



Passnotes

Best Practice in PR and Marketing



THE HENLEY GROUP INTERNATIONAL

Essential communications in a time of crisis: PR and Marketing in a world of social distancing

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing disruption unparalleled in modern times. As the daily press briefings held by the UK Government and others show, communication has never been so important.

There is an immediate thirst for information which must be met. Companies must attach the same importance to communications that global leaders are deploying daily, and 'ramp up' their own communication activity.

Above all, business relies on communications for selling or influencing decisions, and there is little substitute for face-to-face meetings with key decision-makers. As self isolation makes this impossible, other techniques must be used.

In short, pulling back on communication at this crucial time is not an option. Now is the time to reinforce, reassure and rebuild.

This special edition of Passnotes, the Henley Group's regular guide to best practice in PR and marketing, provides a checklist of the communications activity that your company must urgently implement, if you are not doing so already.

Communications will not only provide the information that key audiences demand, but will also protect your brand and support sales, in preparation for the return to something approaching normality.

Now is the time to do more

- Quite simply, going ‘quiet’ is not an option. Now is the time ramp up communications.
- Your audiences demand clear information. Providing that information is essential.
- Going quiet will simply erode your brand awareness faster than your competitors.
- Don’t put your salespeople at a disadvantage at the very time when every lead matters.
- Don’t let your brand lose share of mind, making recovery that much more difficult.

Momentum must be maintained. Yet the situation brands find themselves in has clearly changed compared to only a few weeks ago. Salespeople are remote working, major events that marketers previously committed to have been postponed to later in 2020, or cancelled altogether, and customers and other stakeholders seek clarity and support.

Faced with these challenges, PR and marketing professionals need to ensure that every marketing ‘dollar’ is working as hard as it can and must reapportion their focus on to the PR and marketing disciplines that are best suited.

Communication is an investment

In response to any questions from Finance, organisations that maintain PR, marketing and advertising activity in an economic downturn gain a major advantage over those that do not.

This advantage has been established in numerous studies over the last fifty years (see references). In one study, brands that ‘aggressively’ continued to invest in communications gained a 275% sales increase over competitors. As Nairman K Dhall wrote in a paper called “Advertising as an anti-recession tool” in the Harvard Business Review:

“The rationale that a company can afford a cutback in advertising because everybody else is cutting back [is fallacious]. Rather than wait for business to return to normal, top executives should cash in on the opportunity that the rival companies are creating for them. The company courageous enough to stay in the fight when everyone else is playing safe can bring about a dramatic change in market position.”¹

The challenges

Marketing and communications departments have four immediate challenges before them:

- **Keep audiences informed** with regular updates: this is an expectation, not a ‘nice to have’.
- **Maintain brand awareness** by using every opportunity to push it to the fore.
- **Support the sales process** with engaging content that salespeople can leverage.
- **Prepare for the time** when a semblance of normality returns.

1. Further reading:

- Dhalla, Nairman K. “Advertising as an anti-recession tool,” Harvard Business Review, Jan - Feb, 1980
- ABP/Meldrum & Fewsmith study, 1979
- McGraw-Hill Research. Laboratory of Advertising Performance Report 5262, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986
- Khermouch, Gerry. “Why Advertising Matters More Than Ever,” Business Week, August 2001
- <https://today.oregonstate.edu/archives/2009/mar/advertising-during-recession-may-yield-increased-earnings-later>

Take stock

1. Reconsider your marketing mix

Look anew at your marketing channels and reassess their worth in a situation that makes face to face interaction difficult - a key element of the sales process. Instead of attending events, webinars will get targeted communications to your audience, while now is the right time for white papers on the subjects that customers need to learn about.

2. Use the right tools to build stronger relationships

For most marketers, the channels to customers should be stronger than ever, providing they have been investing in social media and their website. All B2B organisations should have embraced social media - if you have not, you should do so immediately. Salespeople should be leveraging their online social networks as an integral part of the sales process, using LinkedIn to target and identify prospects and nurture them.

3. Take advantage of media opportunities

Opportunities to gain exposure through the media should be maximised - even if this media is online only for the present. Provide publications with topical, informative and engaging stories. Your PR strategy should include placing informative comment and opinion in the target media, as it will be valued by readers keen to understand how the current situation impacts on them.

A checklist for effective communications

Short term

Essential, immediate activity to establish regular and clear communications with your key external and internal audiences, and keeping these channels open.

1. Confirm your target audiences

Ensure your CRM system is up to date and allows you to segment your audiences based on the messages they need to receive. Consider audiences beyond the usual recipients of marketing messages, to include communications relevant to those in finance and admin, for example, as well as key suppliers.

2. Use email updates correctly

Your organisation will be working hard to minimise disruption to the manufacture, supply and servicing of the products, solutions and services you provide. Ensure customers know this, through regular but clear and concise emails.

3. Treat your website as your central resource

Clearly, your website is key, but it has to be up to date. Place key communications and updates on the home page and ensure that any other information that customers will need isn't hidden away.

4. Increase your social media activity

Leverage the social media profiles of senior executives and customer-facing managers on LinkedIn to share updates. Monitor these channels and respond to those that engage.

Medium term

More strategic activity to keep your brand in the marketplace, as well the creation of engaging online content to replace face to face interactions.

1. Secure media coverage

Ensure the brand is getting visibility in the media your target audiences read. Prioritise online coverage over print, due to a potential fall in print circulation on the back of logistics challenges. A mix of editorial and paid media provides a good balance of credibility and commercial focus.

2. Share opinion and comment

Create and place engaging PR content such as opinion pieces and technical articles, and seek to establish a voice in any online panel discussions and forums. Share blogs with publications.

3. Revisit your blog

If you don't already have a blog, or have let it run to seed, then now is the time to look again. A blog is one of the most immediate means of sharing comment and provides a hook for social media.

4. Support sales with content

Without the opportunity to educate audiences in sales meetings or at events, now is the time to boost your content creation programme. Salespeople will want content that they can post and share on LinkedIn, helping them to shore up their sales pipelines, even if orders are harder to come by.

5. Find the right fit for products and services

There will be interest in products and services that address the new situation in which customers find themselves in. Identify those that address these new requirements, such as remote servicing, automated solutions to manual processes, or elements of a service provision that mitigate risk.

6. Expand your content programme

Technical support, those with client facing roles and other responsibilities will benefit from content that they can use. The creation and sharing of informative content for technical support teams on how to run and maintain systems from afar, for example, will be invaluable to end users at this time.

For immediate support with your PR, communications and content marketing contact us on +44 1491 570 971 or james@henley.co.uk

The Henley Group is a specialist PR, communications and content marketing agency with over thirty years of experience helping organisations develop brand awareness, manage their reputations, and target customers to support the sales process.

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