

RAGAN VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

# Crisis Communications

Thursday, June 10, 2021 | 11:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m. ET

## Executive Summary

*Notes from select sessions at the virtual conference.*

11:55-12:20 p.m. ET

Panel

Activating your employee channels to prevent internal crises

*Brandi Boatner, Manager of Digital Advocacy Communications at IBM*

*Matt Fields, Head of Corporate Communications, US Consumer Bank, Barclays*

*Becky Graebe, Senior Director of Communications Strategy, Dynamic Signal*

### On leading with empathy:

- We've all had to take a lot of lessons in empathy and vulnerability, evidenced by record numbers of women leaving the workforce, WFH etc.
- Understand the difference between sympathy and empathy
- In times of crises and change, leaders are often far ahead of the change curve and need to guard against a leadership gap.
- Make sure that everyone is on the same page so that they aren't tone deaf. If employees feel they aren't being listened to they will step out even into social media.
- Bigger emphasis on leadership words must match the action.
- Employees right now have more material impact internally and externally.
- Need it from the C-Suite and all the managers and colleagues.

### How can you conduct and hone your internal listening approach?

- Your annual employee opinion survey may have changed and the cadence should continue to adjust depending on your workforce setup and needs.

- Matt from Barclays pivoted to monthly pulse surveys during C-19. They learned about workload and stress concerns, then managed those up. Specifically noted was confusion over what is the priority to work on right now and emails coming in early/late and meetings – they all need to be happening during normal business hours.
- A great practice is to think about how you can target how these surveys are done – how the questions are put together and how and when they are sent.
- Ask people for their stories. Have someone tell you who they are; what have you done or seen that impacted your work week.
- Brandi at IBM saw from the surveys that women were having more stress and for black women that number was doubled. So they had to address that issue. They decided to do a program so that the black females knew that they were being listened to and so they had a speaker come in to talk to them about why they can't check out and to build a community and to have a voice. Brandi later led Meditation Monday.
- Don't incentivize people to do surveys and don't tell people they must fill out a survey.
- If you have action following the survey, people will begin to fill them out honestly.
- IBM's mantra is 'feedback is a gift.' This means you action it and use that data to change things or meet you where you are.
- Surveys are important, but only one part of the mix. You can use photos instead of words sometimes. You can't solely rely on surveys and you have to action everything.

### **Strategies for deploying tools to displaced, remote, hybrid environments**

- As communicators we have a time to go to leaders that we must modernize the way we are providing info and feedback to our employees and for them to be able to also provide info back.
- Keep your mind open, new technology is coming every day. Think about how you want to receive info and figure out how you can explore new tools and solutions so not to get caught off guard.
- Barclays' digital agenda got pushed to the forefront using video, chat, etc to get 85000 people to work from home in a matter of a couple of weeks.
- Think about things that you as a consumer wants to get info and share info. Find ways to get people connected and have 2-way dialogue. Bring leaders and colleagues together. Keep the informality and conversational tone like they would be speaking face to face.
- IBM's internal comms went from being digital-ish to must be digital or die! They had to get people to be able to work from home, be able to communicate, but also a place to express themselves.

- Use Slack as the water cooler type of place, so employees have Slack channels for everything. Give them the means to express themselves (even a Turtles of IBM channel).
- And so not only do they use it to collaborate and talk about work but to decrease loneliness.

1:05-1:30 p.m. ET

Panel

Responding to the crisis of inauthenticity

*Sukhi Sahni, Head of Corporate Communications for U.S. Card and Retail Bank Divisions at Capitol One*

