

COVID – 19

Communications Strategy



Vibrant people who deliver. Simple

COVID - 19

Communications Strategy

04

Protect your business, plan
your response

Tim Jotischky, Head of Enterprise

07

Keeping customers engaged
during turbulent times

*Shelley Frosdick , Divisional Managing Director,
Consumer*

10

Social media management

Hayley Coleby, Head of Social Media

In difficult times we can all hide under the duvet and wait for it all to go away, or we can use the time to ensure we are ahead when things calm down. Assured, thoughtful leadership is what the country needs, and businesses are no different. However bad a situation is, there is an opportunity to take on tasks you may normally be too busy to attend to.

Whether you are a small company or large, your reputation online is vital whether that needs improving or simply refreshing for the comeback down the line. New digital content says your brand is modern, a leader in its field and more important in times of trouble, it is showing confidence.

So, the first thing is to create some fresh and credible content to tell your story. Do you know what your customers' needs will be in the future, as much as you know what they want now? Think ahead of the curve and the rebound will be faster and more productive.

Are you dealing with the critics of your business, particularly those online which everyone can read? There are ways of removing them, or just as effectively addressing the issues in positive content you create yourself. We all have experiences of going online looking for a craftsman or an expert only to find one of the comparison sites is carrying negative remarks from previous customers. Do we still hire them, no way?!



The first rule of crisis management is to put a perspective on it. Well the chief medical officer has indicated that less than one per cent of the population will be adversely affected by the Coronavirus in a serious way and many of those people are beyond working age. So rather than retreat, now is the time to galvanise your brand, your reputation and take this opportunity to be ready for the future.

If you need expert advice, call and we will show you how to frame your future.



Phil Hall
Chairman

Protect your business, plan your response

Tim Jotischky, Head of Enterprise



Analysis



Assessment



Strategy



Control



Plan



Evaluate



Process



Review

Let's make no bones about this: none of us have ever experienced anything remotely comparable to what is happening right now.

Coronavirus has already had a seismic economic impact on us all, affecting every business and every family in the country, but we don't yet know how bad it will get or how this will end. We are in uncharted waters. When planning your response to the crisis, that's the first factor to bear in mind. There is no point trying to pretend you can predict the future, or that you can put in place a plan that you won't have to rip up in weeks or even days. It's not a failure to admit that; this is a fast-moving situation and you need to be nimble in your response, not wedded to a strategy that might quickly become outdated.

That mindset should inform how you communicate to your staff, partners, suppliers and clients. Don't pretend you have all the answers – indeed, there may be more questions than answers at this stage and your job is not resolve them all, rather it is to show that you are aware of them, sensitive to obvious concerns, and are addressing them in the best way you can, given the information currently available.

1

Keep communicating

That might sound obvious, but when you are unsure what, or how much, to say the temptation is to stay silent. That is the wrong approach and will simply fuel uncertainty.

2

Be transparent

Take it step by step: provide what information you can and admit what you don't know. It is better to communicate correct pieces of information incrementally than to provide responses which you might need to correct soon after issuing them.

3

Segment your audience

The messages you want to communicate won't necessarily be the same for each of your different stakeholders so think about the different audiences you need to address and tailor your responses to each of them accordingly.

4

Internal communications

In difficult situations, businesses sometimes focus on reassuring their clients and customers but forget about their staff. The coronavirus crisis has made everyone fear for their jobs and their futures; your people need to know that you understand that. Your staff can be your most important ambassadors.

5

Sensitive information

To understand that anything you say to your staff could quickly become public knowledge. Don't imagine you can say one thing to your staff and another to your customers without being compromised. Social media has made everyone their own publisher and, whatever measures you put in place to try to prevent them sharing sensitive information, it's always best to assume they will fail.

The coronavirus crisis is still unfolding, but the Government mishandled its initial response in communicating with the public. Trying to deal with the media in the way they always had, through off-the-record briefings or planted stories with selected journalists, didn't work. It quickly realized its mistake and reverted to daily televised briefings.

There are two lessons to be learned from this.

First, the obvious one about transparency; ministers need to bring us with them as they grapple with uniquely complex challenges, just as businesses need to bring all their stakeholders with them on this uncertain, unpredictable journey.

The second, less obvious, lesson is about pivoting. Don't assume you can do things in the way you have always done them before. The coronavirus crisis will change many aspects of your business for good – and it might also change the way you choose to communicate.

