
Leadership in the Time of Covid-19: How Executives Should Communicate Through the Crisis

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The Landscape We're In Today

The coronavirus pandemic has far-reaching implications in all aspects of life and on the business front, posing new challenges for businesses and their executives.

In a time where there seem to be more questions than answers, this is what keeps our client executives up at night:

- How do I continue to communicate and engage with my stakeholders in a way that won't be a risk to the company's reputation?
- Do I move ahead with business plans and new launches?
- How do I find the right tone for this moment to ensure my voice is authentic and not seen as opportunistic?
- How do I manage the new realities of business shifting to digital, while meeting the needs of my stakeholders?

Leveraging Executive Visibility as a Solution:

At Ogilvy, we define executive visibility as a program where a key executive's presence and following is built up through a communications platform, so they become the face of their organization and a thought leader in their industry. This can be extremely impactful and is especially relevant in times of crisis where executives have to keep open lines of communication to their stakeholders.

With businesses under scrutiny and even at risk of bankruptcy, it is imperative that leaders rise to the occasion and steer their organizations in the right direction, not just for now but well into the future. We hope that this paper helps guide you in that direction.

Why is it important to be active and communicative in times of crises?

Executives are the human, relatable faces of their organizations and their personal brand equity is both a buffer in times of crisis and an asset as they seek out opportunity and growth. Now more than ever, executives can connect with their stakeholders – whether it be to comfort employees, appease investors and everything in between – about the initiatives they are embarking on around the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Difference Maker of the C-Suite:

An organization's reputation is at the core of its brand, with all other functions flowing from it. This means that communications from top executives need to stay on. And the way an executive communicates can be the difference between success and failure.

The challenge with the C-Suite's role today is that they must have open lines of communication to a multitude of audiences:

- Employees
- Board of Directors
- Investors
- Industry Peers
- Partners
- Regulators and Legislators
- Consumers

This is **the difference maker** and what sets a C-Suite executive apart from other leaders in the organization.

Right now, employees are worried. A survey done at the start of the virus' impact on daily life (March 3rd) indicated that over 50% of workers don't trust their employers will put their health first and have low confidence in their organization's abilities to respond to the crisis.

At the same time, the Dow Jones industrial average fell faster than the 1929 Wall Street Crash.

The economy's poor performance is concerning investors, shareholders and board members across organizations globally. In addition, both broadcast and marketing trade media are keeping an eye on companies and brands, judging those coming off as exploitative in their efforts during a crisis.

Adopting a Multi-Stakeholder Crisis Strategy:

The scope of communications for a C-Suite leader has expanded to a multi-stakeholder approach where they must ensure they speak to the whole scope of these internal and external audiences.

We recommend that all executives ensure their Covid-19 crisis strategy has the following two parts:

Part 1:

Develop a "micro" executive visibility strategy

Part 2:

Choose the right channel matrix for communications that speaks to your multiple stakeholders.

Part 1: Defining your “Micro” Executive Visibility Strategy

To ensure we are messaging with a multi-stakeholder lens and covering off the right way to distribute content in a way that is natural for each leader, Ogilvy has a process for approaching executive visibility programs.

Traditionally, our approach takes each executive through five phases to build a long-term messaging and engagement platform.

However, in times of crisis like Covid-19, we suggest focusing on three key elements of this process to ensure that our C-Suite partners can go-to-market faster with their messages to quickly start communicating with key stakeholders. We will take you through best practices for these steps in the next section.

1. DISCOVER

A **Discovery** phase where you “Listen First” and audit the conversation landscape

2. DEFINE

A **Definition** phase to build the overarching executive narrative and messaging points

3. ACTIVATE

Activation through content creation for both an organic, paid and traditional media strategy

1. Discover Phase

The “Discover” phase calls for executives to “Listen First” to understand the current conversation landscape. Using a proprietary LinkedIn Insights API tool that we have at Ogilvy, we surveyed the LinkedIn platform and pulled the top articles that C-Suites were reading in the last two weeks amidst the Covid-19 crisis.

Doing this type of landscape research helps inform your multi-stakeholder messaging strategy. Our recommendation is to continue drilling down to the intersection between your industry and the current global health landscape to add a personalized lens on what stakeholders in your industry are concerned about amidst Covid-19.

