

From Crisis to Connection: How to Build a Social Media Crisis Management Strategy

Crises of all kinds could hit your brand at any moment.

In the past, communications leaders worried about fairly standard possible crises—those centered around your brand’s reputation, operations, leadership or employees. However, as we’ve all learned lately, there’s no established playbook for brands when the crisis is a global pandemic.

Planning for the worst, and being able to adapt quickly no matter what you’re facing, has become critical—and social media plays a major role in your crisis communications efforts. A Pentland Analytics [study](#) found that the impact of brand crises on shareholder value has doubled since the emergence of social media. Furthermore, they found that companies that respond well to this type of crisis see a 20% increase in value on average; those that respond poorly see a 30% decrease.

To ensure the longevity and success of your brand, your organization must think through its strategy from the top down, solidifying social’s role as fundamental to crisis management, developing a holistic plan that involves the right team members, activating your plan as needed and managing the aftermath to mitigate residual effects.

While we hope you never have to use your crisis communications plan when the world is business as usual, we’ll also address what to do right now amid the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic—when the playbook has gone out the window entirely.

Part one: Communications during the coronavirus pandemic

To put it bluntly, we've never faced this type of world crisis before. This is an unprecedented time for us as a society and it's natural to feel uncertain. Unlike creating a social media strategy for a marketing campaign or content strategy for a new product launch, there's no template or slew of tried-and-true best practices for handling a global pandemic.

That said, social media professionals are already some of the most well-equipped to deal with communication in a difficult situation. Our profession demands empathy, strong communication skills and flexibility. Your experience developing all of these qualities is what will help you develop an effective plan to support your social community and sustain your organization's communications during this unusual time.

Note: If you are looking for evergreen crisis communications guidance, please use the links on the left to continue to part two.

Now let's jump into your coronavirus communications plan.

First, it's important to distinguish between **crisis communications** (the rest of this guide) and **communications in a crisis** (what we're talking about when it comes to the coronavirus).

Crisis communications is a form of brand communication meant to mitigate damage to a brand's reputation during a negative action or event caused by that brand. Examples of these kinds of events include Boeing's [737 Max malfunctions](#) that caused two plane crashes or Pepsi's [Kendall Jenner ad](#) that received widespread criticism for making light of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Communications during a crisis refer to communications from a brand during a widespread crisis situation that is bigger than the brand itself. Events that trigger communications during a crisis are not caused by the brand, but they are likely to have an impact on the brand's business, operations and community. Our current coronavirus pandemic is one example of this type of event.

In the next two sections, we'll cover what to share and how to engage with your audience during this uncertain time. We'll also go beyond your social media communications plan and cover one of the most important ways that social media can support your organization and inform your next moves.

Social media strategy: what to share

During a crisis, we cannot proceed as if it's business as usual. As a social media professional, it's crucial that you are well-informed about your organization's operations, plans and policies and that, even when things may change hour-to-hour, you are providing clear, empathetic information to your audience.



Typically, information that an organization shares during a crisis like this may include any effect on business (such as hours of operation, new cleaning procedures or refund policies) and how the brand intends to support those affected by the crisis (such as donating goods, providing physical space for relief efforts or waiving delivery fees).



Aston Villa 
@AVFCOfficial



Today, @AVFCFoundation teamed up with @FareShareUK to ensure that no perishable food at the stadium will go to waste. 🙌👏 #AVFC



Villa donate fresh food to support vulnerable and loc...
www.avfc.co.uk

👍 658 12:36 AM - Mar 21, 2020



💬 89 people are talking about this



As you adjust your social approach, look at any planned content or campaigns for the next few weeks. Do these messages feel relevant? You may need to postpone campaigns or pause scheduled content altogether. At minimum, review everything you had planned while asking yourself this question:

“Does this feel relevant to our audience right now?”

Most importantly, know your audience. Are they primarily customers? Students? Employees? Local community members? Think about these people and what their questions, concerns and needs are right now. Providing content that speaks directly to these considerations ensures your social presence remains relevant and even valuable during a difficult time.



 **Kristin Volpe Thomas** 
@KristinVThomas

Vanguard is a "Helper Brand" in this [#COVID19](#)/Market Volatility situation. My team is working hard to be a resource to investors by providing information, reassurance, and helpful content across all channels. Raise your hand if you are also a "Helper Brand" right now.

♡ 8 1:25 AM - Mar 14, 2020 

 [See Kristin Volpe Thomas's other Tweets](#) 



 **Pinterest** 
@Pinterest 

It's been a hard few weeks. We want to help.

