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**Executive Summary**

**The Future of Communications in an Age of Uncertainty: After the 2020 Presidential Election, What's Next?**

***Michael Kaye****, Global Communications & PR Manager,* ***OKCupid***

***Richard Levick****, Esq., Chairman and CEO,* ***LEVICK***

***Amanda Schoch****, Chief Communications Officer,* ***Office of the Director of National Intelligence***

**How have audience behaviors changed during COVID-19?**

**Kaye:** There’s unprecedented levels of engagement on our platform. A lot of users said they liked virtual ways of meeting people—that they actually got to know people better this way.

Behaviors are changing. Women in particular felt more liberated in their dating lives, sending more intro messages, etc.

**Are those trends here to stay?**

**Kaye:** We just published our Future of Dating report. We expect to see a rise in romance, people finding someone with compatible views to them. It’s less about “tall, dark and handsome” and more about “does he support climate change activism?”

**Levick:** “Fear has of course been a real issue for people.” As an entrepreneur, when this began, people wondered if the economy would just fall off a cliff. How do we be both fair to employees and balance the decline in revenue and cash flow? Being there is more important than ever.

Take a lesson from history, Levick argues:

We have to recognize the arc of history. There are only three times when the government didn’t step in in times such as these: James Buchanan before the Civil War, Andrew Johnson refusing to do reconstruction after the Civil War, and Herbert Hoover who didn’t see it coming and didn’t know how to deal with the Great Depression.

Crisis abhors and vacuum and when you don’t have leadership at the federal level, it gets pushed down to lower levels. It’s why we are looking at CEOs to lead. We haven’t seen this level of “mercantile activism” since 1907.

**What about trust?**

**Schoch:** There is an issue with truth and trust right now. There is not a shared understanding of what facts are anymore. It’s really hard for communicators to find a shared connection across all audiences.

Schoch shares that her government agency has had to watch its audience erode and the public decide whether it is telling the truth or not telling the truth—which is hard. Her solution? “Find places to build connection on the most basic levels.”

There’s also a need to engage newly remote workers and build connective tissue across the organization. Otherwise you cannot connect with them in real time.

**How can communicators build trust during time of private, serious conversations behind closed doors?**

**Schoch:** On the internal piece, if you can’t share the results, share that the conversation is happening and be as transparent as soon as you can be transparent.

Focus on information literacy. Don’t tell audience show to feel; help them understand how to evaluate information from high-level sources. We can really build trust by helping audiences learn.

**Kaye:** We share almost as much with external stakeholders as we do internally. That helps external stakeholder feel like they are part of the brand.

On the BLM movement: We were immediately talking internally that first weekend. We kept employees in the loop: We don’t know exactly what we are going to say, but this is where we want to go, and we made a promise to come back to with more. Tip: Ask employees what organizations matter to them.

For brands that were nervous about saying something wrong—now not saying something and not saying something quickly enough is your biggest mistake.

**How can you build more trust?**

**Levick:** Start at the top. The days of being apolitical are gone. The era of brand neutrality is over. One of the things we need to be doing is looking back to look forward.

If we have a lodestar for this moment, it’s the height of the anti-Vietnam war movement—but really, we are past that. What we have is a cold civil war right now. So, of course we are stressed. The next several months are all about understanding history and understanding your audience.

Really understand what your company is and who your audience is.

As an example: Nike took on the NFL with Kaepernick, even though they knew they would lose some customers. They were willing to make a short-term sacrifice for the long-term gain. The result? Their share price went up something like 10% after.

Know that internal communications will eventually be public. “100% of us will be hacked.” Political contributions are not private. As an example: AT&T had a great BLM statement but were then revealed as a major donor to Tom Cotton, a senator who wrote a polemic in the New York Times calling for violence against protestors.

This is a historic moment. “You either lean in now or you are left to the entrails of history.”