What C-Suites are currently reading falls into three main categories:

Facts vs. Fiction: The first trend we see is C-Suite leaders diving into articles about the history of pandemics as well as facts about Covid-19 and its spread. It’s extremely important in this era of fake news that leaders message the right things and stay credible.

Why outbreaks like coronavirus spread exponentially, and how to “flatten the curve”
By Harry Stevens March 14, 2020

PLEASE NOTE
The Washington Post is providing this story for free so that all readers have access to this important information about the coronavirus. For more free stories, sign up for our daily Coronavirus Updates newsletter.

After the first case of covid-19, the disease caused by the new strain of coronavirus, was announced in the United States, reports of further infections trickled in slowly. Two months later, that trickle has turned into a steady current.

Visualizing the History of Pandemics
Published 4 weeks ago on March 21, 2020
By Nicholas Lofan

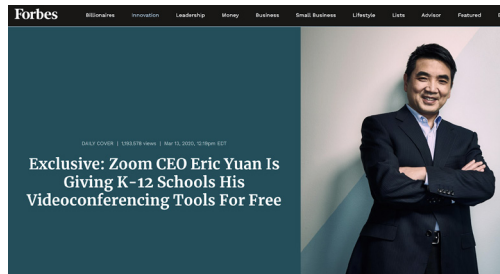
HISTORY OF PANDEMICS

PAN-DEM-IC (of a disease) prevalent over a whole country or the world.

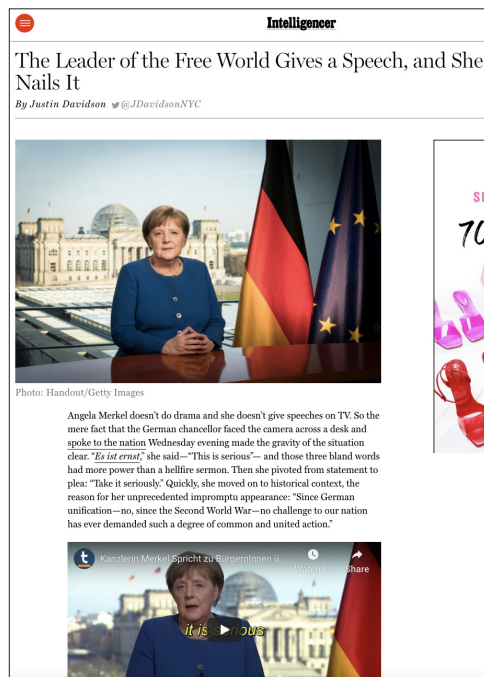
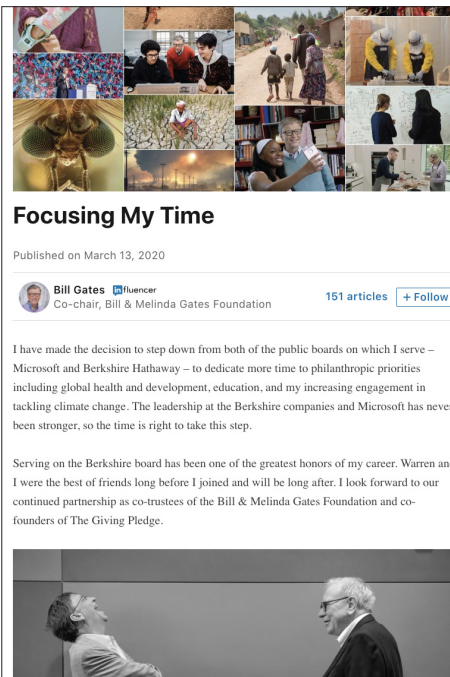
Pandemic	Year	Deaths	Impact
17th Century Great Plagues	1600	3M	
Smallpox	1820	56M	18.2B
Black Death (Bubonic Plague)	1350	14.1	19.1B
Japanese Smallpox Epidemic	735-737	3M	
Plague of Justinian	541-542	50-50M	
Antonine Plague	165-180	5M	

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, as humans spread across the world, infectious diseases have been a constant companion. Even in this modern era, outbreaks are nearly constant. Here are some of history's most deadly pandemics, from the Antonine Plague to COVID-19.