*Doug Duvall, AVP of Corporate Communications at Amtrak*

*Megan Rokosh, CMO of Havas Health and You*

- Authenticity is a bottom-line issue. You risk serious reputational damage if you're inauthentic in your approach to DE&I, CSR, ESG and social media. Every day, strive to strike the balance between purpose and business economics.
- You must understand where your audience is and what they're passionate about. If you ignore or underestimate communities of color, you're missing a huge consumer base. "Doing good is good business."
- There's nothing "minor" about global purchasing power of "minorities." People make purchase decisions based on how ethically they perceive companies do business. You must align with your audience's passions and preferences.
- What signals are you sending out with your company's messaging, philanthropy and how it treats employees? Consumers will pick and choose companies they view as supporting their viewpoints.
- Smart listening starts within. Gather consistent employee feedback to gather trends and ideas. You must sustain a two-way dialogue with employees to uncover brewing problems and prevent potential crises. Use town halls to answer employee questions in real time. Prioritize channels that display transparency.
- "I don't know, but I will do my best to find out" is an OK answer for execs.
- Put your money where your mouth is to demonstrate your commitment to safety and meaningful employee well-being. Be transparent regarding big business decisions; don't leave employees in the dark.

- In the midst of crisis, don't make promises you can't keep or act in ways that don't line up with your core values. Communicators must be truth seekers and truth tellers.
- No transparency leads to no context. No context leads to no awareness. And no awareness leads to mass confusion, discord and disarray.
- Communicators must bring multitudes of different communities and demographics together. How can you find common ground? What are the new best practices for interacting with generational differences?
- It takes guts to approach (or reproach) a CEO and get them to share tough news, but that's how you earn corporate clout and respect. Trust will quickly degrade and evaporate if you're not transparent and authentic.
- Consider how you'd speak with your spouse about a difficult issue. You wouldn't use corporate jargon or buzzwords, right? Canned answers are not good enough. However, if your leader is not a natural communicator, coaching is crucial. Don't have people read a speech off a cue card or monitor, as if they're being held hostage. That degrades authenticity.
- Leaders are human beings, too. Give your leaders some grace. Take time to celebrate small wins and incremental change. Don't go to the same leaders over and over again. Seek out niche, diverse experts and those who are particularly compelling or knowledgeable on specific subjects.
- Timing: Response speed is important, but it's more essential to be thoughtful and thorough. It's better to be right than to be first. However, be quick to acknowledge wrongdoing if your company is in the wrong. Silence on massive news issues might make you seem aloof or out of touch. Don't wait too long to comment on pressing social issues your employees care deeply about. It's nearly impossible to "take back" a message that's ill-conceived or clumsily worded. Proceed accordingly.
- If your execs are aloof, consider doing a "Mean Tweets" reading session so they can see how employees and customers really feel.

2:45-3:10 p.m. ET

Panel

Practicing cool media relations in a crisis

*Spring Harris, Head of Global Communications and PR for Norton Lifelock*

*Kaelan Hollon, Senior Director of Communications at Reynolds American*

*Audra Hession, Principal & Managing Director at G&S Business Communications*

## **Where do you start when it comes to crafting media holding statements?**

**Spring:** Creating a plan in advance is critical, and it should factor in an approach that accounts for what makes sense for the business as well as customers and employees.

**Kaelan:** I spend a lot of time building a library of general statements. It's like the expression, "Everyone has a plan till you get punched in the face." You're on vacation, your communications council is not available. Having a fulsome library of statements is really helpful. Your leadership is going to be asking questions. You have a library of these statements. We can say, 'We don't have all the information now, but here are examples of what we've said in the past in similar situations. You can consider what you committed to in the past in terms of goals and priorities, and lean into that, instead of exactly answering the issues at hand.

**Audra:** Crisis should never be a surprise when it happens. It's the preparation and planning that is absolutely essential. Having a plan in place and having identified all of the stakeholders, and what's important, and what have you said in the past. Have it ready to go. And have it practiced. Have everyone on the same page. Socially listening—it's also really important to have a social-listening plan in place. You have a handle on where the crisis is, and the points of view being expressed, and where you should weigh in and where you shouldn't. There will be things you want to say and things you won't want to say.

## **What is the right time to bring legal into the conversation in a crisis?**

**Kaelan:** Without a strong partnership in a highly-regulated industry, it becomes so painful and protracted to get to some kind of action. But when you have that partnership, it offers shortcuts. Having external counsel input is important too. They can help you avoid availability bias, where you turn to the most immediate examples or solutions. When your focus is, 'We've done this, and this is what worked in the past.' External counsel can come in and say, 'There are all these other things too.'

