

Communicating During a Crisis

COVID-19 Proves Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance

Richard Shippee and Brunella Reid

There are times when a marketer's role in crisis communications is so crucial it becomes a defining career moment.

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing quarantine has been one of those moments.

But while COVID-19 might be one of the most severe crises in the past few decades, another disaster eventually will emerge, and firms and marketers that pay close attention learn from this situation.

With every challenge comes an opportunity. Professional service marketers now, more than ever, are the voice of the firm, and their contributions will not only impact how they are seen as strategic leaders but also how they create long-term value and engender client loyalty.

Gorana Stojanovic, global executive director of communications and strategy of PrimeGlobal, a Top 5 global association of independent accounting firms, said firms should focus on being trusted advisors in a time like this.

"We are noticing that across all our firms, the trusted advisor status has been considerably enhanced, which will have a positive impact for years to come," Stojanovic said. "Firms should use this to their advantage to show real value for their clients, but make sure to help out in a way that's meaningful, not opportunistic."

Stojanovic recommends firms cancel previously scheduled posts and adjust

their content, keeping it simple and relevant.

"Government policies and advice are changing daily and sharing relevant information can be a great resource for clients if done right," she said. "Communicate about how you can support clients' most immediate needs, particularly access to financial relief. Corporate transactions are not on the agenda right now, so teams are providing advice to build financial resilience long term, providing huge value and building client loyalty. This is the message that needs to shine through in all comms."

She also advises firms to be mindful of tone deafness or pushy paid digital advertising right now and to show empathy in all messaging, "especially when you need clients to take action during this difficult time."

While many professional services marketers might feel better prepared in leveraging appropriate content, most feel unprepared and downright nervous when dealing with crisis communications.

Jackson Spalding, one of the Southeast's largest independent marketing communications agencies, has helped clients navigate these difficult times. When asked about the biggest mistake firms make in a time of crisis, Bryan Harris, who manages crisis projects for a number of the firm's clients, says firms should stay away from making predictions in the moment based on limited knowledge.

"Many leaders made bold proclamations at the beginning of this situation related to its impact on the

country or their business that now look naive," Harris said. "Leaders need to be honest with their people, especially in a crisis."

Firms should ensure not to create a "trust gap" where leaders have to "fall back on those original words," he added.

Focusing directly on the COVID-19 crisis and the steps CPA firms have taken over the past several months can provide us with a roadmap.

"Agility and responsiveness are key," said Jill Jacobs, chief marketing officer at Friedman LLP. "In a crisis situation, it is hard to predict where things will go next, so you should plan for different scenarios and be willing to adjust course quickly."

Drilling down, Jacobs said the COVID-19 crisis had its unique characteristics. "We asked, 'what are the communications objectives, who are the stakeholders we need to reach, and what problematic scenarios do we want to avoid?'"

Here's how Friedman segmented their audiences:

- **Employees:** They zeroed in on steps taken to keep workplaces safe, then quickly moved to communications about remote working arrangements. As the crisis unfolded, they addressed new goals, such as keeping team spirits up while working apart for an extended period of time.
- **Clients:** Reassuring clients was key, including service continuity, how to reach key personnel and how to send records securely. It was

➤ Continued on page 19

also crucial to provide clients with financial information and resources such as CARES Act guidance to help them deal with the crisis.

- **General public:** They created a COVID-19 Resource Center offering articles, webinars, and other timely, original content.
- **Press:** This meant responding quickly to urgent media deadlines, ensuring all spokespeople had the same resources and messages, assigning senior partners specific roles/topics when it came to media engagement and proactively highlighting how Friedman was helping clients through the crisis. They also made sure to have flexible statements prepared in case any stock questions are asked by the press (such as work-from-home arrangements, employee safety, etc.).

A key lesson Jacobs and her team learned was to communicate early and often.

“In a highly dynamic situation — especially one with almost no prior roadmap — issues will arise on a nearly constant basis,” Jacobs said. “So having mechanisms in place for rapid response enables management to get the word out quickly.”

What were some of Friedman’s go-to methods? Regular virtual town halls, numerous internal and external emails, daily alerts for clients and others, active engagement on social media, news releases and other tactics.

Jacobs’ conclusion is that “a successful response to a crisis is an enormous opportunity to demonstrate your values to clients, employees and other stakeholders. Once this crisis is behind us, stakeholders will remember who stepped up to the plate, and who didn’t.”

Many firms, like Friedman, have the resources to work with a full-service public relations agency. Yet, in times of crisis, firms of almost any size can find it exceptionally helpful, and affordable, to work on a project basis with a public

relations firm.

“Everything in crisis communications is now seen through the lens of COVID-19,” said Seth Linden, president of Dukas Linden Public Relations. “That’s understandable and expected, but even more important is for the C-Suite to have a team of trusted agency advisors to help steer them through storms. Crises occur even during normal economic times and require thoughtful guidance.”

More specifically, Linden said, is the need for a PR agency serving an accounting firm to have a significant grasp of the industry characteristics affecting the firm’s clients.

“This is why PR agencies will have specialists in financial services in order to be of value to a CPA firm with a substantial client base in hedge funds or private equity,” Linden said.

When it comes to a crisis, however, the relationships between the client and PR team can radically change.

“First, we have standard operating procedures built into a PR/client crisis plan, such as immediate access to the managing partner. It is vital to have that senior-level relationship and a high level of trust, with trust being the key word. Trusted agencies and their clients will even have a closely-held project code word in place so that members of the C-Suite can discuss highly confidential matters with their agency — even if the matter is of a positive nature such as an acquisition or a rebranding effort,” Linden said.

While the agency’s client relationship partner usually has the relationship with the CPA firm’s managing partner or the marketing partner-in-charge, in terms of overall PR strategy, when a crisis hits, the specialists come into play.

“An agency often has an account manager with a background as a business or financial services reporter,” Linden said.

This specialist crafts and pitches a responsive crisis message to reporters

and editors at publications and websites. Similarly, an agency also likely will have an executive coach on staff or on call, whose job will be to work on the messages the firm’s leadership will provide to various audiences, including staff, clients and the media.

The success or failure of a crisis communications strategy, particularly in the era of instant social media communications, depends on how well (and sometimes how early) the superstructure of the plan has already been put into place so the messaging can start immediately and proceed efficiently, drawing on a pre-existing measure of trust and candor, Linden said.

Whether a firm works with a PR agency or not, the two key lessons to learn, Linden said, “are to learn from a crisis to help plan for the next one — because there will be a next one — and to develop a media communications style of proactivity that builds goodwill and trust among the media serving the client’s industry.”

“A crisis,” Linden said, “should not define the client’s profile or long-established reputation.”

Following these best practices will allow professional services marketers to not only survive a crisis but also to better position their firms — and themselves — as valuable, strategic thought leaders. The value created by accounting firms during these challenging times is bound to generate goodwill and loyalty for years to come while preparing you for the next crisis.

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