Looking to Peers: We see C-Suites looking to competitor and peer brands to see what their reactions have been. Although we do not recommend doing an exhaustive competitor and peer audit during times of crisis, keeping a pulse on their comms efforts is important.



Trusted Thought Leaders: We also see articles being consumed about key thought leaders like Bill Gates or leaders like Angela Merkel around how to message. These could be good sources to turn to for inspiration.



2. Define Phase

The “Define” phase is where we recommend taking the findings from the “Discover” phase to help inform the narrative and messaging points that you should build your communications around.

We recommend working with your communications team to run through the following questions to define your multi-stakeholder messaging platform:

Define Your Impact:

- What objectives do you wish to accomplish through your communications in this crisis period?
- Will this impact your company’s longer-term business agenda? Can you ensure this is not a temporary strategy that your company will have to move away from?
- What expertise can you offer that only you can speak to, compared to other leaders in your organization?

Define Your Sphere of Influence:

- Can you prioritize the audiences you wish to reach during this time? Doing so will help you prioritize your channel matrix in the next section.
- What current events in the news cycle do you feel comfortable commenting on?
- Who among your competitors and peers do you think is doing it well?

Define Your Method of Communication:

- What social channels are you currently using that you’re most comfortable with?
- What are some quotes and anecdotes you wish to share during this time?
- What publications have you been reading during this period that you’ve found to be the most credible?

3. *Activate Phase*

The “Activate” phase is where you start creating communications content to distribute across your paid, owned and earned channels.

We recommend you think through the following areas to properly “Activate” your executive visibility crisis comms during Covid-19:



Content Plan:

- A crisis content plan should factor in your messaging plan, who your comms partners are for each post or broadcast and what channels this is on.
- Consider drafting a content calendar where you are actively communicating on a weekly basis.
- Conduct daily internal content reviews or check-ins with your team to make sure your plan is still relevant as things are changing on a daily, or even hourly, basis.

Distribution Cadence:

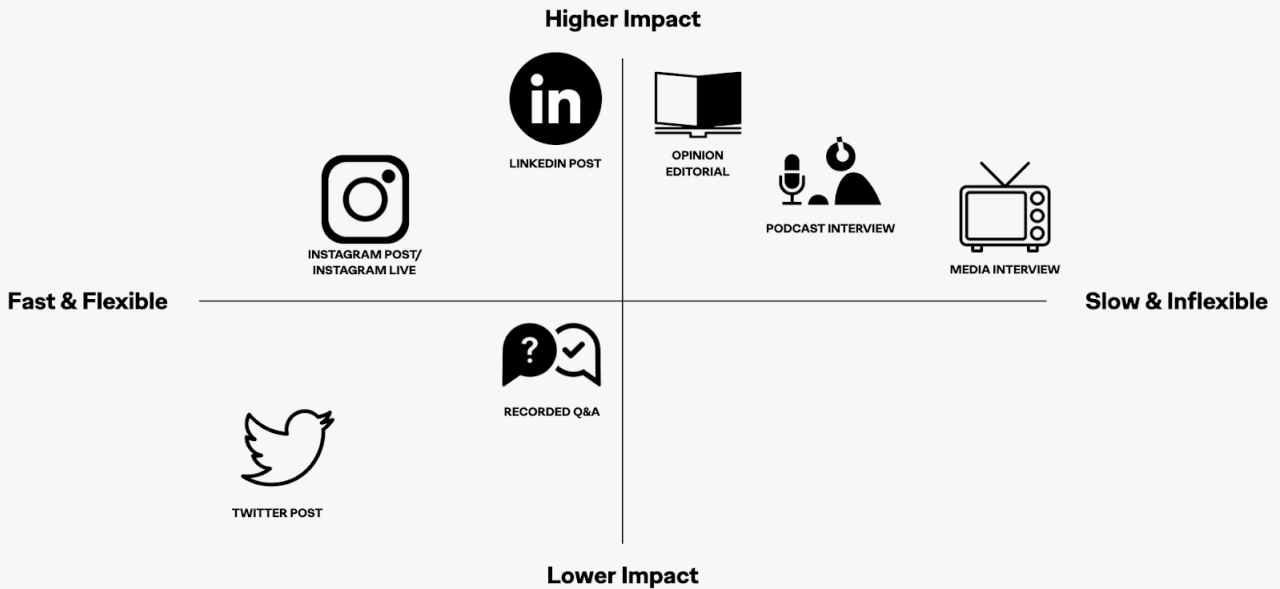
- Establishing a consistent content mix will create dependability in the eyes of your stakeholders.
- Depending on the objective and audience of the content, consider amplifying with paid media dollars on social or traditional media to reach more people.



