

The Role of Strategic Communication in Pandemic Event Planning

Responding effectively to a pandemic event pivots on a number of key capabilities, with swift, prudent communication among the most important. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and at the Pentagon, and the devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in New Orleans, underscored how response and recovery can be hampered severely by shortcomings in the ability of key personnel to communicate with each other.

In those cases, and in many similar but smaller-scale emergencies around the country, incompatible communication technologies, or incomplete and inaccurate information, contributed to problems in launching an effective response. Should a pandemic event develop, such as the spread of a new influenza strain, communication capabilities before and during the event will be critical to saving lives and preventing disastrous impacts on the economy of the United States.

Natural disasters and terrorist attacks occur at a specific point in time and in a specific location. Emergency resources are then deployed primarily to respond and recover.

Pandemic events are fundamentally different, and the implications for strategic communication planning and execution are enormous. Infrastructure will be intact, but absenteeism could approach 40 percent in businesses, organizations, and government agencies that normally provide support and services. A pandemic event could last for weeks and then return in waves, sparking fear and anxiety in citizens as they try to protect themselves and family members. This anxiety is likely to increase as people seek medical and other services that are both understaffed and overwhelmed.



“Traditional crisis communication plans will be inadequate,” said Tony Silva, an ICF International senior vice president in strategic communications. “Organizations in the public and private sectors will pay a high price if their plans and procedures are not adjusted well before a pandemic event occurs.”

Another key distinction of pandemic events is the vital role of individuals rather than emergency responders or medical personnel. Disease is spread individually and, as a result, communication about risk and the importance of specific behaviors is fundamental to controlling and containing an outbreak. The ability

to communicate with clarity, assurance, and authority is essential and must be planned for as comprehensively as any other aspect of a pandemic event response, which is affirmed in the federal implementation plan. “The public will respond favorably to messages that acknowledge its concerns, allay anxiety and uncertainty, and provide clear incentives for desirable behavior.”¹

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History shows that pandemic disease outbreaks can move with ferocious velocity around the globe. A pandemic influenza can make its way across the country within two months of the initial human contact in a foreign land. Such rapid spread can create tremendous difficulties for public health officials, who must coordinate an effective response, and has complex implications for developing and implementing a valuable communication strategy.

¹ *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza: Implementation Plan*, May 2006, p. 8-9.

Three primary areas of concern for any public or private organization that wants to be prepared for pandemic influenza or other outbreak are the public's:

- perceived risk
- understanding of individual responsibilities
- ideal behavioral response

The public reaction to pandemic influenza will depend on the quality, credibility, and timeliness of the communication. Considering the speed of a pandemic event, advance planning and established procedures will distinguish those organizations that respond adequately and those that fall short. According to federal planning documents, "...the need for timely, accurate, credible, and consistent information that is tailored to specific audiences cannot be overstated."²

Federal officials add: "Recognizing that more than 85 percent of the critical infrastructure is owned and operated by the private sector, the development of public-private partnership is paramount to securing our Nation's assets."³ The majority of response actions will have to be coordinated down to the community level, making strategic communication imperative for private sector organizations, as well as state and local government agencies.

Both public and private organizations that want to be fully prepared for pandemic events will need to incorporate the following factors into their planning. These include an ability to:

- identify and train a pool of spokespersons
- develop several layers of redundancy (i.e., cross-training) for personnel responsible for gathering and disseminating information
- create specific plans and procedures that anticipate a 40-percent absentee rate lasting several weeks (i.e., workload shifting to and among homebound employees)
- provide guidance in the absence of complete or detailed information (i.e., having up-to-date "tip sheets" on influenza mitigation)
- update and verify information as it becomes available (i.e., access to key information sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- communicate critical information to key audiences across multiple platforms to compensate for potential interruptions in normal communication procedures

- communicate in multiple languages
- coordinate messages among public and private organizations
- establish a clear distinction between messages designed for the health of the organization and messages targeted at the health of the individual.

"One of the biggest shortcomings of traditional disaster and crisis communication plans," said Silva, "is the assumption that all staff are available and that all the services the public normally depends on will be functioning. While the phones and e-mail will be operational, the people who are needed to gather and share critical information might be out of their offices for weeks, which will have a devastating impact on the communication capabilities of potentially every organization in the country."

Another shortcoming is the failure to use the time we have now to develop and even begin implementing an effective crisis communication strategy. A wealth of information on individual and organization-wide actions that can and should be distributed is already available. For example, every organization should have available tip sheets on topics such as social distancing, coughing etiquette, and basic health procedures. Materials should be assembled in advance, distributed to key personnel within organizations, and updated regularly as new information becomes available.

Employees within an organization and the public at large need to have confidence in the messages they receive. Individuals will expect clear and specific information about how to care first for themselves and their families. Once these fundamental concerns are addressed, people can feel more confident about fulfilling essential functions, such as reporting for work and maintaining the underpinnings of a sound economy and essential public services.

For more information on how ICF's emergency response and communication expertise can help your organization meet federal guidelines for preparing an effective strategic communication plan, contact info@icfi.com or 1.703.934.3603, or visit icfi.com/pandemic.

² *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza: Implementation Plan*, May 2006, p. 20.

³ *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza: Implementation Plan*, May 2006, p. 168.