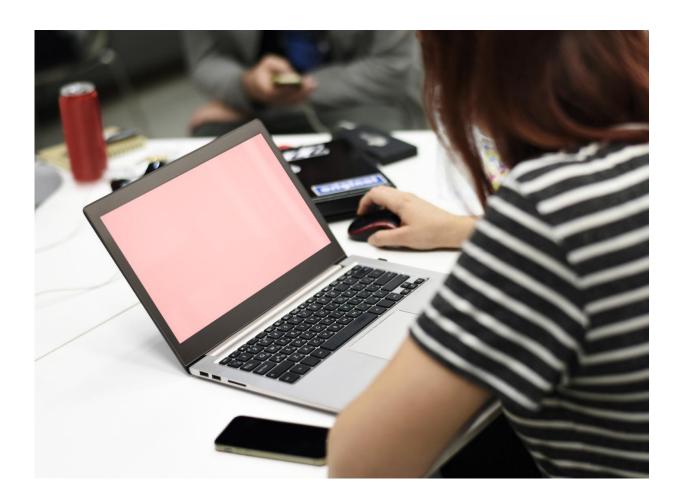# Organizations need to be transparent in times of crisis, says expert

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Times of crisis and uncertainty prove to be challenging for public and private organizations whose leadership engage in constant

communication with the public, especially in a situation as unprecedented as a global pandemic.

Executives and officials may be concerned with what exact messaging to share with their audiences, when and how to do so effectively.

Aileen Izquierdo, interim chair of the FIU Department of Communication, offers some insight for organizations' internal and external communications during the beginning, in the middle of and after a crisis.

Beginning stages of a crisis

Brands should spend time reviewing the vulnerabilities that could impact them, followed by developing action and communication plans.

There are some crises that can never be anticipated, but having generalized plans for weather, health and economic impacts on your institution will allow you to be more nimble and prepared during periods of uncertainty.

In real-time, the coronavirus pandemic has caused countless companies to execute their crisis plans. Those that have been most successful, thus far, are the ones that have been "proactive in their communication to all constituents who rely on their services/products," explains Izquierdo. "Authenticity in the messaging is key."

If plans are not yet finalized, it is acceptable to state that your organization is working on a strategy or that it is a fluid and more information will be shared as soon as it becomes available.

However, there needs to be some sort of disclosure "as soon as an organization is aware that there is an issue that could impact the

constituents or the company." When events are unfolding quickly, a company spokesperson may not have all of the details, clarifies Izquierdo, but they should acknowledge that there are ongoing circumstances and that details will be provided promptly.

Immediate information, like a shelter in place or a location to avoid, needs to be shared as soon as the possibility of a dangerous situation arises.

The extra time allotted from the initial message dissemination allows for a team to regroup in order to make a firm decision on next steps. This is a more sensible option over hastily distributing a message that may prove to be inaccurate as a situation develops.

In the core of a crisis

Regarding the amount of information consumers need from an organization, it is important to note that the public demands and deserves information needed to stay safe, whether it be not purchasing a particular product or social distancing six feet away from other individuals, Izquierdo says.

"But, we need to remember that we must share information as calmly as possible," she adds. "We also must provide the audience as much detail about what is being done to remedy the situation.

"As we see with the coronavirus, we need to share why certain measures are being taken (remote learning and working), but we also need to share what is being done in the meantime like enhanced cleanings, vaccine testing (at the federal level), etc."

According to Izquierdo, the biggest pitfall that a brand can dodge regarding communications during a time of crisis is to avoid a delayed

reaction with stakeholders. If a company's public feels left in the dark, their brand loyalty will decrease.

"Companies must be ready and able to respond to the best of their abilities. Sharing their up-to-the-minute knowledge will allow stakeholders to make decisions that are in their own best interest and will allow for a positive relationship with the organization."

An organization's employees during a crisis can be the best ambassadors for an organization or its worst advocates, Izquierdo cautions.

"If an employee feels like they are not part of a conversation, they may speak negatively about the institution, spread rumors or work against what the organization is trying to do."

Reaching out to employees first and keeping them in the loop as the crisis evolves is essential for maneuvering through a situation in a more positive manner while minimizing the spread of misinformation.

The LIght at the end of the tunnel

As a company begins to emerge from a crisis, Izquierdo says it is essential that leadership assess what went well and what needs to be improved to prepare for any future occurrences.

"Only through honest reflection and analysis can an organization's leaders improve how they handle difficult situations."

Moving forward, it is difficult to predict what can be learned regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, as we are still in the throes of the crisis, acknowledges Izquierdo.

"As we get through this situation, there will be opportunities to evaluate

the organizations that took proactive approaches to provide a safer environment to its stakeholders and explain why (others need to engage) in better actions."

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