Response/Issues Management:

- Work with your PR and corporate communications teams where possible to plan replies that may come in as a result of your messages and plan a message matrix of how you may want to address various questions and responses.

Part 2: Choose the Right Channel Matrix



Once you've identified your multi-stakeholder strategy, you'll need to choose the right communication channels. We've put together a channel matrix ranking the speed and ease of getting a message out vs. the impact. The right approach during this time is a balance of the channels listed, ideally choosing one from each quadrant.

Starting from the bottom left quadrant and going clockwise:



Twitter: Tweets allow you to be fast and nimble, testing multiple messages to see what works.

However, it can be hard to control responses and negative/inappropriate feedback on the platform, which are public for all to see.



Recorded Q&A: Doing a recorded Q&A allows you to answer questions in a controlled environment. The most effective ones target one audience group (i.e. a townhall for your internal employees or answering consumer questions from social media).



Instagram: With new longer-form features like IGTV and Instagram Live, this platform helps build a personable side to your executive visibility platform. It also allows for employees and consumers to ask questions without their comments being publicized.



LinkedIn: LinkedIn is a great way to pen a longer-form thought piece, allowing you to go deeper into initiatives your company is embarking on. It can also have a halo effect like providing investors and the media more detail about your company's crisis efforts.



Opinion Editorials: These longer form pieces have an opportunity of reaching a wider audience than on LinkedIn and provide a "controlled" channel for you to clearly communicate your message.



Podcast Interview: A podcast interview is a great medium like Instagram to show the human side of your leadership and your organization. However, it can take longer to set up and negotiate the right questions and topics with the program owner.



Media Interview: A public interview ensures the highest reach and impact of all the channels but does have some risk to concern as editors do control how the content is published or aired. It will be key for executives to prepare prior to any media engagement.

We understand this is a new kind of crisis situation we're all living through today and we hope this paper is helpful for you to start defining your multi-stakeholder messaging and channel approach.

Speed is of the essence during crisis situations and should you need some assistance, reach out to our Executive Visibility team at Ogilvy to learn about our framework to help you build a crisis messaging strategy in a matter of hours.

Or, if you would like to chat further about the content of this paper, reach out to:

teresa.shiang@ogilvy.com

We'll also leave you with some practical tips, including a "Do's and Don'ts" guidance for building out your executive narrative.

Thank You

*If you would like to chat further
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Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- Be agile and don't be afraid to over-communicate during times of crises, as long as information is fact-checked and provides value for your stakeholders
- Find ways to connect with your audience (i.e. virtual Q&As) and start conversations with trusted thought leaders
- Empathize with your audience's current lifestyle, situation, and access to resource
- Act like a leader and put purpose into action, not just into words
- Identify opportunities for altruistic initiatives that align with your company's purpose
- Encourage best practices from the WHO
- Post consistently to establish trust and dependability

Do Not:

- Make broad pledges that haven't been fact-checked
- Go out of your brand's comfort zone
- Interact 1:1 for detailed consumer questions - lean on your consumer support team for this
- Put out messaging that may position your brand as opportunistic during a crisis period
- Post insensitive messaging that makes light of the situation
- Stand by for recovery
- Forget about the human element of impact and how you, as a leader, can contribute and make change
- Adopt a temporary strategy that your company will have to move away from

Resources

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[How to Communicate in Turbulent Times](#)

The Guardian:

[How Coronavirus Sent Global Markets Into Freefall](#)

LinkedIn:

[Focusing My Time Bill Gates](#)

Forbes:

[CEO Gives Schools Zoom for Free](#)

NY Magazine:

[Angela Merkel Nails Coronavirus Speech](#)

Medium:

[Coronavirus: Why You Must Act Now](#)

CNBC:

[Novartis to Donate Malaria Drug In Fight Against Coronavirus](#)

Washington Post:

[Corona Simulator](#)

Visual Capitalist:

[History of Pandemics](#)

NY Times:

[Tom Ford Video Chat Tips](#)