Communicating in a Time of Extreme Crisis

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OVERVIEW

At Sullivan & LeShane Public Relations, Inc. (SLPR) we have seen and managed many significant crises in our three decades of experience…

…but to date nothing compares to the impact the COVID-19 global pandemic has had on our state and clients.
WHAT WE HAVE BEEN DOING

Since the pandemic began, we have been helping companies, small businesses and organizations with:

- Crafting messages
- Sharing their stories
- Retooling internal and external communications strategies
- Staying connected to their audiences
- Engaging the media
- Turning vulnerabilities into opportunities.
HOW TO MANAGE A CRISIS FROM A PUBLIC RELATIONS STANDPOINT

Right now, it’s not a question of “How do we prepare for when a crisis hits?”

Because it has already hit.

What’s most important now is adapting on the fly to the “new reality.”

- Putting a crisis plan in place/immediately updating existing plan for current situation
- Keeping the channels of communication open with all essential audiences
- Delivering the right messages
- Seeing the opportunities born out of the crisis
- Starting the process of learning through the crisis.
- Keeping communication lines open
KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERSHIP IN A CRISIS

- Calm guidance
- Nimbleness
- Pragmatism
- Clear chain of command
- Having the right team in place that you trust
- Anticipating what happens next
- Organization/delineation of responsibilities
- Seeing it through to a desired conclusion
FIRST MOVER

When times are tough, get moving. Leaders need to ask themselves:

- What do you want each of your stakeholders to say about how you handled the crisis?
- Will your silence be seen as indifference?
- Are others shaping the perception of you or your organization?
- What do you want your audiences to think of your “brand” post-crisis?
- Will you lose the ability to influence the outcome if you wait?

*If you don’t have the answers to these questions, then you need to form them and fast!*
FIRST MOVER
Positive Examples at the City/Town Level During This Crisis

Opinion: CCM is here for Connecticut
By Michael Freda
Published 12:00 am EDT, Wednesday, April 8, 2020

Towns implementing low and high tech tools to keep town business running during coronavirus crisis
Jodi Latina
2 weeks ago

CCM CALLS ON GOVERNOR AND CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION TO SHARE FEDERAL FUNDING FOR CT CITIES AND TOWNS TO BATTLE FALLOUT FROM COVID-19

CORONAVIRUS INFORMATION
As you know, Governor Lamont has declared civil preparedness and public health emergencies. The Governor’s declarations also make clear that the chief executive officers of municipalities have emergency
FIRST MOVER

Other notable examples:

- Financial institutions reassuring the public on the strength and security of their future
- Child care providers expanding their capacity
- Financial advisors providing comforting guidance on portfolio management
- Senior communities finding new ways for families to stay in touch with loved ones
- Manufacturers retooling to provide much-needed supplies to front-line healthcare workers and essential providers
- “Thought leaders” communicating “need-to-know facts” and best practices for their particular industry
- Restaurants/food stores gearing up to be there for people in times of need
- Chambers of Commerce adapting to meet member needs
- The Governor taking command and control
TRUST AND LOYALTY

There is *nothing* more important during a time of crisis for your municipality.
ADDRESS TODAY… WITH AN EYE TOWARD TOMORROW.

Those who emerge stronger after this pandemic subsides are planning and developing their proactive agendas now. Here’s how:

- Have a “Power Core” team in place to vet rapidly developing situations, document today and look at tomorrow’s trends to be ready for next steps
- Convene regularly to keep appraised of changes, discuss data and develop consensus
- Turn today’s problems into tomorrow’s opportunities
- Identify strategic actions to maintain and revise operational functions to meet the continually changing rules/environment
ADDRESS TODAY… WITH AN EYE TOWARD TOMORROW

- Pay attention to what is trending and how it impacts the future
  - Self-isolation
  - Technology (virtual meetings, social wellness connections)
  - Future of large-scale entertainment/group events
- Heighten a sense of community
  - Philanthropy
  - Neighbor helping neighbor
ADDRESS TODAY… WITH AN EYE TOWARD TOMORROW

- Social media impact
  - As valid source of information
  - “Emotional vs. factual”
  - Speed of the information barrage
- Enhanced “conveniences” for impacted people
  - “Special hours” for at-risk people
  - More deliveries
- Enhanced constituent services and increased recognition
  - First-responders
  - Food store workers
  - Healthcare/child care workers
  - Public works employees
ADDRESS TODAY…
WITH AN EYE TOWARD TOMORROW.

Examples we’ve observed:

- Technological adaptation (telework, telemedicine, telecommunication)
- Access to state/federal support – government stepping up to support municipalities, individuals, businesses (CARES Act, SBA bridge loans, Manufacturers Innovation Voucher Program, Paycheck Protection Program)
- Creating and locating additional supply chain resources, especially in healthcare, child care and food supply
- Changes to policy to accommodate drastic precautions, and the impact on future government oversight
WHAT WILL YOUR AUDIENCES REMEMBER ABOUT YOUR CONDUCT?

People will remember how well you weathered this storm, and that will have a positive or negative impact on your brand. It’s your choice!

- We reassured our citizens; we provided guidance in a time of instability.

- We were a resource in keeping the public updated on how to maneuver through the unstable environment of a crisis.

- We took care of our employees and residents as best we could. We were fair, humane, kind and acted with compassion.
WHAT WILL YOUR AUDIENCES REMEMBER ABOUT YOUR CONDUCT?

Positive examples we’ve seen:

- Calm, steady leadership
- Steady client communication on new developments: Government programs, “what you need to know” communications
- New workplace/meeting protocols: Modern tools to make it easier
- Regular timely updates: Websites, social media, e-blasts, newsletters, communication platforms
THOUGHT LEADERS CREATE A SENSE OF COMFORT AND PERSPECTIVE

The media is singularly focused on this crisis and keeping people informed – this provides an opportunity to be on social, on-air and print media, communicating positively about how they and their stakeholders are adapting.

- Legacy media (television/print/radio)
- Skype and Zoom interviews and meetings
- Teleconferences
- Facebook Live/social media
- Blogposts
- Public access networks
- Webinars
- Newsletters
- Podcasts

*Helping people understand, reflect and become informed/educated helps them feel in control in an extremely unknown world.*
MOVING FORWARD, REMEMBER THE “THREE C’s OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS”

Care
Your audiences need to not only hear this is important to you but to feel it is important to you.

Control
You have to demonstrate a calm understanding of information and manage it to the best of your ability; key messages are the foundation of everything you do and say.

Communicate
With a message in hand, get moving and spread it quickly, steadily and often. Be creative and use both new technologies and old-fashioned modes. (Ringing bells/honking car horns, virtual graduations, public access resources).
PREPARE FOR THE NEXT ONE

Use After Action Review

An essential process for the conclusion of any crisis to enable you to determine “best practices” for the next time.

1. What went right as we managed this crisis?
2. What was critical to the process?
3. Why did certain things work or not work?
4. What could use improvement?
5. When the next crisis comes around, what should we do different?
6. How can we do better next time?

The After Action Review sets a cadence for future unexpected events, and will prove critical to your strategic crisis planning going forward.
PREPARE FOR THE NEXT ONE

“Life isn’t about waiting for the storms to pass – It’s about learning how to dance in the rain.”

- Vivian Greene
THANK YOU!
Questions/Comments?

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