Dealing with being at home. Cooking good food with what you have. Teaching your kids. New home office ideas. Whatever you need right now to feel a little better, our community is sharing more ideas than ever:
pinterest.com/pinterest/stay...



♡ 47 2:20 AM - Mar 21, 2020 

 23 people are talking about this

This doesn't mean that your social feed needs to become a coronavirus newsroom (unless you're a media outlet, of course, in which case we salute you). People are also looking for distraction and moments of positivity, like the Shedd Aquarium's educational and uplifting [penguin adventures](#) or cookbook author Julia Turshen hosting a [daily writing workshop](#) for kids of all ages.

How to engage

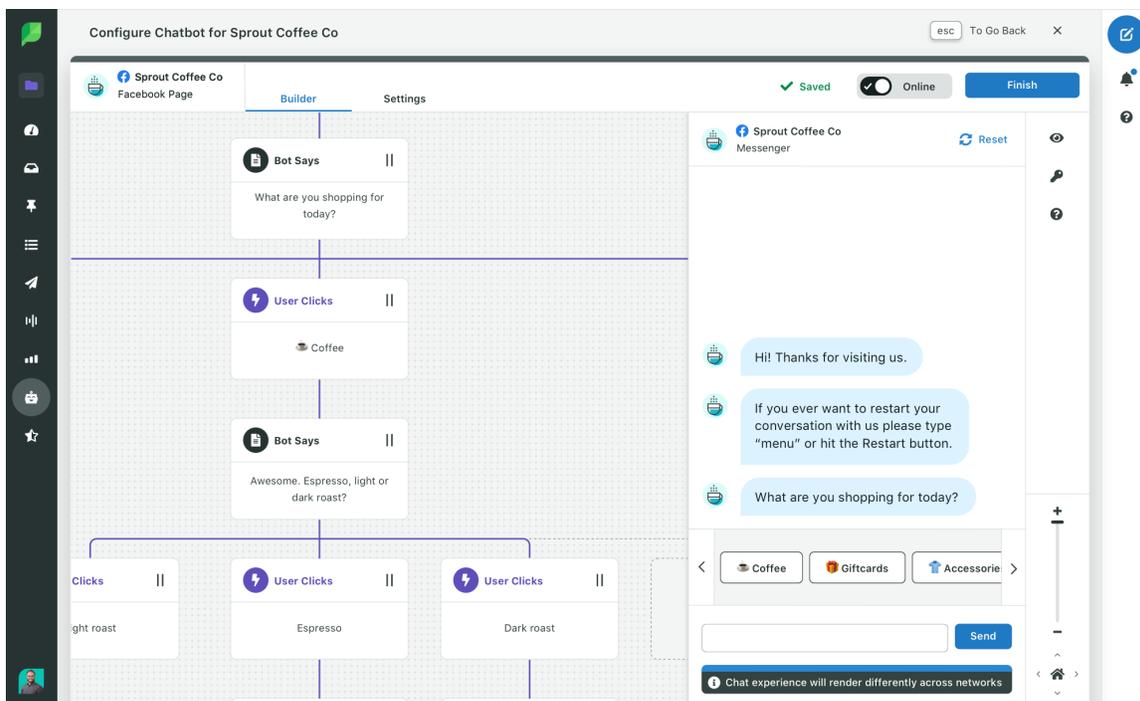
You're likely experiencing a lot of the same emotions your audience might be: concern, fear, uncertainty or even some work-from-home cabin fever. Now is the time to lead with empathy. Focus your social approach on responding to your community's questions and fostering a sense of connection. Through this approach, you can position your brand as a port in the storm—a leader, a pillar of support and a source of helpful information.

When [Glossier](#), a cosmetics brand with both ecommerce and physical locations, chose to close all of its stores, their team published a note from their CEO on Instagram that specifically called out social media as a way for the Glossier community to stay connected with the brand.



We've heard from brands in almost every industry who are receiving an unprecedented volume of messages. For small social teams and solo practitioners, revising your entire strategy, creating new and relevant content, and responding to hundreds or thousands of questions is an enormous challenge.

If you are receiving a high volume of similar questions, consider implementing a **social media chatbot** to help get your community answers and resources as quickly as possible. Being able to route your customers to information on your website, tips to self-diagnose and resolve common customer support issues or information about your company's current charitable efforts will give your team hours back to spend on more complex or unique queries.



How to use social insights to inform decision-making

While social media is one of your most powerful communication tools, you can also use social to address economic concerns caused by this pandemic.

Social media is a powerful source of ideas, inspiration and data that can inform the best approach for your business right now—both in terms of new ideas to generate income and strategic discussions within your organization.

