures, or to protect the essential front-line workers still at work. Brands need to communicate good terms around sick pay; around ensuring jobs are available for people if businesses are closed due to state lockdown measures; compassion around people taking time off for childcare and more besides. For investors it might be more around communicating contingency measures, emergency planning, cost-cutting measures and how they are rolling out.

For external stakeholders it might be anything from how the business could retool manufacturing capacity to [produce ventilators](#), [hand sanitiser](#) and protective clothing or re-tasking software or resources to support the research effort for a cure, to mitigate the worst impact of the disease, or to support the at-risk and vulnerable in our communities. Or simply investments of cash in those endeavours.

Others still are making their services available for free to key workers navigating the crisis on our collective behalf, be that [software](#), [mobile data](#) or comms or cloud resources. Or more obliquely, providing insight into how we can stay mentally and physically healthy when working from home, or remain productive in suddenly very, very distributed teams.

A judgement needs to be made on the frequency and reach of these comms; as [Marketoologist lampoons](#), 'u ok hun' messages from brands people have no great affinity with do little for anyone involved.

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INSIGHTS FOR BRANDS ON EARNED MEDIA DURING THE CURRENT CRISIS

Most media titles are allocating the lions' share of their coverage to the impact of the pandemic right now, from a myriad of angles. Reduced staffing and footfall may diminish the impact of print media whilst online readership is (anecdotally) rising. Cutting through amidst all this requires authenticity, credibility and a scale of endeavour that is meaningful and relevant to the title, be that a retail trade (dominated by Covid and its impact) or a financial services focused title (analysing the reshaping economic landscape and its impact on the sector). There is still room for non-Covid related stories, but less than there was, and what's being pitched needs to be positioned more sensitively than in the past.

ASSESSING YOUR COMMS CHANNELS

In all cases, communicate consistently and considerately with your core stakeholders. At a scary time, people will want relevant reassurance and comms from the brands they do business with, and, after years of building and cultivating communities – this is precisely the wrong time to go quiet.

Prioritise direct comms – people need to be addressed directly before they read about the impact in the papers or hear about it at a Government press conference if possible. Look at the role local & trade media play in providing analysis into your sector and community; find opportunities to provide real insight. Think about how social media channels could be effective in addressing different stakeholders, from employees through to customers and partners, listen to what your audiences are saying, and engage appropriately.

Above-the-line may or may not be appropriate depending on the measures you are putting in place, and the potential you have of striking a chord. Some promoted content has been extremely incongruous with the state of the world as it stands; so ensure all scheduled campaigns are paused and reviewed for suitability in the current context. Be careful about being too casual in tone or doing anything that could be perceived as opportunistic; this is a global crisis and no-one should profit off it when so many will suffer.

Public sector engagement is important, despite how busy the Government is at this moment in time – if you have ideas, resources or insights that could support with mitigating any aspect of the fallout of this crisis, they will want to hear it. Whether it's in clinical research or health and social care, on the economic impact, supply chain logistics, free tech for the over 70s or food and medicines distribution. No aspect of modern society remains untouched by all this, and governments the world over are calling out for expert insight.

In all cases, carefully consider the tonality of your comms. This is a deepening crisis and one in which we have no real sense of the extent of the impact or the timing of a return to business as usual.

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FROM A PLACE OF EMPATHY

The more sensitive a communication, the less it can afford to feel like a cookie-cutter blast out. Direct, personal, personalised communication using the lessons learned from Account Based Marketing and the humanity only a good amount of empathy can offer is key.

Indeed, in a crisis, comms tends to become a more pivotal function; guiding the business in how to take steps that will help it mitigate risk and missteps when difficult decisions need to be taken.

There's no question that many organisations will need to go through cost-control measures in spite of the Government's best efforts to protect everyone. Guiding leaders in the business on how to frame and manage really challenging, really sensitive communications internally and externally is critical. As is playing a role in leadership discussions to help executives understand the implications of decisions once taken, and on occasion to find alternative routes to addressing them.

At a time when many in the organisation are anxious, fearful for their safety and that of their family, the comms team needs to support the conscience of the business.

LATER IN THE CRISIS

It's too early to know where things will land what we'll be facing off against later in this crisis. We'll continue to monitor and share updates even as we practice what we preach within our own workplace – or rather, virtual workplaces.

In the meantime, when you communicate, ask and answer these three questions before you hit send, publish or pick up the phone:

- Does this message continue to have relevance and resonance in a changed world?
- Is it sensitive to the reality we are facing?
- Will people still care, and will they share?

In the world today, we're all in need of hope and optimism. Brands sometimes have a role to play, but most of us are unused to dealing with consequences of this magnitude. We are entering a period of more thoughtful, more considered communications.

We wish you well as you navigate it all. We're here if you need us.