**Taking the Goodyear incident and campaign clothing at work as an example:**

**Levick** makes five points:

1. That whole crisis comes out of a single slide out of HR that someone took a photo of on their phone and it went viral. That’s how little it takes to start a crisis.

2. It speaks to the anger out there that everyone is tiptoeing around. There’s a real divide in this country and strong feelings abound.

3. The big problem was not for Goodyear but for their dealers. The dealers were on the front line. The dealerships that did the best were those that immediately anticipated it and were prepared with a statements, with signs, letting people know that they are a multi-brand seller etc.

4. Speaks to the issue of advocacy clothing. Companies must address the advocacy clothing issue.

5. Think about how this is going to affect your frontline employees.

**Schoch:** Take your political stance from your core values as an organization. Our workforce and the folks we talk to, we talk in an apolitical space to protect our country. We stay out of the political space. We know that people work for us, and they have deeply-held values. But we have to protect our organization from becoming polticized to fulfill our mission.

Make your response to this moment based in your purpose and clear understanding of what your purpose is.

“I can make these points about transparency and politics because we are so clear about what our purpose is. All organizations need to go back to what is that core purpose and then make decisions based on that space.”

**The Future of Employee Engagement, Change Management and Culture in a Digital Workplace**

***Shalini Gupta,*** *Leader and CEO Communications Manager****, BT (British Telecommunications)***

***Jackie Rooney,*** *Head of Internal Strategic Response, Internal Communications,* ***Facebook***

***Rachel Lutz,*** *Internal Communications Manager****, Deloitte***

**How panelists have kept their employees connected**

**BT:**

* Established one communication platform to reach out to everybody.
* BT uses Workplace by Facebook, which works well to absorb all of their communications.
* Created listening sessions to bridge the gap between leaders and employees. Leaders should be equipped to participate in both larger town halls and smaller, intimate coffee sessions
* Partnered with HR managers to update line managers so they can support their remote teams.
* Communicated a steady stream of good news stories to demonstrate the impact of their organization and buoy employees’ spirits during difficult times.

**Facebook:**

* Leaned on Workplace to build community and make connections. Tool can be used by everybody at the company, from Mark Zuckerberg to new interns.
  + Various channels within the platform create spaces where important as well as frivolous information can be shared. Facebookers can head to Workplace to read important COVID-related updates or share their “Sad Work From Home Lunches.”
* Led Weekly Q&A sessions with Mark Zuckerberg where employees could ask anything
* Tailored communications to different audiences in regions–some communications can apply to everybody at the company, but some might work.
* HR Director took the charge on COVID-related communications. Select an identifiable, reliable source that people can go to for additional information helped build trust for employees.

**Deloitte:**

* Identified what information is “need to know” and what’s “nice to know” and tried not to overwhelm employees with too much information.
* Developed push notification newsletter and newsroom collect all COVID-related information.
* Collected communications geared to different countries to create a digest that served as single voice of truth.
* Established live-listening sessions with COO and Chief People Officer.
* Shortened meetings and sessions; recorded town halls so employees could watch on-demand if they missed it live.

**A lot has changed, but what’s here to stay?**

**BT:**

* Employees will continue to crave empowerment. They will help influence the way we communicate and work going forward.
* Crowdsourcing for content continues to reveal your organization’s authenticity.

**Deloitte:**

* Wellbeing continues to play a bigger role. Stress levels for managers will continue to rise – arm them with the toolkits, discussion guides, and other items that they’ll need to ensure they’re focusing on their mental health.
* Appreciation and recognition will continue to go a long way. Monetary awards are always appreciated, but sending cards or e-cards and offering continual shoutouts for employees’ work should be the standard practice.

**Facebook**

* Real-time feedback and data capture is critical. Facebook uses the Weekly Q&As to gauge what employees are ‘liking’ or commenting on.
* Manager leadership is more important than ever. Give them breathing room if they have issues outside of work ensures they’ll come back to their jobs focused.

