



Fostering connections between government and the people it serves during a crisis and beyond

COVID-19 is requiring just about everyone to rethink their crisis communication strategies and toss the “standard” playbook out the window. Growing concerns and uncertainties are putting more and more pressure on federal, state, and local governments to adapt and adjust engagement strategies that go “beyond the podium.”

During a time of crisis, especially one as severe and far-reaching as COVID-19, governments should lead and be able to reach, engage, and connect with the public on a more human level to deliver critical information at the most important moments.

As the pandemic leaves a lasting impact on the world, governments may need to

rely more on technology and services that emphasize responsiveness and serve their constituents with sensitivity. While organizations focus on the short term to keep services functioning, their ability to understand their audiences, listen to data-driven insights, and create better citizen experiences can be crucial for long-term recovery.

Here are some considerations for governments to build and maintain engagement with the people they serve:



1. Stay mission-focused.

The government can lead by communicating precisely on the best courses of action. It can help people navigate a crisis by staying focused on the mission to reach them with accurate information. Aligning day-to-day work with the organization's mission helps keep the critical work prioritized during uncertain times. It is also important to identify which audiences are most vulnerable and know how to reach them with a clear, articulate message on the channels most relevant to them.



2. Lead with empathy.

Government agencies need to understand and anticipate their constituents' needs and desired outcomes so they can connect with them in personal, meaningful ways. They should also recognize that people's pain points may change during times of crisis, which means it will take agility to deliver on real-time needs.

Understanding the ways individuals and families benefit from specific services can help organizations meet their needs

more effectively. Organizations can get to know their customers better by reviewing data and analytics insights, conducting surveys, listening to feedback, and creating audience personas. A single view of each person, possibly provided through a customer data platform, can help government agencies make informed decisions about how to engage and create deeper one-on-one connections with the people they serve.





3. Develop new ways of engaging.

Organizations should embrace new ways of communicating to maintain one of life's most fundamental elements: the human connection. Diversifying communication platforms can help a variety of audiences—from vulnerable elderly populations to millennials—get the information they need quickly. Useful channels could include email newsletters, SMS text messaging, social media videos or daily press conferences. It can also help to lean into new channels where audiences are already gravitating in search of information, such as social media live videos. The content shared there should also contain simple and informative messages.

As individual situations and the environment change on a daily basis, reaching people effectively will also be an iterative process. Operating in a data-driven ecosystem using social media listening, sentiment analysis, and search optimization can make it easier to gauge the effectiveness of communications tactics and refine the approach as needed.



4. Use social sensing to confirm audiences are being reached.

In times of crisis, misleading and untrustworthy information can proliferate—and feed into people's fear and confusion. Such information muddies an otherwise effective message that governments are sharing with the people they serve. Social media sensing can provide an accurate reading of how people are interpreting messaging, then help identify inaccurate information and inform a correction. Using social listening tools can help identify trending conversations and find ways of offering access to legitimate resources.



5. Reimagine in-person services as digital services and adapt digital infrastructure.

With the massive shift toward doing things virtually, people are relying on digital tools and platforms more often and in more comprehensive ways. Governments should consider adapting to a digital-first environment and identify new ways of working to help the people they serve during crisis and beyond. New or reimaged digital services might support everyday and official tasks such as applying for or renewing driver's licenses, going to the public library, or using public parks and recreation facilities.

This rapid, crisis-generated shift in channels has created challenges for many governments, because many of them lack the e-commerce capacity to meet demand. Government agencies should assess the implications of the shift of demand from traditional services to online, then move quickly to prepare to meet it.

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It's also wise to keep using and developing technologies that have shown their effectiveness already—such as telehealth and remote work—so they evolve to become more permanent options in government. Greater use of certain technologies can help make a government less dependent on physical locations and more resilient to future crisis. By adapting government services to new ways of helping people on a digital spectrum, governments have a chance to meet the needs of each client by appealing to their unique circumstances and needs.

6. Team up with like-minded organizations. Governments emerging from a crisis will have to manage existing operations while also exploring new ways to enhance and streamline future emergency responses. Breaking down silos and sharing information across agencies and departments can shrink lead times and enhance stakeholder interaction. By introducing new technologies that local, state, and federal agencies can use collectively, and establishing new ways of working together, governments can identify and solve for similar challenges.

More importantly, they can foster a dialogue that helps people feel more secure and connected to a deeper sense of stability. These partnerships may also help governments to react quickly in high-impact situations and drive engagement in moments that matter.

Prepare for the **unexpected.**

While each organization will find its own unique path to reopening, all will likely face common challenges, including the efforts needed to become better prepared for the next crisis. Government leaders will have to answer key strategic questions such as:

- **In what environment will people seek us out?**
- **Who depends on us?**
- **Are we prepared to handle the volume of people that may require our services if another crisis occurred?**
- **Are we able to connect with them and provide an experience that meets their needs?**
- **What happens if our resources go away?**

Governments should use data and market research from their current recovery efforts to prepare for future responses. They should break down access roadblocks so they can provide the leadership their constituents seek as they navigate their fear and confusion after a crisis changes their personal lives.

As the pandemic eventually subsides into a new normal, it will be crucial for governments to continue to understand and interact with the people they serve in meaningful and responsive ways. Governments can continue to harness community interest and attention by understanding their audiences, leading with empathy, and designing human-centered experiences that meet individual needs.

What's next?

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