Navigating COVID-19 in the Social Sector

July 2020
Introductions

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For years, *The Atlantic* was a magazine — until it became an idea.
We design not just for disruption, but for **endurance**

We set organizations apart to succeed today, and we guide them to continuously evolve for tomorrow.
“It has never been so important to get people to pay attention to hard truths, and perhaps it has never been as difficult to do that as it is right now. The key is to confront the most brutal facts of reality unflinchingly, while maintaining an unwavering hope for the future.”

How to Talk About the Coronavirus
LIZ NEELEY
The Atlantic has been an industry leader in responding to COVID-19.

How the Pandemic Will End
ED YONG

The Trump Presidency Is Over
PETER WEHNER

You’re Likely to Get the Coronavirus
JAMES HAMBLIN

The Extraordinary Decisions Facing Italian Doctors
YASCHA MOUNK

Former President Barack Obama and Bill Gates both tweeting out Ed Yong’s “How the Pandemic Will End,” citing its usefulness and insight

Social Distance Podcast
over 300k downloads to date

Glossier CEO citing Atlantic journalism as influence to close all Glossier stores, highlights article in letter to customers
To the research ...

01 Background and Methodology

02 Three key themes and takeaways

03 Q&A
Background and Methodology
In April and May of 2020, The Communications Network and Atlantic 57 conducted a survey among communications leaders at foundations and nonprofits across the country.

This research effort was designed to understand how communications leaders nationwide are responding to COVID-19 and navigating the disruption that has resulted from the pandemic.

**Fieldwork.** April 29 - May 8, 2020.

**Sample size.** n=275.

**Distribution.** The survey was distributed via email to all members of The Communications Network.
Communications leaders from across the country are included as part of this research, with most respondents being female.
Most respondents work for a non-profit or a foundation.

Of those working at foundations, 10% are at an independent national or global foundation, 8% are at a family foundation, 7% are at an independent regional foundation, 7% are at a community foundation, and 1% are at a corporate foundation.
Organization and communications team size vary widely, with roughly half working at organizations of fewer than 25 employees, and on lean communications teams of fewer than three.
We identified three key themes:

01. Communications is critical
02. Change is ongoing
03. Storytelling must adapt

The timing of our research provides a window into the mindset and actions of communicators during the COVID-19 pandemic and on the eve of the uprisings over police brutality and systemic racism.
Communications is Critical
Communications teams have played a central role in helping organizations navigate COVID-19, including largely taking responsibility for internal communications.
At the same time that many are now managing critical internal communications, the cadence with which they are communicating externally has increased for many communications leaders.

How would you describe the change, if any, to different types of external communications from your organization since the outbreak of COVID-19?

Those working at non-profits are more likely to say they have increased the use of graphics in comparison to those at foundations (30% compared to 14%, respectively).
As organizations share more frequent communications, they have done so with an eye to the external audiences on which they are focused.

Those at foundations are more likely to have communicated with grantees at least weekly since the outbreak of COVID-19 compared to non-profits (52% compared to 23%, respectively) while those at non-profits are more likely to have communicated with funders at least weekly (32% compared to 52%, respectively).
In order to manage communications efforts at their organization holistically, many have developed a working group in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Those working at larger organizations are more likely to have developed an internal working group—96% of organizations with 151 employees or more, compared to 78% of organizations with 50-150 employees, and 56% of organizations with fewer than 50 employees.
These working groups typically have a variety of business functions represented, with most working with input from the highest leadership at the organization.

What organizational functions are represented in this working group?*
Please select all that apply.

*\(n=190\); only those who say their organization has developed an internal working group.
Representation in these working groups vary by organization size, with more business functions commonly represented in larger organizations in comparison to smaller ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Foundations</th>
<th>Non-profits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/Senior Executive Team</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program/Programs Officers</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations/Facilities</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent and Culture/HR</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Development</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board/Funders</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT/Technology</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Management/Emergency</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*n=190; only those who say their organization has developed an internal working group.*
Communications support and resources provided to partners tend to center on opinion pieces or support by sharing other perspectives, while fewer organizations tend to indicate that they are providing guidance to their external audiences in ways to navigate COVID-19.

Communications leaders at non-profits are more likely than those at foundations to say their organization is providing support through resources such as thought leadership or opinion pieces (54% of non-profits compared to 43% of foundations), and are similarly more likely to say they are supporting their partners through online convenings to offer support or training (43% of non-profits compared to 36% of foundations).
Lesson 1

Position your organization for service
“There might be a certain appeal in hearing clear, useful information from whatever powerful American institutions are willing to supply it right now, when guidance from the U.S. government has been slow, inconsistent, and confusing.”

