The big C in Communication
Crisis – Control of the Narrative

Our work-life would be so much easier and comfortable if crises would come with 3 weeks-notice and a kind reminder.

As it often happens, even though some can be predicted, they ambush, spread chaos and confusion. Now, those who bury their heads in the sand, and hope the problem will pass will be - sooner or later - sanctioned by their customers, partners and by the public in general. When it comes to a national or even international crisis, companies face first hand its repercussion, thus, they must be first in acting and communicating transparently the consequences.

Fortunately, more and more companies become brave in taking a stand when it comes to a social, economic, or even political problem. Why the switch in brands' approach? Because of millennials – the influential work and buying force – and the Z generation, who are loyal to brands that are true to their values and are not afraid to call out when something is wrong and are transparent when they face a problem. Nevertheless, people are more considerate when it comes to companies' actions and statements.

Note: Be aware, Crisis Communication - a crisis a company goes through - and Communication during a crisis (as we face nowadays because of COVID-19) are two different things, but they can be co-dependent, as companies who have untrustworthy messages during difficult times can start a communication crisis.

Therefore, during these troubled times, clear communication has never been more important. Whether it is with the teams, customers, or service providers, sending the right message is paramount. Communicating in a crisis is difficult because all
affected people take in information differently, process information differently, and act on information differently. While we can identify crisis typologies and associations, it is misleading to imply uniformity in a communication strategy. What works in general with the online community, partners or employees, may very well not during a crisis like COVID-19. Each crisis has the potential to create unique communication demands, so let's take a look at some dos and don'ts during COVID-19.

When it comes to communicating during this crisis, always keep in mind that internal and external communication must be done in parallel - no exceptions, and that they are equally important. When planning the strategy, make sure to:

- Be the first source for information
- Express empathy and encourage
- Explain the future steps and show you are in control
- Remain honest and open
- Commit and remain dedicated to everything previously stated

How to adapt to these 5 steps in your internal communication strategy?

- **Be the first source for information**

Taking a proactive approach and sending even a memo, for starters to your stuff, before creating a major internal panic with echoes on the external side, is the most important thing. Your employees will share their uncertainty with external parties, especially when they are kept in the dark, so even if it's bad news, let them know sooner than later.

The truth is, when you give the right information, well-informed employees can play a vital part in protecting the brand’s image and market capitalization.

**How to do that effectively?**

- **Express empathy and encourage**

Every notification should start with empathy because that uncertainty you feel, as a decision party, the employees are feeling it too, and by acknowledging their sentiments, you will have a more open and understanding crowd. Panic is not something you want to spread because people will not work better. On the contrary, they will make mistakes because of pressures, they will create animosities, which will make the company atmosphere tense, and this environment is unfit for overcoming situations, especially in the current context. When you are keeping an encouraging tone, and you are showing your employees you have a plan that involves them, chances are, everyone will be on board, and will even come to you with solutions you haven't thought about.
What is the next step in clear communicating during a crisis?

- **Explain the future steps and show you are in control**

Making them part of the solution and giving them related things to do - that are constructive and linked to the crisis they’re facing - the general anxiety will fade, and the sense of control will be restored. Showing you have a plan based on checked facts, that you reviewed every worst scenario, and that you are prepared for what will come, will help them prepare for the future.

This news should come from someone who they acknowledge as an authority and who is close to them.

**How to write your messages when the future is grey?**

- **Remain honest and open**

This is an essential aspect some overlook. You should never release information in a rash when you don't have all the data checked, or are matters that can be changed in a heart bit. It is fundamental to stick to the reality of the situation and to respond accordingly, participatory. Thus, people will have the facts and will make appropriate judgments. Remain open to suggestions because sometimes your employees might hold solutions for some dilemmas.

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What happens if things become critical?

- **Commit and remain dedicated to everything previously stated**

Show dedication by sharing in the discomforts of the crisis. This is not the time to put the blame on someone, but to come clean, as you and your employees are already prepared for every scenario. If you have addressed your messages based on the previous guidelines, you should not face a communication crisis as you have already declared the most damaging scenery.

It is important to stay faithful to the previous statements so that you don’t lose the confidence of the employees (or former) and add an image crisis.

**If you don't tell your story, someone else will**

If you don't tell your story, someone else will, and when it comes to a crisis or life-changing situations, people tend to see only in white and black. Taking control of the narrative is the most powerful, and the responsible thing you can do.
How do you get control of the narrative when telling the story to the external public?

By using the same formula we previously explained. As already stated, you must synchronize your internal with your external communication. An integrated communication strategy is a must during the crisis. Taking from the top, when creating your external communication messages, always keep in mind the following:

- Be the first source for information
- Express empathy and encourage
- Explain the future steps and show you are in control
- Remain honest and open
- Commit and remain dedicated to everything previously stated

Remember, communication is more than simple words. When it comes to a crisis, it’s not just what you say or how you say it - it’s the combination of those two and the actions that follow. It will dictate how the company is seen in the public eyes and how the reputation will be affected. Always update on facts, what you know and what you’re doing. Always monitor the reactions. You should always keep an eye on the news coverage and always ask for internal feedback.

Another thing brands should never ignore is social media. Being present online and explaining the situation as it is will give companies massive leverage. Whether we are talking about LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, or all of the above, being present and communicating during hard times is paramount for controlling the narrative for both internal and external communication processes.

In the end, when done well, these courageous steps can mitigate a crisis, move people to action, and save a reputation.