

10 Tips for strategic public relations during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This practical paper enumerates 10 tips for strategic communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by data, the tips focus on knowing your audience, having empathy for what they are going through and having an understanding of how people's perception of the relative value of mainstream media and social media as information sources has changed during the pandemic crisis. The paper emerged from a podcast interview organized by Dave Scholz at Léger with Alex Sévigny which focused on the rise of social media that happened during the pandemic, caused by the widespread and sudden movement to working from home across the economy.

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The COVID-19 pandemic that spread across the world in early 2020 triggered a sudden movement to working from home as self-isolation and sheltering-in-place became necessary means of slowing the spread of the pandemic. Whole workforces had to suddenly shift their worklives from the traditional office to their home offices, as public spaces were emptied to allow people to maintain a safe physical distance from one another. This led to a rebalancing of which sources people turn to for information about the pandemic and current affairs. The list of tips that follow are based on the COVID-19 pandemic edition of the "Social Media Reality Check" study run annually in partnership by Léger and McMaster Master of Communication Management Research Lab (Sévigny & Scholz, 2020). The tips were inspired by a very fruitful podcast discussion between Sévigny and Scholz that took place in May, 2020 (Scholz & Sévigny, 2020).

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Ten tips for strategic public relations and communications during the COVID-19 pandemic

1. Recognize the importance of the moment.

This is an extremely important moment in people's lives. People have a heightened awareness of it. It will live on in their memory for a long time -- they will likely tell stories about their experience of the pandemic for the rest of their lives. You want your contribution to this unique moment to be memorable in a positive, constructive way. If you are going to be part of their life-narrative, you want to be remembered and mentioned in a positive fashion. Times of crisis are times when people are most susceptible to life changes and re-framing of personal values and priorities. This is a great time to build a relationship with people who may not have been open to that in the past or to deepen your public relationships in ways that could be very beneficial to you once the pandemic is over. The positive, warm relationship bonds you forge with people during this time of need will be long-lasting.

2. Everyone is not experiencing it the same way.

While data from Léger (2020) show that people have a lot in common during the pandemic, such as working from home through a digital platform, sheltering in place, etc., it doesn't mean that they are all living through it the same way. For example, working mothers and single parents are experiencing it quite differently because, given prevailing social norms, working from home over a digital platform is something they have to do on top of 24/7 child care because of closed schools as well as household maintenance. It's physically and emotionally hard and very stressful for them. Same with people who are essential workers - their pandemic is different from that of others. International students are often finding it a very isolating experience. Get to know your audience. So that your communications with them can be empathetic and understanding of their experience of the pandemic. Showing people that you understand and care about them by validating their experiences will be very memorable to them post-pandemic, when they are thinking quietly and taking stock of their pandemic experience.

3. People are using social media differently.

Social media use pre-pandemic was often programmed around people's structured days. People would consult their phone while commuting, during breaks from work, lunch, and just before bed. Now that people's days are less structured, they are using social media in a less passive way and in a more intentional way. That means that they are paying a lot more attention to what they are looking at, rather than glancing and sharing casually as something to do or as a distraction while on break at work. Since people are paying more attention, it means that you should be more intentional in what you post. You want to be a positive part of their life, bringing something useful, credible and hopeful to them.

4. People are sharing less mainstream news on social.

Social sharing of mainstream media news stories has gone down, as people's use of social has become more intentional. A typical behaviour pre-pandemic would be to check your phone during a commute, see an interesting story, verify the credibility of the poster and your alignment with them, read the headline and the lead, and then share -- almost absent-mindedly. This passive use of social media has been replaced with less frequent but more intentional use during the pandemic, which means that people are sharing less, but that their sharing is more meaningful and impactful on their opinions. Consider amplifying stories that feature your brand or organization and to help amplify them. Plan these posts out so that they make sense with your other posts that day. Remember that it takes about 4 hours to a post to work its way through Facebook's algorithm and be disseminated to your page's "likers". Allow the time for your posts to breathe and take life. Be cautious with social media advertising during the pandemic as it can be seen as opportunistic, unless you are using paid advertising to share useful or vital information.

5. People are getting more info from TV.

Sévigny and Scholz (2020) have shown that use of social media has plummeted and that television is up as a means of gaining information. This is the first time that these trends have reversed in 10 years. Since the mix is different, and television is so prominent (56% of people say that television is their main source of information during this crisis), make sure you watch the PM and your Premier/Territorial Leader on television as well as current affairs shows that are discussing what the day's announcements have said. Be sure to pick up on the tone, style and priorities you see on television and position your social media posts appropriately in relation to them.

6. Post useful, empathetic, hopeful, credible content.

During a crisis, where most people are at home, the data suggest that they are consulting social media fewer times a day, but paying more attention to posts. Post useful things: share information on government measures that might be helpful or tip sheets on how to apply for programs. Empathize with people's challenges during the pandemic by validating their experiences - don't argue with people's suffering or preach to them. Just listen and empathize/sympathize if possible. Post hopeful content that makes people smile or gives them something to look forward to. Finally, post credible content - stay in your lane and post things that people will be willing to believably receive from you.

7. Know your audience.

During this pandemic, when people are using social media less, but in a more intentional fashion, it is even more important than normal to do some basic research to know your audience. Get an understanding of the demographics of your audiences. Do you have many essential workers? Do you have many people who do not have internet access? Do you have many people who are members of various vulnerable populations? Do you have a lot of single parents? Do you have a lot of people whose first language isn't French or English?

8. Practice social listening.

While you probably already do some social listening by monitoring your brand or organization's social channels, you might think of broadening the scope of your social listening to gain an understanding of how people in your riding are experiencing the pandemic. Use popular stable hashtags (eg. in Hamilton, #HamOnt) to listen to the stories people are telling about their experiences. Learn from this. Incorporate some of these concerns, topics and jokes in your narratives as you post daily. This can make your MP feel more relatable to people who are having a shared experience. They will also give you valuable insights into what local media might be thinking about or preparing to write up as news stories.

9. Humanize yourself and let people in.

Showing that your executive suite, staff, volunteers are affected by the pandemic is important. Make them relatable by showing their human side. How are they finding working from home? How is the office functioning? Is everyone practicing social distancing and hand washing? Providing little vignettes or video updates is a great way of sharing the message that your workforce are cheerfully working. You might even share some (appropriately) funny moments as well.

10. Recognize that not everyone is on social media.

In all of Canada roughly 88% of people are users of social media (Séigny & Scholz, 2020). Remember however, that their access to and use of it varies widely. Many lower income people and seniors may be depending on the public library for social media. That is not an option for them while the library is closed, so they are likely without access to the internet. Same thing for rural populations, where access to broadband either through cellular or cable/DSL is very limited. Be aware of these populations in your riding. Find out who the "connector people" might be who may be able to bring messages from your social channels to these folks who don't have internet access. Possibly develop messaging and give the "connectors" a mission to bring your empathetic, useful and hopeful messaging to the folks who don't have internet access.

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