Take the opportunity to review the structures you have in place and whether you need a different approach:

- ✓ **Do you have the in-house capacity to communicate effectively?**
- ✓ **Do you need to focus more on internal communications?**
- ✓ **Do you need help with your messaging as you try to adjust to the new realities that the coronavirus has imposed on your business?**
- ✓ **Do you need media training to help you communicate your messages more effectively?**
- ✓ **Do you need ongoing strategic counsel in the months ahead?**

'Never let a good crisis go to waste' is a frequently heard business maxim. There is nothing good about the coronavirus crisis. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to come out of it the other side with a business that is better equipped to deal with any future challenges you might face –because none are likely to be as daunting as this one.

Keeping customers engaged during turbulent times

Shelley Frosdick, Divisional Managing Director, Consumer



**Target
market**



Advertising



Strategy



Customers



Innovation



Awareness



Marketing

During these uncertain times brands should be adhering to strict communication rules as information from central governing bodies changes daily, in some cases hourly. However, communicating effectively with your customer base has never been so important.

We have seen brands across the world pause marketing activity, draw back on advertising spending whilst they plan a way to best communicate and engage with customers amid the coronavirus outbreak. Logistics, manufacturing and sales have all seen an impact. With the hospitality, retail and travel industries set to face the biggest challenges. We have seen store closures, a decline in retail footfall and changes in consumer sentiment have prompted companies including global businesses like Burberry and tech giant Apple revise their annual forecasts.

So, what can businesses do during this time to ensure you continue to engage with your customer base and stabilise your business.

Virtual becoming a reality

We have seen an acceleration in trends for live streaming, video sites, gaming and esports as more and more people across the UK self-isolate. In February when the first isolation measures were brought in in China, average weekly downloads of apps jumped 40% compared to 2019, and gaming downloads were up 80% versus 2019.

With reduced footfall on high streets and a restriction on social gatherings, the effectiveness of out of home advertising and its ability to reach consumers means that brands need to think differently about how they can keep visibility high.

As more people stay at home, self-isolation and quarantine measures will likely increase media consumption including across social media, online newspaper subscriptions, blogs, forums and chatrooms. Ensuring you have a strong online presence or focusing your efforts to improve your company's SEO could provide extremely valuable as we migrate towards a world where digital and virtual communication is the focus.

Many consumers are turning to the online space as a place for escapism, they want brands to keep their social channels 'normal' and for content to still be informative, aspirational and engaging. We can't escape Coronavirus on the news channels, and social media is a place that can offer some light relief so think about how your brand can play its part in this.

Content is still king

Whilst the 24-hour news channels and front pages of national papers are dominated by the Coronavirus epidemic, there are many other media titles that need content that isn't focused on Coronavirus. It's so important to remember that there is still a huge part of the UK media that is focused on consumer, lifestyle, fashion, beauty, food, homes etc – the list is a long one! These titles, and the journalists that write for them still need brands to work with them, not only for the issues they are working on now, but for the issues they are working on that will publish in July, August and beyond. Think about your consumer base and where they normally see you, don't switch that visibility off, keep your brand as part of the mix and support the media titles that need brands to work with.

Investing in your community

Unlike traditional advertising, which is often a one-way dialogue between a brand and its customers, PR is built around creating and nurturing two-way relationships.

When there is so much uncertainty for so many businesses and consumers at this time, people will look to those they trust for information, advice, and to aid their purchasing decisions. Promoting case studies, real life experiences and the positive efforts your business is taking can help to influence consumer decisions.

Equally where businesses can show their 'human side', promote their CSR efforts or how they are supporting their employees and customers can also help.

Messaging and planning

Regular public relations ensure that crucial relationships are already in place when you might need support.

Companies that invest in PR are ensuring that their story is constantly being reviewed and refreshed and relationships built and nurtured. Not only is that attractive to customers, prospects and search engines, but it keeps an organisation sharp and continually thinking about the messages it is sharing. If you are having difficulties with your supply chain, logistics or reduced workforce, PR can help ensure you inform your customer base quickly, with clear messaging and in a targeted way.

We have seen countless clients release positive stories and reviews on high-domain authority websites which have resulted in sales or leads instantly, and in the future. These pieces appear regularly on page one of a search engine results, sometimes months or even years after they were written. Think about how you can secure engagement in these areas and build foundations for the future, as well as now. In the weeks to come as uncertainty heightens and we all move to a way of living that is a long way from the norm, we cannot advise enough how important open and honest communication is. Engage with your consumer base, listen to what they are saying and support them in the best way you can as we all navigate this ever-changing landscape.

Covid-19 Social Media Crisis Management

Hayley Coleby, Head of Social Media



Network



Interaction



Web



Follow



Chat



Like



Tweet



Viral

SOCIAL

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant effect on businesses around the world, drastically altering their operations and short-term planning. It has also forced companies to assess how best they communicate with their audiences online, with some pressing questions needing to be answered.