**Additional big themes**

* Pace is more important than perfection in many communications, particularly in times of crisis. Don’t be laborious with gathering approvals on every piece of content.
* People want authentic, transparent communication. Overly produced, slick content isn’t what’s capturing employees’ attention at the moment.
* It’s okay for leaders and communicators to say, “I don’t know, but I’m hear if you need help with anything.” This goes hand-in-hand with the issue of transparency.
* Be respectful of employees’ time and empathetic to what’s going on in their lives outside of work.

**The Future of Purpose: Changing How We Communicate DE&I, CSR and More**

***Janet Stovall,*** *Senior Director of Social Impact and The UPS Foundation,* ***UPS***

“A supernova that forms where purpose creativity and conviction collide.”

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is nothing new. It wasn’t new in 1953 when an American economist invented the term. But it really gets its start in 1970 when economists develop the social contract that businesses have with society.

Today that contract is being enforced like never before:

* 68% might or definitely would stop buying form a brand because of poor or misleading CSR
* 84% might or definitely would stop buying form a brand because of a poor environmental track record
* Nearly half (49%) would pay a premium for socially-conscious or environmentally-friendly brands.

The social contract has grown to include new stakeholders and new stakes, particularly on D&I:

* 71% of LGBTQ consumers are likely to interact with and trust brands with inclusive ads
* 69% of Black consumers seek and purchase from brands with inclusive ads

Global social unrest has expanded the contract even further to include equity:

* 65% believe brands should have and support anti-racist initiatives—and support them publicly
* 56% are willing to buy from a brand that takes a public stance against racism
* 46% of consumers think that a collective show of support against racism could drive real change

Creativity: Read [“Beautiful Constraint”](https://www.amazon.com/Beautiful-Constraint-Transform-Limitations-Advantages-ebook/dp/B00QL30Q90)

UPS’ constraints:

* Little budget
* Few tangible D&I results to highlight
* Path dependency

Solutions

* Use stock images to keep costs low
* Create a modular project: Different images and segments could be swapped in for videos to speak to different audiences like suppliers and employees
* Change path dependency: Instead of talking about what UPS usually talks about, delivering more packages for bigger profits. Instead, focus on what UPS did have: A passionate belief in D&I and “one really big footprint.”

**Execution**

First, find your “why.” For purpose-driven communications, you must have a why and as communicators, it's our job to find those reasons**.**

“When creativity and conviction collide, new worlds are born.”

What does the future of purpose look like?

It’s:

* Direct
* Decisive
* Dynamic
* Disruptive
* Defensible

“Most of all--best of all--the future of purpose is an infinite possibility. And for those of us lucky enough to usher it in, the future of purpose is where we who tell the stories can and will have a disproportionate potential for good in the world.”

Organizations can’t avoid being in the purpose-driven world. You can’t avoid it, so it’s better to get on board now. It’s too important to consumers.

* When covering your efforts with purpose (DE&I, CSR, etc.), don’t focus on your actions--focus instead on the lives you helped. Focus on those stories.
* Tie purpose to the business case and strategy.
  + Janet won’t create a communications plan until she’s able to see the business plan, because without it, they won’t see the value of what you’re doing as a communicator.

**The Future of Digital Marketing Content: How to Thrive in a Pay-to-Play Landscape**

***Rachel Miller****, Social Media Marketing Manager for Talent Acquisition,* ***TTEC***

**· A/B testing is crucial.** You can (and should) A/B test blog posts, landing pages and social media ads to see which version garners more clicks, pageviews and conversions.

**· It doesn’t matter if you think it’s snazzy.** All that matters is what your audience prefers and responds to.

**· Make just one differentiator between A/B tests.** If you have too much variance between tests, how can you monitor what, specifically made the difference? Just use different copy or different visuals, but not both.

