7 Steps to Effective Public Sector Communications in COVID-19

The one sector of society that did not shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic is government and public health agencies. The public has been facing a crisis of compromised health, confidence and financial security and national governments have had to communicate on all fronts as ongoing policy measures had to be taken to protect citizens and their national economy. A successful response to the pandemic requires a co-ordinated multi-stakeholder effort to communicate the information around it, with clear public leadership.

Once the containment phase of the crisis ends, the focus will shift towards economic rebound. In the transition to recovery, citizen attitudes and behaviours will be shaped by the severity and frequency of potential new virus outbreaks, and the effectiveness of the government response for both health and economic measures. Public sector communicators now need to engage with the public in rolling out vaccination programs, whilst working with business and industry towards economic rebuilding.

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GOVERNMENT

Communications
at Large

More than ever, the acceptance of public policies depends on consistent and effective communication as a first line of action. This needs to be leveraged for several objectives linked to successful COVID-19 communications, such as the public's confidence in their country's ability to cope with and recover from the pandemic, personal behaviour changes, and being the most trusted source of information. Whilst communications alone is not the solution to the pandemic, it is a significant public health intervention. Effective public sector communications is crucial in engaging citizens and the business community.

The response efforts from government have an impact on the ongoing level of trust from citizens, influencing their reaction and cooperation with lockdown measures and other protocols put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. Consistent and transparent communication is the first line of action for public institutions at all levels. Public sector agencies and departments are constantly having to adjust their COVID-19 strategies and need to communicate them with the right constituents and stakeholders.

Effective Public Communications
in 7 Steps

Governments therefore need a way to send trusted, accurate and reliable information on a regular basis as the situation changes across the country and even the world. W7 WORLDWIDE produced the '7 Steps to Effective Public Sector Communications in COVID-19' Guide as a tool to help public sector organizations and agencies manage the ongoing communications challenges of the crisis:

Compliance with pandemic response efforts requires trust in government, confidence in its policies and its ability to deliver them, plus a belief that its information can be relied upon. Any delay by governments to communicate decisively, even about the unknowns of the pandemic, will leave space for misinformation to propagate as people search elsewhere for answers. In fact, being clear about uncertainty is important to convey scientific advice that is subject to change with emerging evidence from consistent official sources.

Health experts played a key role in the development of policies throughout, but there has also been a strong emphasis on information management as a key element in effective crisis management. Governments around the world are utilizing data and information systems to provide crucial insights about the spread of the virus and the management of this pandemic.

Government portals play a key role in providing up-to-date information to citizens and the business community and in providing access to financial support and other governmental initiatives to deal with COVID-19. Providing trusted information is therefore essential to effective leadership and management of the crisis.

② Work Closely with the Media

Media works as a bridge between government and society and in the pandemic plays a significant role in making people aware about the situation, calm down fears and encourage them to take positive action. Business media is mostly interested in the impact on the nation's economy and how this will affect companies, industries, and employees. Journalists covering government and the public sector are solely focused on the policy, societal and economic implications of COVID-19. At this time government beat reporters are stretched to the limit covering the steps public officials and public sector agencies at all levels are taking to manage the crisis for their constituents.

TV and online newspapers are key sources of information about COVID-19 the public go to. While evidence and data are imperative to building a case and explaining a strategy in public campaigning, facts can only take you so far. As we have seen from the pandemic, the most powerful and inspiring communicators have been those who have taken facts and used them to tell a story that we can all understand and relate to. These tactics will create an emotional response and demonstrate government's empathy and understanding of the perils its citizens face.

③ Digital Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the acceleration in digital change for public sector organizations which have had to implement new platforms, applications, and systems at a remarkable rate to give them the tools they need to cope with increased demand on services and for up-to-date information. Adopting systems and platforms which enable them to keep the lines of communication open with citizens and the business community build a deeper sense of engagement in the process.

Digital engagement initiatives by governments can help people cope with the crisis, improve government operations, and help tackle economic challenges in a way that keeps all stakeholders involved. Social media use has grown among the general population, becoming a major source of information and government organizations around the world have widely adopted these platforms. Public sector communicators need to harness the opportunity of the current increased interest for sustained engagement to grow their audiences via digital channels.

4 Meet the Communication Needs of Younger Demographics

Most government communication still works on a one-way or broadcast model, which has its place. But research shows that when government communicators actually engage in dialogue with younger citizens, instead of just broadcasting to them, their messages are much more effectively received. When it comes to current pandemic-related information, communicators may try to get creative with interesting video, audio, and image-based content, but audiences are more likely to engage with content that involves dialogue. Young people in particular are likely to tune out broadcast-style messages because they have grown up with social media that is created around dialogue.

