Crisis communications in the time of coronavirus

Prepared for Michigan Municipal League
March 24, 2020
David Waymire

• Former reporter: 1978-1990
  • Illinois, Michigan
• Entered PR in 1990
• Started Martin Waymire in 2004
  • Issue management approach
  • Focus on public affairs
  • Crisis management experienced
  • Extraordinary client list (Including Michigan Municipal League)
  • Staff of 13, based in Lansing, ready for the world!
Crisis communications in the time of coronavirus

• Give an overview of crisis communications preparation and best practices
• Then focus on our current coronavirus situation
• Plenty of time for q and a
Crisis Communications Fundamentals

The Key?

Be prepared ... a crisis will happen
Be Prepared for a Crisis

1. Must Have a crisis communications plan
2. Must be mentally prepared to execute it

The second is sometimes the hardest
Decisions will come fast; some will be hard
Be prepared to:
• Own up to problems
• Apologize for them
• Fix them
Crisis Communications Planning

• Identify possible crises
• Identify your target audiences
• Identify your communicator(s)
• Identify your delivery channels
• Identify messages and talking points to respond to them
Crisis Communications Planning

Identify Possible Crises: *What type of crisis could strike your organization?*

- Acts of nature: Fire, tornadoes, flooding, disease
- Crime (fraud, violence, theft, arson, allegations of abuse, neglect, sexual harassment, discrimination)
- Technological (internet breakdown, ransomware, major systems failures)
- Financial failures

- In this case...shutdowns, shelter in place, someone in your organization/community tests positive
Crisis Communications Planning

Identify Your Key Audiences

• Constituents
• Employees (ambassadors)
  • First responders? Other special subgroups?
• Businesses
• Elected officials
• News media
• Local, state, federal bureaucracies
Crisis Communications Planning

Communicators/messengers: Public and beyond

• Identify who will be the face of the public response
  • Mayor
  • City manager
  • Other?

• Who will be voice to other groups
  • Employees
  • Other elected officials
Crisis Communications Planning

Communications Channels: How Will You Reach Audiences?

• Direct
  • Email (constituents, employees, other elected officials, news media – all with own data base and own messages possibly)
  • Facebook
  • Video/YouTube
  • Twitter
  • Automated phone systems
  • Face to face (with employee groups, for instance)

• Indirect
  • News media
Crisis Communications Planning

Messaging

• Prepare in advance
  • What is your overriding message you want to get through: Try to What will you say in the crisis?
  • Your primary message(s) will obviously depend on the crisis
  • Consider keeping messages short and to that point
  • May want to think about how to gather questions, respond to them, and then post answers in a single space, updated regularly

• Message must be consistent among all audiences (though not all audiences will get all information)
Crisis Communications Planning

• Identify on-site and off-site command and control centers.

• Determine what they will need to function
  • Staff
  • Supplies
  • Computers, etc.
  • Access to databases (cloud)
Crisis Communications Planning

• Monitor the news stories. *Correct errors!*

• Monitor Facebook and Twitter and perhaps other online forums (blogs from activists or community members, chatter on local government websites and on local news media websites). *Correct errors!*
Crisis Communications Planning

• Prepare in advance!

• Craft “Messages and Talking Points”
  • Write them down, practice them
  • As much as possible, avoid acronyms, medical jargon especially in this time. In short, use plain English
  • Be certain your message(s) communicate the single most important piece of information you need audiences to know about the situation (you have about 6 to 8 seconds to say what you need to say!)
Presentation

• Speak at an understandable pace (people tend to speak too fast)
• Deliver your messages and talking points!
• Pivot from loaded or irrelevant questions to your messages. ("Look, the most important point to understand ...." “This issue is really about ....” “Michigan citizens care about this because ....” “This is not about XXXX. It’s about .....”)
Crisis Communications Planning

• Draft and adopt a Crisis Communications Policy (put it in your employee handbook)

• Identify who is authorized to speak to media. If anyone else does, it’s grounds for immediate termination of employment.
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Try to focus on what you handle
  • You are not public health experts
  • You are respected leaders close to your constituents
  • Reinforce public health, federal or state edicts in your official capacity

• Tone will be vital
  • Need to be factual
  • But as upbeat as possible

• You can’t overcommunicate
  • Set a regular time/day of week
  • If something comes up in between, jump on it
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Tailor messages to audiences
  • Constituents as a whole (mostly)
  • Seniors
  • Businesses/Chamber of Commerce
  • News media
  • City department heads
  • City employees
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Messengers
  • Mayor or city manager
  • Fire/police leadership
  • Joint with county?
  • Joint with adjoining community?
  • Joint with public health officials?
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Messaging will need to be concise and focused
• Set expectations quickly
  • What’s closed and open
  • What’s allowed and not in your community
  • First responder expectations/capabilities
  • How to address basic city functions
    • Utility bills
    • Taxes
    • Permits, inspections, etc.
• Close as positive as possible
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Delivery channels
  • News media
  • Local print
  • Local TV
  • Local radio
  • Email to constituents
  • Facebook
  • Twitter
  • Video (on-line or over the air)