What challenges are top of mind for your brand right now? Use social to look at what your target audience has to say about related topics, how your competitors are responding and what the local community is searching for. You can use [social listening tools](#) to evaluate a wide spectrum of global social media messages, or you can simply search for keywords or hashtags to find examples to inspire your next steps. A few examples:

- **Restaurants and bars:** International pub chain Brewdog has launched **102 online bars** where patrons can play trivia, watch live music and comedy shows and take masterclasses in brewing beer. On the local side, bars and restaurants are creating special delivery packages, like this Club Lucky **martini kit**, which also gives \$10 back to their staff who are out of work.
- **Nonprofit:** Common Pantry, a nonprofit food pantry that delivers groceries to the elderly and typically provides a grocery store-style pantry experience, **confirmed they are staying open** and shared the best way to provide support while social distancing is through a donation.
- **Retail: Helm Collective**, a vintage shop that's had to close its doors and move to ecommerce, put together care packages to order for yourself or a friend, including a few items from their normal stock but priced at a discount.
- **Higher education:** Trinity College, which sent students home for the remainder of the semester, encouraged alumni and community members looking for ways to help to donate to their **Student Emergency and Equity Fund**—something that exists year-round, but is currently experiencing unprecedented need.

Package these insights into a report that you can share with the rest of your team. Include high-level takeaways about the social conversation as well as examples of messages so your team members who aren't on the social front lines can hear from people in their own words. Make sure to share this report along with your own recommendations.

The ability to adapt and come up with creative ways to support business operations will characterize successful brands through this ongoing disruption. As a social media pro, you have the opportunity to be a guiding light for both your customers and your organization as we navigate this pandemic—together.

If you are interested in learning about how to use Sprout Social to implement the recommendations above, we've compiled a list of essential features and how to use them [here](#)—and our **free, 30-day trial** is available to all, with no credit card required, if you'd like to get started right away.

Part two: The role of social in best-in-class crisis communications

While we are all focused on the current global crisis, unfortunately, the need for traditional crisis communications preparedness hasn't disappeared. Especially when it comes to social media.

For example, as the coronavirus news cycle began to take off, people began posting about using Tito's Vodka to make hand sanitizer—a recipe which wouldn't meet the CDC's recommendations, as the vodka contains less than the 60% or higher alcohol content they recommend. The brand quickly began responding to social media posts about this topic to correct and educate those posting, and they also went a step further by preparing their distillery to make 24 tons of approved hand sanitizer. A potential brand crisis, neatly averted.



TitosVodka ✓
@TitosVodka



While we advise that you cannot use our vodka as a hand sanitizer, our distillery has been working hard to get all of the pieces in place to begin production on 24 tons of hand

sanitizer that adheres to industry and governmental guidance. Please see attached for more information.



While we advise that you cannot use our standard vodka product as a hand sanitizer, our team at the distillery has been working hard to get all of the pieces in place to begin production on a hand sanitizer that adheres to industry and governmental guidance.

Last week, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) announced they are authorizing production of ethanol-based hand sanitizers by permitted distillers. This good news allowed our team to continue working on this process.

Currently, we are testing our formula, procuring necessary components of supplies and packaging, and preparing for production as we wait for the additional required ingredients to be delivered to the distillery. We have the ingredients and equipment on order to make an initial 24 tons of hand sanitizer over the next several weeks, and plan to make more from there as needed.

While we don't have all of the details quite yet, we do know we will be giving it away for free to our community and those most in need. We will update you as we know more on TitosVodka.com.

♡ 11.1K 5:28 AM - Mar 23, 2020



💬 3,715 people are talking about this



Most crises your brand will face start and pick up steam online. With that in mind, it's important that every level and function of your organization understands the primacy and power of social media for managing a crisis.

Why is social media critical for crisis communications?

- **It's fast.** In a matter of minutes, a single message can make its way around the globe. The rapid spread of information on social media is both an opportunity and a challenge for your brand in times of crisis.
- **It's direct.** Recent research shows that 86% of consumers believe **transparency from businesses** is more important than ever before—social gives you a direct channel to share your brand's position with your customers and community.
- **It's a powerful data source.** Brands can aggregate data from millions of social messages and derive actionable intelligence with **social listening tools**. This gives communicators a real-time way to assess a crisis, understand its timeline and inform appropriate next steps for the business, online and off.
- **It's a first touchpoint.** According to the **Pew Research Center**, more American adults get their news from social media than ever; in fact, more than half get their news from social media often or sometimes. It is often the first place people hear about a crisis and where they watch it play out in real-time.