

Report



- Date and time: 7 December 2020, 14:15 - 15:45
- Title of the session: **Crisis communication: managing the unmanageable**
- Format (select one): Workshop
- Moderator: **Joanne Sweeney** (CEO Public Sector Marketing Institute) / Speakers: **Ave Eerma**, (Chairperson, Crisis Communication Network of the IPCR), **George Candon** (Strategy Director, Hill + Knowlton), **Peter Zsapka** (Director of Communication, Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic)

Main topics discussed

The session covered the role of crisis communication and crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing specifically on how digital technologies can help. **Ave Eerma** shared her experiences as the chairperson of the Crisis Communication Network of the IPCR, outlining the different approaches taken to crisis communication during the pandemic. **George Candon** then spoke about the business perspective of crisis management, explaining how crisis preparedness can be done well or poorly in the private sector. Finally, **Peter Zsapka** discussed the lessons he has learned in the Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic, sharing what he has found to be the most effective ways to get institutional messages to connect and resonate with the public.

Key messages from each speaker

Ave Eerma spoke about the crisis communication network of the IPCR that she chairs. She explained that this network is for sharing national communication plans, helping people coordinate messages, and exchange best practices in crisis communication. She explained that knowing how to respond to an initial crisis event (such as the first recorded cases of COVID-19 in your country) can determine how bad the rest of the crisis gets, and cited three countries as examples of how it was handled correctly from a communication standpoint. In Finland, the campaign focused on people's psychological resilience, led by the PM, with the involvement of many different government sectors. The idea was to set up a really well coordinated response and come out of the crisis stronger, leveraging social media to achieve this. The Irish national framework for living with COVID-19 was presented with coloured levels to clearly communicate each of the restriction levels. These plans were shared through print and digital mediums or were delivered to people's homes directly. In the Netherlands, the approach was to empower people to make their own decisions to be responsible. Their communication was also based on a survey of how people feel about the terms they use in communication. Positive connotations were more effective, like "smart lockdown" (as opposed to "exit strategy" and "new normal").

The conversation then shifted to the private sector, where **George Candon** drew on his own experiences running crisis preparedness for many companies across Europe. A large part of his presentation covered exactly what a crisis is: a series of events, usually unexpected, that threatens a company's ability to operate. To prepare, he explained that companies need to have a plan that maps the most likely eventuality. Even if the crisis is something that was not predicted, having a plan in place makes the company more agile. Bad things can happen to any organisation, which means that building credibility and showing you are taking control of the situation is what matters. The digital dynamic of our media means that

very often the response is judged by the initial reaction, as seen in the case of the horsemeat scandal in the UK or the United Airlines passenger that was roughed up while being removed from a flight. Whether a company responds in the first half hour, and whether they apportion blame or accept responsibility, determines how the company will be perceived.

Peter Zsapka then discussed the experience of having his institution go from being relatively unknown to being the most important one in the current crisis. The most important lesson he learned in the experience relates to what public communication means for institutions. They do not have the same clear link between bad communication and going out of business, as institutions can survive for a long time with bad communication. Communication from institutions is very often too factual; it is more important to know how your audience feels. Take the curved banana story in the UK as an example: the EU reaction is to give out facts about why it is not true, but it was not because they lacked information that people believed the story. They believed it because they do not like the EU. Most people think we are rational beings, but we are primarily emotional beings. We have to learn how to talk to that part of the brain in our audience. The problem that people are not rational can be seen everywhere: flat earth, vaccine conspiracy theories, conspiracies about COVID-19, etc. The number of people who believe these things is very high. As institutions, we have to communicate assurance and hope. Work more on emotions, and information can come later.

Solutions proposed

The panel primarily addressed how and when information is communicated to the public, be it in the private or public sector. Communication needs to be consistent across all levels, transparent enough to share what is known and what is not, and needs to happen regularly. Very often, even if the handling itself is not much better compared to other countries or institutions, the perception will be much more positive. Related to this was also a comment from **George Candon**, who stressed that communication needs to be integrated into the management planning. Too often, communication is thought of as a tool to be used after managing the crisis, but communicating is part of managing the crisis.

Questions from the audience

In the discussion that followed, several very topical questions were asked on how to handle crisis communication. One such question asked whether by empowering people in crisis communication you are also enabling them to respond with criticism or undermine scientific grounds. The general consensus among the panellists was that even if it might be uncomfortable to open Pandora's box and receive criticism, it is necessary. Being engaged sometimes means facing consequences, but the upsides are very beneficial. After the crisis is over, we will have to be honest with ourselves in assessing how successful we really were, and be even better prepared for the next crisis.

Take-away messages

The session concluded with the three speakers sharing what they thought was the best advice for communicators, with all three speakers sharing the sentiment that the most important thing is to keep calm, build resilience, and take care of yourself. Things will get better in the long run, but the problems will be with us for many years to come and panicking will not help others or ourselves.