

A tip sheet for nonprofits and charities

Communications during COVID-19



1. Consider your communications structure

How is communications done in your organization? Who is responsible for communications?

Are you a communications staff of one? Are you a busy Executive Director doing this off the side of your desk? Are you a volunteer-run organization?

Many nonprofits and charities have small teams, and often operate without a full-time communications role.

Be realistic about the capacity of your organization to send and share information.



2. Consider when it's the right time to share content

Timing and frequency - a good rule of thumb is: "Is this information useful? Is it helpful?" See Content Consideration Steps below.



3. Be helpful to your audiences

Who are your most important stakeholders and audiences? Prioritize them and connect with them first. What is your organization's area of expertise? What can you offer that is unique to your community? How can you be helpful?

For example: disseminating information, creating and curating resources, being a "sensemaker", to analyze and provide summaries of useful information, analyzing programs and funding, providing comforting entertainment or recreation; using your platforms and audiences to amplify voices who may not otherwise be heard.

Be brief. There is an intense and extremely high volume of information circulating. Do yourself and your stakeholders a favour and get to the point succinctly and clearly. Avoid fluffy language and unnecessary content.



4. Think about the best way to share your content

Consider platforms and tools: personalized emails, social media, CRM emails, blog posts, online polls, surveys) Webinars, Webcasts, Zoom chats, Twitter, Instagram Stories, IG Live, Facebook Live.

Collaborate with others. Are there opportunities to share information alongside other organizations? Consider unlikely collaborators, too! Co-write a blog post, co-host an on-line gathering, or co-produce a short video.

Nonprofits and charities are facing a significant challenge as they strive to maintain connections to their audiences during a time of fear, information overload and short attention spans.

At the same time, nonprofits are trusted leaders in their communities and especially now, need to connect to their supporters and audiences.

Many organizations have taken a pause or changed their communications to focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. But as we move from responding to the crisis, to the next phase of recovery, how should organizations communicate?

How can organizations continue to serve their missions and talk about their work? What information is needed and how should they share the stories of the people and communities they serve?

What should organizations be thinking about as they consider the type and content of their communications going forward?

Here are six key things for your organization to consider as you plan communications in this next phase of COVID-19.



5. Consider what you should share and how much to share

An organization's beliefs and actions are a communicator's core material.

Start with what is important to your audience.

If the landscape of your organization is changing, be transparent about how, when and why.

Reassure where you can.

Stick to content that is useful and succinct. People are overwhelmed with information. Don't add to the volume. How essential is it to communicate now?

Content

Acknowledge COVID-19's impact on your organization (and as appropriate, those you support). Put that information front and centre on your website, newsletter, social media. Then continue to tell your stories.

Audiences want to know how COVID-19 is impacting the non-profits they are connected to or support. Be honest, but don't exaggerate. Consider how content and tone should be personalized for each of your audiences. For example, your content to members may be different than communications with financial partners or your regular subscribers.

Try and balance the negative stories with something upbeat - share the rainbow as well as the rain.

Consider ways to gather information, such as quick polls in your eblasts or on social media. What would be useful to your organization and to supporters? What key questions can you ask easily to make it easy to participate and how can you share back what you've learned?

Tone

Use the values of your organization as a compass through all communications. Use plain language and honesty. It's the antidote to confusion and fear. Choose nouns over adjectives. Choose quality over quantity.



6. Keep in mind the post-COVID period

What stories can you start gathering now that will be useful in the recovery stage as the nonprofit sector builds itself back up?

If you can only do one thing: Prioritize this!

Actively listen to the needs of those you serve. Whether they are grantees, networks, communities or specific populations, find out what they need right now.

How to find out what is needed?

Ask questions in an email, host a call, do a quick poll, ask questions on social media, or pick up the phone.

Then make it happen!

Not within your scope?

Collaborate! If it's not your area of expertise, explore who or what you can tap into to provide support. There are lots of organizations and companies eager to help.

- Do Communicate with empathy, compassion and confidence.
- Do Communicate with regularity, so that your audiences know what to expect from you, how to reach you.
- Do Be honest and transparent.
- Do Stay connected with the people who support you. It will do a great service for others and can be rewarded with a stronger relationship going forward.
- Do Open channels for conversation and feedback.
- Do Continue to be creative.
- Do Ensure your organization's leadership is involved in communications.

- Don't Hide behind COVID with radio silence if your audience should be hearing from you.
- Don't Overwhelm with information or explanations.
- Don't Apologize for communicating. Acknowledge the current environment and explain why it's necessary to connect now.
- Don't Be gimmicky or try too hard to connect the crisis with your purpose for communication.
- Don't Focus only on the negative stories and don't exploit your clients and their experiences in the interest of communicating. #povertyporn

Non-Coronavirus Content Consideration Steps shared via The Communications Network



Question: Does the content on its face have any relevance to what people are experiencing due to COVID-19? If not, is there a way to contextualize to make it relevant?

If the answer to Step #1 is no, this content should probably be rescheduled for a later time.

While there is an appetite for non-coronavirus information, information must be contextualized for the world that exists today, particularly for something timely like a blog post or article.

This contextualization could involve a relatively minor edit, such as adding an introductory paragraph that grounds the piece in the current crisis or a more extensive reformulation of the piece to anchor it to the challenge that currently exists or a solution.

Question: If the content is relevant, can it be conveyed with a tone that acknowledges the challenges your audiences is facing?

If the answer to Step #2 is no, this content should probably be rescheduled for a later time.

While we want to help provide some semblance of normalcy for our audiences and continue to carry our missions forward, we must be mindful that this is a time where many are struggling to meet their most basic needs. It is important to not come across as out of touch or insensitive.

Content should convey a tone that is empathetic, resourceful, and collaborative.

Question: If the content is relevant and appropriate, how should we disseminate?

While readers' attention may be pulled in a lot of different directions, they are still looking for meaningful content provided it feels timely, engaging, and acknowledges current circumstances.

This is also the case for the media. If earned media is an objective, an organization's best chance of securing coverage is by creating an external media strategy that demonstrates how their content relates to this crisis and is still relevant and deserve coverage.

More resources to discover

The Communications Network: [Crisis communications](#)

Since so many of us are doing virtual meetings and possibly media work: [How to look your best on a webcam, New York Times](#)

This tipsheet is a collaboration by a collective of communications staff working in the charitable and nonprofit sector in Canada, including:

