

Notes from discussions with three crisis communications specialists who are included among CTNewsJunkie's sponsors.

Everyone is in Crisis Mode

The primary concern for small businesses right now is crisis management - how do they find a way through it. One way to be of service to your clients is to help them with their message.

First and foremost - find a local communications firm that specializes in crisis management. Perhaps trade some advertising in order to get the firm to agree to do a webinar specifically for your advertisers as well as the communications firm's clients who are probably open to hearing ideas - these are potential new clients for you.

Use your publication to promote the event - and get online for a discussion how your advertisers should be changing their outgoing brand messages within the context of this crisis. Keep it positive - don't make it a gripe session. Help them - allow a Q&A as well if some of the participants are still struggling after the talk.

News publishers are marketing engines - We need to be there to help our clients and that is often going to mean helping them without their advertising revenue. In this moment, it's important to accept that you are building your funnel for that time after this crisis.

The 5th Seat

This is the role that public perception of your company plays in your decision making. Your publication needs that 5th Seat in your boardroom, just like your advertising clients need it in theirs as well. With physical distancing as our new normal, business as usual messages can and will seem crass.

Your clients need to communicate to their customers three basic messages:

- We are open, but here's what you need to know to access our services
- We can't wait to be back
- We can't provide our services but here's what we are doing for our community (donations in-kind or otherwise, volunteerism, or what they are doing for their employees is also something to advertise).

Here are three different takes on the above:

- We intend to come back: **"We're closed for now but we can't wait to be back serving you."**
- Stand in solidarity with your customers: **"We're in the same boat and understand how hard this is for everyone."**
- Highlight the things you're doing to help others: **"We've encouraged our employees to be out volunteering while we are shut down."**

Craving Good News

In this crisis, people are craving good news. Help your clients communicate the good things they are doing for the community and for the people who work for them. This is always a good message. Your clients' employees and their families are included among or connected to your readers, friends, and neighbors.

- We're hopeful that we'll get a loan to avoid layoffs but in the meantime we are xyz. This means "we are trying." There's a way to message that and create a connection to existing customers and open up conversations with new ones.

Perception of your Publication - Tone Matters

Generally speaking our clients don't owe us their marketing dollars at any time and many of them don't share the depth of commitment to public service journalism that we do. You can't force them to, either. Above all in this moment, be helpful to readers and potential advertisers, and they will be more likely to support you.

A simple needs assessment might be the thing. Are they effective on the web and/or social?

- Clients with a poor web presence need to be connected to web designers who are prepared to move quickly to create a simple, functional website through which they can accept transactions. Don't send them to a slow operator.
- If they have a website but no social media presence, you could offer a simple, exclusive social media content service to help them generate transactions.
- Or, offer an umbrella social media service with sector-specific social media "events" like one we saw here this week - the #GreatAmericanTakeout was a restaurant promotion done by the downtown shopping district in our city.

Change Your Playbook

- Create really low-cost advertising tools to help customers, but be prepared for some pushback regardless of how low the cost is. (Share it with some people you trust before you pitch something publically).
- If there is pushback, be the customer-friendly adult and, hopefully in private, come back with "I totally understand. We're in the same boat. What can I do to make this work for you?"
- Voluntary pricing works and creates loyalty. If it needs to be free, pick your battles about what can be given away free of charge and what still has to have a price tag.
- Your [business directory is your mini chamber of commerce](#). In this climate, it may be all a company can afford. But regardless of the price, have them fill out their listing and include in the form key questions about what they're doing to help keep customers safe from exposure. Highlight what they're doing in a narrative or a list-type promotion of lots of small businesses all at once. This directory is your funnel builder. Paid members of the directory should be provided discounts on other advertising as an incentive.
- Make sure they know that when we all come through this together, you're going to remain a partner because your business and theirs are part of your community.

Adjust Your Sales Process to Reflect Need for New Messaging

Some publications are sending out tired ad reps who keep trying to renew ineffective campaigns, doing the same thing over and over ... within the context of this crisis, those publications are not helping their clients at all. They are helping themselves and people will remember that.

Any advertising client who doesn't give you or your ad rep a cogent new message in response to the pandemic needs your help. You or your ad reps need to be prepared to reframe things. What's the new message?

You might have to walk in with a series of new messages in hand, but think about those message options before you go in the door. Let's break it down based on how your clients are classified in the new normal: Essential or Non-essential - and these are situational determinations:

- Essential businesses need to pitch how they are essential, and how they are now functioning under some new model. What do people need to know?
 - Plumbing or electrical services should be telling their clients that their technicians will come in respectfully while keeping their distance in order to keep you, the customer, and their technician safe.
 - If it's restaurants or liquor stores, their message may now be: "Call or use our website to order and you will be amazed by our new curbside takeout service. We should have done this a long time ago."
- Non-essential businesses. Let's use a consignment shop example:
 - "We'll be back, so now's the time to clean out your closets and figure out what you're going to bring us when we're open again."
 - When you are done "Marie Condo-ing" your house, we'll be ready to take that extra stuff off your hands and either sell it a low rate to someone who really needs it, or we'll get it to Goodwill, whom we are proud to support.

These are troubled times

During troubled times, people go to the institutions they trust by default. They have time to read again, and you have the numbers to prove it. "This is the best opportunity ever to have people see your ad because they're going to remember this experience for the rest of their lives."

If that doesn't move the needle, and you're producing excellent journalism on COVID-19, before you lay off your ad sales team, try refocusing them on selling your memberships. The value proposition on low-cost, voluntary subscriptions is excellent. Your membership program should no longer be an afterthought - in this moment it might need to be your PRIMARY sales focus.

From a news perspective, do the reporting that your readers AND advertisers need. Make sure you are asking your local leaders the questions your readers AND advertisers need answered.

Whether you do it during a public press conference for impact or whether you back-channel their questions, make sure you provide them honest answers. A lot of elected officials are struggling to provide CLARITY. It's our job to get them to provide that clarity.

Suggest reviving a "You Asked, We Answered" feature - either on the site as a written thing or as a live chat or video discussion on social media. This is something a lot of news organizations have always done in a variety of ways, but in this environment it can be really impactful. It means **we are listening, and we are invested in answering.**

Live streaming press conferences is an excellent thing to do if you can pull it off. Lately we have started streaming 15-20 minutes before a press conference, and prompting people on social media to send us their questions. It works. Builds viewers and followers.

Doug Hardy
Partner/Business Manager, CTNewsJunkie
@doughardy_ct
<https://www.ctnewsjunkie.com/>