**· Don’t be afraid to test new channels.** Test out paid social media ads on each platform to give it a fair chance. Create and promote content that belongs and looks “native” on the channel. (For instance, what works on Facebook might not fly on TikTok.) Compare common metrics between channels to ensure you’re weighing apples vs. apples (such as [CPM](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/cpm.asp#:~:text=Cost%20per%20thousand%20(CPM)%2C,1%2C000%20impressions%20of%20its%20ad.), views, clicks, click-through rate, cost-per-click, [reach](https://brand24.com/blog/how-to-measure-social-media-reach/), etc.).

**· Don’t forget to measure and track key metrics.** Urchin Traffic Monitor ([UTM](https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/1033863?hl=en)) links + Google Analytics = robust measurement, according to Moore. In all your campaigns, include trackable URLs that prove exactly where traffic is coming from. [Pixels](https://www.digitalmarketer.com/blog/what-is-tracking-pixel/) also enable you to track conversions from your ad (each social media channel offers this capability).

**· Pre-pandemic, clicks were king – now relationships reign.** “[Conversations](https://business.linkedin.com/marketing-solutions/conversation-ads)” is a new ad feature in LinkedIn via InMail that’s similar to a chatbot. Moore reports that [Messenger ads on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/business/ads/messenger-ads) are a hot trend, too.

**· Use influencers to endorse your brand and help support specific drives or campaigns.** Micro-influencers, who are well respected within niche communities, can amplify your brand to a very targeted audience. They’re worth the investment.

**· Brand everything you put out there.** Be consistent across visuals, channels and copy, and pay special attention to logos and color schemes.

**The Future of Media Relations: Getting Your Organization in Headlines**

***Emily Mekstan****, Senior Manager of Retail and Owned Brand Communications,* ***Walgreens***

***Cheryl Smith****, Publisher,* ***I Messenger Media Group***

***Gregg Castano,*** *Founder and CEO,* ***News Direct***

**How media relations has changed amid COVID.** Mekstan says Walgreens was flooded with media requests when the pandemic began--largely with questions about supplies of TP, vitamin C, vaccines, cleaning products, etc. She says her team has used this time to build close relationships with reporters, and to push traffic to its [newsroom](https://news.walgreens.com/).

**Hot media relations trends.** Visually compelling multimedia assets are becoming essential to catch reporters’ eyes. You must make it as easy as possible for them. Text-heavy press releases alone don’t cut it anymore. (See the **“**[**Future of media relations**](https://www.ragan.com/white-papers/the-future-of-media-relations-special-report/)**”** special report for more on top trends moving forward**.**)

**Focus on making complex information snackable, concise and compelling.**

**Before pitching news, you must know your audience, know your subject, and understand the climate.** Read the room! Don’t be tone-deaf and waste your credibility. Newsjack, but do so with extreme wisdom and caution. Be empathetic, and demonstrate cultural awareness as you pitch.

**The news cycle shifts so fast.** Youmust move quickly before you miss your small window of opportunity. Streamline your approval processes to ensure speed.

**Package things up for reporters.** Sendpre-approved quotes, and provide charts, video snippets and visuals. Amplify reporters’ work, and show an interest in what, specifically, they cover and are interested in. Understand how newsrooms have changed amid deep cuts, and make an effort to learn how journalists prefer to be pitched and select topics.

**Set up a single source of truth for your company.** Combat misinformation, ensure consistency, and prevent confusion.

**Build relationships with smaller publications, such as trade journals, brand journo newsrooms, curation newsletters and niche magazines.** “Legacy media” ain’t what it used to be. Make sure your clients and execs understand what their goals are aside from just “generating buzz.’ Identify a clear set of measurable media relations objectives.

**Build relationships with reporters.** Journos lean heavily on Twitter’s trending topics to shape their storytelling. PR pros should be all over trending topics on social media. Reporters should feel they have a partner instead of someone who’s trying to get something from them.