Amanda Mull
Pandemic Advertising Got Weird Fast
Being of service: a framework

**ORIGINAL IDEA**
What new story, perspective, or guidance can we provide?

**CREDIBLE EXPERTISE**
Are our messengers trusted?

**EMOTIONAL ALIGNMENT**
Are we acknowledging our audiences’ fears, curiosities, hopes, or stress?

**ATLANTIC EXAMPLE:**

*Calling Me a Hero Only Makes You Feel Better*
I work in a grocery store. All this grandiose praise rings insincere.

*How the Pandemic Will End*
Ed Yong interviewed 22 different health experts and scientists for this quintessential piece on the pandemic’s trajectory and future.

*The Three Equations for a Happy Life, Even During a Pandemic*
“How to Build a Life” is a new column that aims to give you the tools you need to construct a life that feels whole and meaningful.
Survey Discussion Questions

- Did you establish working groups and if so, how have these working groups evolved?
- Have they continued to serve you as other issues come into focus?
- How has collaboration across your organization changed? For better, or worse?
- How has the volume and velocity of your communications output changed?
- Where have you seen successes with your external communications?
02

Change is Ongoing
The majority of organizations indicate that COVID-19 has disrupted at least a portion of their 2020 plans and that they have had to adapt their goals and priorities in response to the pandemic.
Most have also shown significant agility so far in their response to COVID-19 when it comes to everyday communications, with most indicating that their organization has been flexible in their approach.

How flexible has your organization been when it comes to adjusting communications in response to the COVID-19 crisis?

- Very flexible: 72%
- Fairly flexible: 26%
- Not too flexible: 2%
- Not at all flexible: 0%
Most have had to adjust their goals and priorities in several different ways, including changing how they convene, what they talk about, and the tactics they use.

Nearly nine in ten respondents (88%) say that their priorities or goals have changed in at least three different ways, with roughly half (46%) indicating they have changed in five to seven different ways.

How have your communications goals and priorities changed?*
Please select all that apply.

- The ways we organize or convene have changed: 78%
- The messages we hoped to amplify this year have changed: 71%
- Campaigns have been paused or cancelled: 62%
- The stories we tell about our work have changed: 60%
- The communications tactics we use/planned to use have changed: 56%
- The tone of our communications have changed: 53%
- The ways we support communities have changed: 46%
- The audience we are speaking to has shifted: 18%
- Other: 1%

*n=265; only those who say their communications goals and priorities have changed.
Although target audiences are unlikely to have changed, the communications tactics that are being employed to reach them have been adapted as a result of landscape shifts caused by the outbreak of the virus and its wide-reaching effects.

How much have your organization’s communications tactics changed as a result of shifts in consumer media habits during COVID-19?

- Changed a lot: 55%
- Changed a little: 27%
- Has not changed: 18%

68% Of Americans say they’re searching for coronavirus updates on the internet.

49% Of Americans say they are reading more news stories on social media following the outbreak.
Many organizations have specifically pivoted their approaches toward an important piece of their business—events—by taking convenings virtual.

Nearly nine in ten communications leaders (88%) say that events and convenings are at least fairly important to their organization.

Which of the following best describes your current thinking or planning around events and convenings?*
Please select all that apply.

- All events and convenings have been cancelled: 17%
- All events and convenings have been indefinitely postponed: 24%
- We have cancelled events for the next few months but are still hoping to hold them in the fall/winter of 2020: 35%
- We have converted some in-person events or convenings into virtual gatherings: 71%
- We are considering conducting some of our events or convenings virtually: 38%

*n=265; only those who say events and convenings are very important, fairly important, or not too important.
Even in the weeks since the fielding of this survey, it is expected that thinking around in-person meetings has continued to evolve as governments and organizations push back opening plans and audiences settle into virtual routines for both safety and convenience.

- 62% of employed Americans currently say they have worked from home during the crisis—a number that has doubled since mid-March.
- 1 out of 4 business suppliers say they would not consider traveling for a business related event at all in 2020 in the absence of a COVID-19 vaccine.
- 79% of business event planners are planning to redesign an existing face-to-face event in the next three months to be either partially or completely virtual.
Information and guidance about managing communications during COVID-19 is readily available for communications leaders.
While slightly more leaders say they rely on external sources specifically when looking for information on managing communications, many say they are relying on internal and external sources for guidance about equally.

When you are looking for information on managing communications during COVID-19, do you tend to turn to internal sources or external sources more frequently?
Respondents indicate that they use a variety of sources, including peer networks and official government organizations, suggesting that there is no one-stop, comprehensive source.

Communications leaders at non-profits are less likely than those at foundations to turn to peers at other organizations (68% compared to 78%, respectively) or membership organizations (52% compared to 64%, respectively). Instead, they are more likely to rely on health authorities like the CDC (61% compared to 41%, respectively) and the WHO (42% compared to 26%, respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peers at other organizations</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership organizations</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media/Journalists</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your state government</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your local government</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Health Organization (WHO)</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson 2

Stay nimble
Now is the time to remove hurdles, break down silos, and eliminate red tape.