- **Do you proceed with your normal social media strategy?**
- **Do you need to update customers on how the pandemic has affected your business?**
- **How long will it be until you can resume normal communications with your audience?**

In times of crisis, which we would classify the coronavirus outbreak as for businesses, it is essential that your communications plan is aligned, and you are ready to respond to fall out. Our social media crisis management team at The PHA Group explain what that entails:

Firstly, it is vital that you take a virtual step back from your social channels and assess the current landscape. Is your audience demanding a response from you online? Has the pandemic altered sentiment towards your brand? Is your company's wider sector particularly damaged by the outbreak?

At this early stage, we would advise postponing your always-on activity, including scheduled posts, in order to avoid any inadvertently insensitive content being published. Many brands have been guilty in the past of putting a successful response in place to neutralise a crisis on social media, only for it all to be undone by a wayward scheduled post containing unfortunate subject matter or copy.

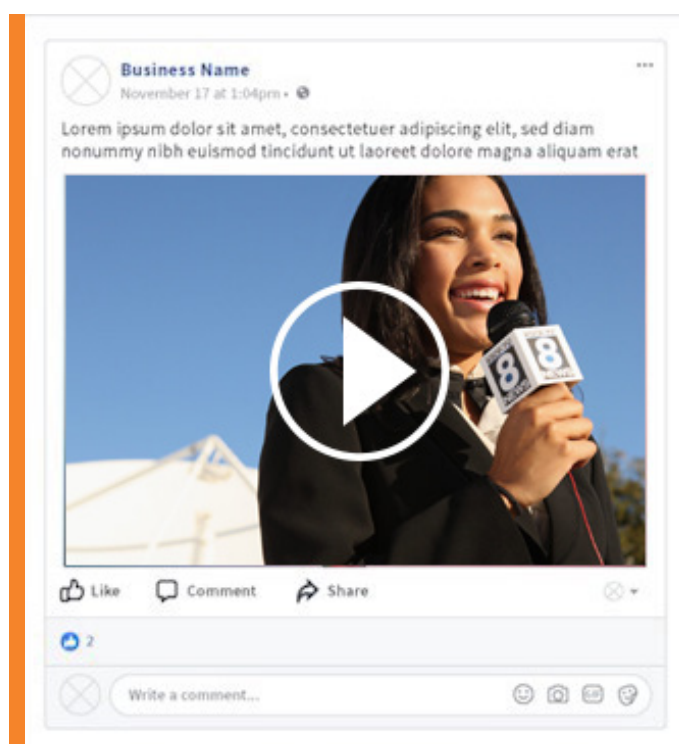
Ideally, your company's communications team will have a crisis contingency plan in place that can be unpacked and launched at this time. Such a plan would dovetail PR and 'traditional' crisis activity with a fully-fledged social media response to create an aligned and united front

Our ethos at The PHA Group is that you can't have one without the other: a statement issued to press needs to be replicated on social media, or a 'state-of-play' media report needs to possess social media analysis, to provide just two examples.

Communication with your audience is key during a crisis. You cannot simply bunker down and avoid contact with your audience.

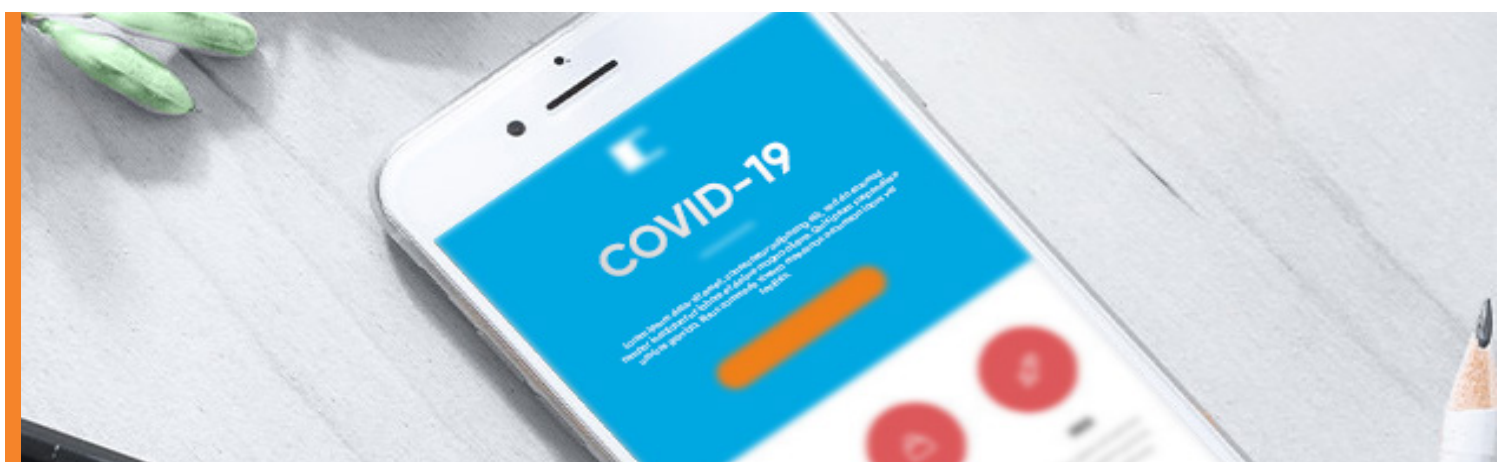
Whilst resolving the crisis internally should be your priority, your audience still expect some form of communication during testing times. In a crisis as widespread as the current coronavirus pandemic, where the effects are far reaching and many brands provide a service that will likely be impeded, it is vital you optimise the lines of communication with your audience..