**Audra:** Contrary to what some people think, legal is your best friend in a crisis. They are a crucial part of the team and may have info you don't in terms of regulatory issues and product development. I also like to say—so many of the clients we work with have had legal teams with specialists. So make sure you have alignment and a full understanding of the issue at hand and what can be said and what can't. If you don't have legal on your side, you're going to get in trouble.

**Spring:** Your first interaction with legal should not be when the crisis occurs. Become friends. But be willing to assert your own expertise. They have a job to do, but don't be afraid to challenge what they're saying.

**Kaelan:** It's picking up the phone and saying, 'Listen, I need to protect our reputation and emphasize our commitment to a strong supply chain'—use legal as a brainstorming tool to help you get to the right place.

## **More execs are going rogue. What are your strategies for managing executives who go rogue?**

**Audra:** CEOs have more pressure than ever before. That creates emotion, and sometimes you have a rogue executive or a passionate one who feels like they have to comment right away. My recommendation is to get to know that CEO, understand their trigger, how they might respond, what their reactions might be. Comments are expected. More than a third of [stakeholders in any given situation] are expecting CEOs to have a comment on a particular issue. You should control the scenario. Conduct as much training as you possibly can. Have the scenarios in place and know what they are going to be ahead of time.

**Spring:** Be an advocate. The CEO has to be comfortable with you and understand that you're the expert. Sometime people may go rogue because they think they're the only person who can solve the problem. So make sure they are looking to you—put the time in, build that trust, because it goes such a long way.

**Kaelan:** Establish in advance the areas where you can respond and where you should hold back. You want a CEO's presence to be narratively consistent. Executive planning can really help that.

**Audra:** Once you've outlined the narrative and developed a script, a CEO can have a game plan in their back pocket. But as communicators we need to be prepared to be on the front lines with them. Make the investment. Spend time with them. Know the business like the back of your hand. Help them work through the best means where they're comfortable. Script what you can.

#### **On media training execs for crises:**

**Audra:** We've all been in situations where we have to educate, and that should start before a crisis. If you have the trust of the executive and you've invested in those relationships in advance, you're going to be able to help in a crisis.

**Kaelan:** Show people in advance examples of things that happened in the past. Examples are helpful—good and bad.

#### **In crises, there's misinformation and disinformation. How do you handle communicating around those issues?**

**Spring:** One of things we encounter is scammers constantly trying to impersonate our brand. We work with customers when that happens. Sometimes these issues will make it to the media. We have process to establish what actually happened. Sometimes it can be simple as an error, or it could be a malicious actor too. We can tell the consumer what they should be looking for. Also work with legal. Tricksters are out there!

**Kaelan:** Where there is public misunderstanding about your products, having a strong network of thought leaders who can speak to it and clarify can be really helpful. Knowing which expert in the field really gets the issues of regulation in your industry and making sure they communicate where you can't because you're still waiting for approvals—that can be super helpful.

**Audra:** Sometimes you can rely on your industry association to amplify your message or offer support and credibility to your story. You have to be aware of the issues and what's being said so you can identify misinformation. Paying attention to blogs and social media—that's where these things erupt. Know the facts. Partner with legal. Partner with R&D. Have a firm understanding of what's accurate and what's not.

3:20-3:45 p.m. ET

Panel

Media monitoring skills to stay on top of a crisis

*Shannon McClendon, PR Manager at American Nurses Association*

*Mark Weiner, Chief Insights Officer at Cognito Insights*

*Theresa Souza, Head of American Sales at Signal AI*

### **How do you approach media lists and decide what to listen to?**

**McClendon:** “Keep it very simple.” She offers three ways to break down your audience in concentric circles starting and the center and moving outward:

- In your center, **existing contacts with a direct relationship to your organization/topic**, people you already know and have a relationship with. “These are key contacts because you want to get your point of view out there quickly,” she says.
- Outside that center is your **existing contacts that aren’t tied to the issue/organization**. Perimeter contacts, with tangential audiences that can help reach a broader audience.
- On the far outside are **at-large media who you don’t have any connection with**. Who are the people that are covering something in real time and how are they covering it. This comes last, because you should not be doing this leg work during a crisis, McClendon says. Go to existing contacts first.

