

Covid-19 and the true power of communication

By  Carina Smith-Allin

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The brutality of the Covid-19 global pandemic brought about some 'contagious' inspiration in the community of communication experts. It also encouraged behavioural change on all levels of society, business and leadership.



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In my 25-year professional career, I have come across too many CEO's, leaders and colleagues who do not grasp the power of communication. During a crisis, these leaders needed to be mentored and hounded by communications experts just to say something. When the going gets tough, people need a message the most. All they want is communication from industry leaders.

When Covid-19 arrived, it sent shock waves around the world as countries realised they were not getting a free ride. Soon, everyone from CEOs to industry leaders, prime ministers to presidents, realised the need to say something, starting a national and global movement. As such, citizens in every country started feeling included and engaged at a time when we needed it the most.

Going back and connecting

As a little girl, I always wondered why animals communicated better than humans. I felt that animals were more naturally connected or 'in sync'. This helped me become inspired by the 'connectedness' the global pandemic created. I started to understand that we were all connected through this invisible thread across the globe. No one was immune to the pandemic. Leaders and governments became naturally connected to the people they serve.

Most countries went through a lockdown. We were cut off from friends, family, colleagues and the rest of the world. Yet, despite our natural needs for connection and companionship, we survived - saved by our screens, from video calls to endless streaming. While we were restricted from social contact, we found ways to communicate better. And, this spilt over to our leaders. Suddenly, they were forced to improve their communication skills and start talking.

The narrative

Across the world, we also soon realised the need to refine the Covid-19 narrative. For example, social distancing does not mean the same thing for everyone, which resulted in actual distances in metres, centimetres, feet, etc., being put in place. As a communications expert, I absolutely loved how detailed the narrative became, how well aligned everybody was to it and how the messaging ensured very little room for misinterpretation. Isn't that what proper communication is all about?

Two industries during a global pandemic

I was privileged to work in PR and Communications in two industries during the global pandemic - retail and mobility. The latter is an e-hailing service, Didi. Communication certainly played a vital role when working for such a global company, where all of my colleagues are situated around the world. However, Didi's ethos of transparency and open communication has made the transition easier for everyone involved.

Even though retail and mobility are vastly different in essence, the basic principles of great and effective communication still apply. As leaders, communication, or lack thereof, can be all the difference between an easy-to-manage bump in the road to a full-blown crisis.

The second element that surfaced during this time, which I found particularly inspiring, is that when it came to messaging and communication, no country was 'third-world' or 'slightly behind the rest'. We were all connected, both virtually and through the same narrative. We had a unique challenge in Africa as many of our communities are not as connected to the rest of the world as others. As such, word of mouth became a powerful communication tool, and it didn't take too much effort to raise the bar on communication.

Above all, transparency and constant communication became key tools again to empower communities in understanding the virus and how to protect themselves against it. We remained focused on the key principles of keeping our messages clear, concise and consistent to effect behavioural change in our communities. Is that not what should generally happen even outside of a crisis?

I recently read an article published by the Harvard Business Review about the power of communication through the pandemic. I smiled because, throughout my career in five different companies, my main proposal to leaders was to centralise communication in the respective businesses. This applies not only during a crisis but for impact as it is the only way to ensure an engaged workforce. And here, during a global pandemic, the power of a centralised communication system gets noted!

Paul Argenti, author of the Harvard Business Review piece, wrote, "In a fast-moving crisis, it's important for leaders to communicate with their key constituencies, early and often, and with empathy, honesty, and transparency — even when you don't have all the answers. Start by putting together a centralised communication team. While decentralised communication may be desirable in large, complex organisations, in an emergency or fast-moving situation, you need a crisis communication team composed of key leaders. From there, develop messaging for key constituencies, including

your employees, customers, shareholders, and community. Where companies have moved back to a decentralised communication system, they are indeed regressing as a business.”

The emotional impact of the pandemic on individuals, in particular, have been harsh - to say the least. Where companies will have to take special care is when, and if, employees are asked to return to a normal office environment. I am hopeful that the lessons learnt will be used to build trust and create a sense of purpose again, for all, once we can successfully exit these unprecedented times.

Critical tool for excellence

Writing this article makes me feel grateful that I could play a vital role on a professional level in ‘connecting’ colleagues and supporting leaders to become more effective communicators during a pandemic. I will exit this time knowing that the pandemic had a great impact on those who are not natural communicators, as well as those of us who have a passion for helping them become better. In both instances, we learnt and proved that the power of communication should not be allowed only to show its full colours during a crisis but remain a business driver and a critical tool that leaders can use to empower people and ensure performance excellence.

Allow me to end with my favourite communication quote of all time by George Bernard Shaw, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” Maybe the result of the pandemic will be that communication experts no longer have to ‘fight’ against this illusion?

ABOUT CARINA SMITH-ALLIN

Smith-Allin is the head of PR and communications at Didi e-hailing service. Having been in the communications industry for over 20 years, her passion lies with the understanding of the power of communication.

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