**Don’t be afraid to use influencers to lift specific campaigns or amplify crucial messages.**

**Focus on creating genuine moments of camaraderie, and tell stories that evoke warmth and emotion.**

**What is your baseline of assets, and how can you improve each metric and aspect of your media relations efforts?**

**Always track KPIs of your initiatives, and tie what you do back to core business goals.**

**Your strategy could change in 12 hours.** Be willing to shift tactics, try new platforms or tactics, and always stay nimble.

**The Future of The Industry: Top Communications Trends to Embrace  
*Kathryn Campbell****, Director of Research & Insights,* ***Ticketmaster***

**Trend 1: The speed of technology adoption as accelerated drastically due to COVID-19.**

We’ve accelerated tech adoption by a decade in less than a year.

As a result: Your new customers today aren’t who you thought they would be in January. Reconsider everything you thought you knew.

**What to do:**

* **Evaluate whether your messaging has adjusted to your new customers** who have adopted different ways to buy/engage with you (e.g., ordering via mobile QR codes). Similarly, has your usability testing for your product adjusted to their needs.
* **Rethink your metrics.** The metrics and goals you set for your business are probably not relevant anymore. For example, in January Ticketmaster had huge sales goals. Then in March stopped selling tickets (and had to reschedule 38,000 events in one month). So could no longer hold marketing accountable for how conversions were being driven on the website. Pivoted to focus instead on measurables like building brand relationships and engagement (with employees and customers alike).

**Trend 2: Driving dialog and eliciting feedback.** Listening is especially important when things are this highly dynamic. Attitudes are being formed and reformed with lightning speed. There is a profound lack of trust out there. Nobody is sure who or what to believe.

As a result:Our reactions are disproportionate—you see wild reactions to new information.

**The solution/what to do:**

* **Engage in more regular dialog.** Ticketmaster used to engage in “Brand Tracker” surveys once a year. Now it’s every two weeks. Similarly: Social listening metrics were once a month, now are once a week.
* **Harvest information (listening).** Can’t stay on-point and on-message anymore. Instead must harvest information or you’ll miss out. Employee comms example: Ticketmaster is being more supportive of workers with children during WFH. The company asked what it’s missing from a parenting perspective. Single parents said, “How lonely we are.” They were/are feeling burnt out and frazzled and had nobody around to help. Ticketmaster needed to hear that and now asks the right questions.
* **Engage in mixed message research.** Gather quantitative and qualitative data. This will help you go with issues like anxiety and confusion (qualitative) while also allowing you to gather quantitative research to provide context. This lets you step back and see the bigger trends so you can filter out the signal from the noise.
* **Remember storytelling when it comes to data.** You can’t just present the quantitative data to your execs. You also can’t task leadership to make big changes without assessing the risk. So sharing percentages is helpful (e.g., % of those who will be happy to return to the office after WFH). But also pepper in the “stories” form the data (qualitative) to show them how the data is impacting lives. Balance the “heart and the head” when it comes to pulling and presenting data. Also: Provide context for the data—shape it up as a narrative so execs understand the takeaways.

**Trend 3: Diversity (how to make it personal).** All of us, regardless of background, tend to fall back on who we’re comfortable with.

The result: It leads to lack of diversity.

**The solution/what to do:**

* **Find and follow those unlike you.** Kathryn created the hashtag #followbroadly so that she could deliberately find people “who aren’t like me” at an event. Then she starts following them. A year later, her social media following has changed and is more diverse. Her advice is to invest personal time in diversity. This helps you “walk the walk.”
* **Embrace attitudinal diversity.** The polarized election is a good example. Though more progressive, she has subscribed to some conservative daily newsletters and has chosen to engage with people on FB she disagrees with. Shouting louder will not help us move through this time. Instead, be clear about your values and perspectives—but ensure you’re not in an echo chamber. Don’t just communicate with people like yourself. It comes back to: Listening and engaging in dialog.