**Weiner:** “I would add, as comms strategist, we have to understand who our target audiences are.” Audiences should be warmed up and identified well before a crisis hits “The more work you can do in advance, the faster we can move.”

**Souza:** “So much of being prepared is ensuring you understand the context in which you are operating.” Think beyond the here and now and ask: “Where is our business going? Do I have mechanism that catch things broadly?”

**Note:** The double-edged sword with broad monitoring is the need to have the context that lets you know if you do need to respond. Can you correctly identify an issue that matters to your org’s reputation?

After a crisis, look back at who got involved and what was said. Make sure to take any lessons learned into future iterations of your crisis plan.

**McClendon:** You have to understand your organizations’ position or where they fit into the crisis and the conversation. If you don’t...you are not going to come out swinging strong.

For ANA, as the COVID crisis evolved, McClendon says they had much more targeted media alerts, growing from just monitoring mentions of the virus to also watching terms like PPE and then health inequities...

**Souza:** It's important to ask: Do I have the infrastructure to process all the data coming in? "You don't have time to read every article or identify every topic. How do you balance making sure you are aware of everything with the amount of time in the day that you have?"

As a team, thinking about preparedness, Souza recommends you ask: "Do I have the infrastructure to scale and make sure that I get what I need without wasting my time?"

**Weiner:** There are frameworks that work for almost any organization... Criteria like leadership, innovation, CSR, ... there are basic reputation criteria that can be filled out.

From there, you at least have something that you can build on.

**Souza:** "Framework is bespoke to an organization." What you decide will be your method for processing data and making decisions has to fit your organization and its needs.

### **What about automation?**

**Souza:** Automating that info collection is so important...because topics that you need to monitor are just really big. "No tool can replace a strategy of a comms pro, but do you have a framework to take on some of that heavy lifting so that the time that you do spend is on analyzing and making strategic connections... and then making business decisions?"

**Weiner:** PR has always relied on technology. "A typewriter was a technology...a telephone was a technology." It's great that tech now can do so much more, but... PR is seen as one of the least likely areas to be taken over by automation... Media monitoring still requires that human touch.

Weiner gives a client example for how human ability to challenge assumptions can make all the difference in media monitoring. He had a luxury car manufacturer client... "their idea of PR was taking luxury car magazine writers out to a racetrack and having them do laps." But what Weiner learned from the data is that "the penetration for car magazines among people who intended to buy luxury cars ranked 50 out of 100." Instead, the best media outlet that was read by potential luxury car buyers was "Martha Stewart Living."

In a crisis, Weiner says that you have hopefully identified these potential mistakes ahead of time. "Sometimes contrarian thinking is required."

**McClendon:** "I think about how there has to be a marriage between the data and your insights." For example, around the death of Geroge Floyd, McClendon and the ANA knew that they had to make a statement because of audience data on how nurses felt about social justice.

"We know what our audience cares about, and we knew we had to say something but we had to find our lane and using the data and the insights to drive the response."

**Weiner:** "This is a moment for public relations. Companies know they need to say something ...they don't know what to say and they don't know how to say it.' Data can inform your



message, but it is a human response that is required and it is a comms person who is providing guidance in crafting that message.

**Souza:** There's also a need to find the useful data from the noise. "Eight in 10 execs say they have more data than they know what to do with...there's frankly too much data for any one person to go through."

### **How do you approach an issue where the data and stakeholder sentiment aren't aligned?**

**Weiner:** Not all stakeholders, customers etc. have the same position on social issues. "Make sure that internally the C-suite, the board, etc, are aligned on topics that might be popular or unpopular, but are necessary. At the minimum, make sure the organization is prepared.