Communicators need to understand their target audience, demographics, and behaviour to be able to go where they reside and engage with them in their preferred communication style. Some might argue that a message suitable for social media channels such as Twitter or TikTok from a well-known and respected influencer would be too short or inappropriate to convey the seriousness of COVID-19 prevention. Some governments have formally enlisted the help of prominent influencers to help manage the information landscape during the pandemic, as they have been designated to disseminate information on social media to make up for the fact that government communication doesn't reach everyone.

The constant need to update about an unpredictable and fast evolving threat, when advice which was correct one day can be completely out of date the next, calls for direct messaging to everyone who needs to know as fast and efficiently as possible. Amid a fluid situation, where lives are literally at stake, governments and national health services cannot rely on populations all regularly reading website updates, seeing announcements on social media, or watching television news to find out the latest advice.

Global mobile device usage is expected to reach more than **5.5bn users by 2022.** One of the best ways to get mass penetration of essential new instructions or advice is to use a phone-based public warning and communication system. Direct messaging is also an effective way to quickly counter misinformation before it gets out of control on social media. Misinformation only flourishes in a vacuum, so communications from trusted sources direct to peoples' phones cuts through this noise, helping to build trust.

Public-private partnerships are a necessary route to recovery, as governments alone are not equipped to provide the full range of services and expertise needed to mobilise the economy and ramp up digital capabilities. Partnerships with key industry leaders and business sectors are especially needed when the problem at hand is one that requires innovative solutions and expertise that can respond to the current, rapidly-changing landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic expanded governments' reliance on the private sector and vice versa.

The resourcefulness of the technology sector for example has resulted in their integration into public partnerships. The tech sector has been able to assist the public sector with system detection and diagnosis, patient tracking, contamination prevention, and protection of citizens. Partnerships between governments, private sector and community organizations are crucial in achieving mission critical communications to achieve specific results.

Public sector communicators can achieve these aims by using case studies and anecdotes from firms who contribute to the country's efforts to deal with the crisis. There needs to be promotion on how public-private partnerships delivered when the people needed them most, and how these lessons can be integrated into the public sector market going forward. Individual organizations, industry and trade bodies representing specific business sectors need two-way engagement, so their voices are represented in the sustainable rebuilding of the economy. COVID-19 has seen a high level of lobbying and public affairs activity as businesses seek to influence the policies employed by governments to manage the economic fallout of the pandemic. See W7 WORLDWIDE's 'Guide on Public Affairs in COVID-19' 'Guide on Public Affairs in COVID-19' on how to galvanise the support of the business community.

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As governments and public sector organizations are planning for recovery preparation, a return to economic certainty and stability remains a moving target. Public sector communicators must continually observe, forecast, and respond to emerging needs and behaviours. To return to a sustainable and healthy economy requires future scenario planning and developing a plan of action.

The pandemic has resulted in new dynamics between different actors from government, businesses, and citizens, as well as new mechanisms for communicating and collaborating with them, which especially in the innovation policy space has been one of the longstanding challenges. These examples of emergency innovations by the government, businesses and people have been catalysed by the pandemic. The same leadership and innovation are now needed to re-stimulate the economy in a way that ensures decades of development will not be reversed, and no citizen is left behind.

Public sector agencies and departments are constantly having to adjust their COVID-19 strategies through the various stages of the crisis and communicate them with the right constituents and stakeholders. Governments and their constituencies need to engage in mutually trusting relationships, bringing with them a new shared understanding and greater sense of community to establish a transition to recovery. A positive effect of the COVID-19 crisis generally has been a renewed energy, purpose and commitment to partnership working across government, public sector partners, communities, and business.

Moving Forward

Economic uncertainty may exist for months to come. To successfully navigate the ongoing crisis, governments will have to focus on taking all their stakeholders with them. Public sector communications is a highly effective path to engaging citizens and the business community. **W7** WORLDWIDE's deeply experienced crisis communications team currently works with numerous public and private sector partners to help deliver their COVID-19 communications programs.

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W7 WORLDWIDE is an independent communications consultancy based in Saudi Arabia. Our understanding of the local market converged with our global reach and knowledge enables us to bridge our clients with their audiences effectively. We are aligned by the objective of filling the gap in communication that exists in the local market. Therefore, our specialty lies in building bridges that sustain relationships and create brand reputation and value through innovative approaches. Our array of services includes, but is not limited to:

- Corporate Communications Strategy
- Stakeholder Mapping
- Crisis Management
- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Internal Communications
- Reputation Management
- Media Relations
- Public Relations
- Public Affairs
- Social Media
- Marketing & Brand Solutions

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