Communication with your audience can take many forms. Perhaps the most hard-hitting and effective is a statement that is published onto the feed of a social channel, and in some cases pinned in order to catch the attention of visiting users. Statement posts act as an anchor from which users can respond and engage, keeping all communications within one single post without having to flood your timeline. Typically, a statement will feature a link back to site where users can read more information and get in touch with staff, in order to avoid mass inundation on the channel timeline and worsening the crisis.



Other forms of communication include a video message from a senior figure addressing the situation. Such a video is short and concise and can often carry a more personal feel. Such a media asset can even lead to a spike in positive sentiment during such difficult times. Perhaps the most long-form and informative method is a Q&A on your website that blanket answers all questions your audience is likely to have about the situation. However, a Q&A can feel impersonal and should only be implemented alongside a wider response such as a personal message from a senior figure.

If you've opened the email app on your phone in recent days, you'd have likely seen several emails from companies you're subscribed to, from takeaway apps to cinemas, supermarkets to estate agents, sharing their 'Covid-19 Update' and informing you of changes to their service. Such direct email communication can supplement any statement you share on your social feeds and website. Above all, it carries a more personal touch than perhaps a social post or website Q&A can possess, especially if it comes from a company owner or spokesperson.



In such uncertain times as we currently face, it can be hard to determine when this crisis will resolve itself and companies can return to normality. Those of you who have read about the pandemic in the press will know that we could face several weeks in the current limbo. With that in mind, it is important you have a crisis content strategy in place.

Some brands, particularly in the consumer space, will have to abandon planned campaigns surrounding summer holidays, for example, or school half-term. Brands in the fitness sector may need to reassess what products they can promote to users who are likely confined to their homes.

That is not to say that opportunities may not arise for more creative and inventive campaign ideas that make the most of the current situation. We've seen fashion brands promote 'working from home' clothing ranges to great response, whilst the Football Manager gaming series have taken advantage of thousands of 'work from homers' by offering free downloads of the game for free for a week.

Such content helps to keep your social media feeds and communities alive and go a long way to still being able to achieve your always-on KPIs. More importantly, it helps to maintain crucial audience interaction and engagement, keeping sentiment levels in the green.

During times of crisis, social listening is perhaps the most useful tool in your arsenal. Such software enables you to 'unlock the door' and investigate your audience's social media interactions to discover the extent of the conversation surrounding your brand, including audience impressions and the channels within which these are taking place. More crucially, social listening software allows you to see current sentiment levels towards your company, a metric that we often use as a barometer to determine the size of the crisis. This can help set trajectory and timeframes and act as a signal as to when normality can resume for your strategy.



During past social media crisis situations that we have managed at The PHA Group, we have been guided by such data to correctly determine how best to proceed and when to return to normal service. In short, let the data drive your response.

Which brings us on to our last insight: when should a company return to social media normality? We essentially answered that question in the above paragraph. When negative sentiment directed towards your brand have declined, and volume of crisis mentions have declined, that is typically the time to return to normal and restart your pre-crisis strategy.

However, in the current situation that we face, we must bear in mind the wider climate. As the pandemic begins to subside and media attention starts to switch to other issues, you will know if it is the right time to unpin your statement, take down your website Q&As and revert to business as usual tactics. If you are experiencing difficulties with your social media strategy in the current climate, talk to one of our experts today.

The PHA Group
Hammer House
117 Wardour Street
London
W1F 0UN

020 7025 1350
info@thephagroup.com



Vibrant people who deliver. Simple