**McClendon:** Go back to our values...what do you believe in. You can't make everybody happy, but you have to do what is right.

3:45-4:10p.m. ET

Fireside Covid-19 Lessons: Designing Your Future-Proof Crisis Plan and Toolkit

*Matthew Hutchison, CCO, Dow Jones*

### **Strategies over the last 18 months**

"I think the most important takeaway for me, and I think for the audience, is that crisis has moved from the periphery to the core. It is, should be now, at the heart of everything an organization does."

While everyone should have a crisis playbook, he believes that what we've seen in the last 15 months is "rapid trust erosion in institutions, in society, in business, with each other, unfortunately, means that crisis permeates every aspect of society."

That could be turned into a positive or benefit for communications professionals as he suggests you look across your entire organization. "What are the risks, what could happen, talk to your executives, talk to your employees, talk to your business partners and stakeholders." But most importantly, Hutchison believes you should "follow your gut, never underestimate your gut. Determine what theoretically could go wrong and then address that in proactive communications campaigns." Hence, the reason he believes crisis communications "has moved from the periphery or the exclusive domain of high-powered agency officials or people who have the hat of communications in the organization. It's the domain of everybody, and it's all about understanding what could go wrong."

Further, be sure you to "have the conversations with your executives and leaders to make the systemic changes in an organization to prevent crises from potentially erupting."

## **What does the reawakening look like?**

One fundamental principle, according to Hutchison: “The world is resetting right before our eyes and underneath our feet.”

Especially as people return to the workplace, Hutchison believes communications is key in evaluating “what theoretically are the risks, culturally, mindset. Address it through policies, procedures, culturally... bake that into your proactive campaigns.

“We are in the midst of a racial reckoning, and equity has to be baked into everything that we do as a society. You have to think macro, holistically...and then internally determine what that means to your organization and apply that. Have honest conversations with your stakeholders.”

## **The comms role**

Hutchison says CEOs rely on communications. And, that they want communications professionals to work with all organizational stakeholders to minimize and correct for potential risks.

“Crisis communications is no longer on the periphery, it is integral to planning, shaping a proactive narrative. It is our responsibility as communications professionals to serve as the conscience of the organization. Surface issues that could present themselves. That puts comms in an even greater driver seat in the organization.” While it’s not the ultimate goal of comms to be in the driver’s seat, comms must create systemic changes that benefit the business and protect the well-being of employees.

## **Comms Vision**

While Hutchison first suggested it is about reputation, he quickly corrected, saying, “It’s about trust. Trust is at the center. What are those drivers of trust the issues that could ull at the threads of trust in an organization. Start with trust at the center and go out from there with your various stakeholders. It’s first with the employees.”

Employees are the most valuable asset, affirms Hutchison, and they must be protected. Work internally first with your employees and “work out from there with your business partners and other stakeholders and shareholders.”

## **Court of public opinion vs. the court of law**

“I find it’s always a symbiotic relationship. There’s shared values. Legal always wants to do the right thing. They ground their actions in values. Make them your best friends. Some of the best minds in business have a JD after their name. They are a great sounding board.”

### **The Playbook**

On creating crisis communications playbooks, Hutchison believes that the plan doesn’t have to be perfect but what has to be perfect is “who are the decision makers in real time? How do you get buy-in quickly? And communicate and activate quickly?”

He likens it to a doppler radar and says, “Always have some advisors at all levels of the organization doing a temperature check of how employees are feeling and how external stakeholders are responding. Synthesize. Know when to separate your gut from the hard numbers. Sometimes your gut and informal feedback loop may tell you to take a different path.”

That said, he also suggests that “not every opinion is created equally when it comes to moving fast,” as another person’s point of view can change the entire dynamic. To that end, he believes that when you root your comms mission in maintaining and strengthening the organization “to provide flexibility to dial up some opinions and dial down others.” Overall, he says you must act quickly and nimbly and “don’t be afraid to pivot in real time.”