Don’t forget other languages if needed!
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Delivery channels
  • Your web pages will be important
  • Deliver your updates
  • Deliver your basics
  • Link to others; limit duplication
Addressing coronavirus issues

• Remote work = unusual problems
  • Can’t hold normal news conferences
    • Think of message you are sending
    • Maintain social distancing
    • Possibly from home, or outside of city offices
  • Remind audiences of difficulty that creates
    • Sets expectations
Crisis Communications – COVID-19

Matt Bach, Director of Communications, Michigan Municipal League
COVID-19 Response Template

- **Business Leaders of Michigan**: Good step-by-step approach to addressing the COVID-19 for businesses. While its target is businesses, it can easily be made into community use. ([https://bit.ly/2Ufx0Yt](https://bit.ly/2Ufx0Yt))

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**Planning Document Objectives and Audience**

**What is this document for?**

This document seeks to layout all required policies, procedures and responsibilities for leaders at [Company Name] to follow in the case of a variety of potential scenarios related to the rise of the COVID-19 virus.

**In general – wherever and whenever possible** – [Company Name] leaders must follow the guidance and direction of local health officials (e.g. CDC, WHO, etc.)

**How should our approach be characterized?**

Remain calm. Inspire and instill confidence. Exhibit empathy to employees. Care for our people and our communities.

**What should I do and when?**

As an event occurs, a situation team will be formed to ensure we are addressing the risk and threat to employee well-being in real time. The situation team will vary based on the exact scenario encountered but ultimately our General Counsel and CHRO will arrange and ensure that a situation team leader is in place and is working to organize our response.

As a situation team comes together, the team should review any relevant scenario plans and seek to fill out a scenario template to ensure action planning and proper communication are in place. In addition, the team should ensure familiarity with any relevant policies, procedures or
"As you have heard, our mission right now is simple: help reduce and prevent the community spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. This helps ensure that our most vulnerable stay safe and that our health systems maintain the ability to care for sick people."

Read Mayor Rosalynn Bliss's entire letter to our community. 
Community Examples - Lansing

Mayor Andy Schor
COVID-19 DAILY UPDATE
LANSINGMI.GOV/CORONAVIRUS

March 23, 2020

During the State of Emergency, the City of Lansing will be sending daily COVID updates at 6pm to everyone on the Neighborhood News list and posting to the city’s social media channels.

We are getting many calls about how we can help our neighbors during this time. We will include opportunities to help each other and resources where help is available. If you have information that you would like included, please send it to De اللازمة Fountain at DeLaura.Fountain@lansingmi.org by 2pm. This emergency is changing daily and we are committed to making sure our neighbors have the information necessary to care for themselves, their neighbors, and our community.

View All
Community Examples: Orion Twp.

- Orion Charter Township Supervisor Chris Barnett is doing an awesome job keeping his residents informed and trying to boost spirits. His daily videos are something communities of any size can do. Simple, not overly produced, short – 7 minutes.
- Check out facebook.com/oriontownship
Community Examples - Flint

- Facebook Live chat with mayor & state medical society president elect
- Website with community resources updated as much as 3-4 times per day
- Website has public notices as well as info on how to pay your utility bills and how to contact city departments during shut down
- Drop box out front to communicate with departments
- City of Flint is experiencing a crisis within a crisis. Also developed new system to deliver to homes water filters and tests. Special phone number 810-410-2020 for residents to get assistance with water

"If you do not need to leave the house, don’t. Stay home. Stay safe.”

Flint Mayor Sheldon A. Neeley issues advisory asking residents to adhere to self-imposed shelter in place.
Flush City Hall.

6:30 pm tonight
FLUSHING CITY COUNCIL SPECIAL MEETING
FLUSHING CITY HALL, 725 EAST MAIN STREET, FLUSHING, MI 48433

The City of Flushing is under COVID-19 restrictions and in an effort to fully comply with the State of Michigan Governor’s Executive Order 2020-11 will hold a "telephonic conferencing meeting" as allowed under the Governor’s Executive Directive 2020-02.

The public is encouraged to participate via telephone using the following telephone numbers and meeting ID:
Dial by your location:
877-853-5257 US Toll Free
or 888-475-4499 US Toll Free
Meeting ID:
839704034
Community Examples – Village of Holly

- **Window Walks**

  Communities are coming together by supporting window walks ... It's a chance to get outdoors, get some fresh air, and spend some time with family while still practicing social-distancing.

  Please join in the fun and spread some happiness! Get out those art supplies and be creative. This week’s theme is ‘Silly Faces’. Thanks to Tricia Perrine for sharing photos of her family and their silly faces! 😊 #WindowWalk #HollyStrong #SpreadHappinessNotCoronavirus
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Questions?