**SOCIAL DISTANCE**
- Quick to market
- Conversationalist in tone
- Fills gap in marketplace
- Low production value
Survey Discussion Questions

- How have you aligned on your goals for the remainder of 2020 and beyond?
- Has your organization been able to react in flexible and nimble ways over the past four months?
- In what ways are you looking to engage with audiences as alternatives to in person events?
- Where have you looked to find information and assistance to aid your response to recent events?
03

Storytelling
Must Adapt
Communications leaders overwhelmingly acknowledge that there will be permanent narrative changes as a direct result of COVID-19.

Thinking about your communications strategy following COVID-19 recovery, how much do you expect your organization’s narrative to change in a permanent way as a result of the pandemic?
Similarly, it is also widely acknowledged that narrative changes more broadly can be expected, leaving organizations to question when they can begin to pivot away from directly COVID-relevant content to focus on other initiatives.
Despite questions about when the pivot should be made, many feel that there are a number of key social areas are primed areas of opportunity given the current crises, presenting an opportunity to use the broad scope of the pandemic to drive conversations about related priority topics.

Which of the following areas do you believe presents an opportunity to capture momentum and drive progress forward following recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, if any? Please select all that apply.

- Public health: 80%
- Racial equity: 67%
- Economic opportunity: 67%
- Social justice: 63%
- Role of government: 54%
- K-12 education: 47%
- Climate: 45%
- Homelessness: 40%
- Environment: 39%
- Criminal justice: 31%
- Immigration: 29%
- Higher education: 28%
- International cooperation: 27%
- Gender equity: 22%
- National security: 11%
- Other: 6%
- None of the above: 1%
As goals and tactics have evolved, it has become more necessary to be intentional with the tone of external communications, with many organizations aiming to meet their audiences’ core need for information and reassurance during a highly uncertain time.

Which of the following words best describes the organizational tone you are striving for in external communications during this time? Please select all that apply.

85% of Americans approve of organizations providing practical information/tips which help people deal with the situation.

GWI: Coronavirus Research | April 2020; Twitter: Advertising during COVID-19 Research
In the same way that tone has evolved, many organizations have changed their narrative approach to ensure that their stories feel germane to the moment.

The larger the organization, the more likely they are to say they are more focused on ensuring their storytelling feels relevant: 70% of organizations with more than 150 employees say this is the case, compared to 66% of organizations with 50-150 employees and 57% of organizations with fewer than 50 employees.
However, fewer than half of respondents say that they are actively listening and seeking input from their audiences, suggesting more closely connect with and understand how communities are faring.

Smaller organizations are more likely to report that they are actively listening and seeking more input from the community they serve compared to larger organizations (48% of organizations with fewer than 50 employees, 45% of organizations with 50-150 employees, 28% of organizations with more 150 employees).
Lesson 3

Match your mindset to your audience’s mindset
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RANKING OF AUDIENCE NEEDS, FROM ATLANTIC READER SURVEY</th>
<th>AUDIENCE MINDSET</th>
<th>THE ATLANTIC’S RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Understanding** how the U.S. and other governments are responding to the crisis. | *Is this under control?* | **What’s Behind South Korea’s COVID-19 Exceptionalism?**  
Seven weeks ago, South Korea and the U.S. had the same number of virus deaths. Today, South Korea has fewer than 300, and the U.S. has more than 70,000. |
| **Information** about how the virus is spreading and its potential impacts. | *Am I safe?* | **Why the Coronavirus Is So Confusing**  
A guide to making sense of a problem that is now too big for any one person to fully comprehend |
| **Guidance** from experts on what I can do to protect myself and others. | *What can I do to help?* | **A Guide to Staying Safe as States Reopen**  
Don’t forget: We need ways to pass the time.

And to try and enrich our lives as best we can.

- Mind our mental health
  - I Got a Pandemic Puppy, and You Can Too
  - Seriously, share this with the person you need to persuade.

- Watch something smart, but easy
  - Unexpected Movie Masterpieces to Watch in Quarantine
  - Some were blasted by critics, some flopped at the box office, and all are ripe to attain cult-classic status.

- Let a rock icon soundtrack your day
  - Dave Grohl’s Pandemic Playlist
  - The Foo Fighters front man picks a song for your every quarantine mood.
Survey Discussion Questions

- In what ways will the changes that have happened over the past four months be permanent?
- How has your organization changed its tone or approach to storytelling over the past four months?
- What opportunities, if any, have you taken to listen to the communities and audiences you serve?
- How has your organization begun to address broader societal issues in its communications in light of COVID-19 and recent protests against racial inequity?
Thank you.