



## COVID-19: Communications Response & Planning for Nonprofits and Foundations

### Goals:

- To assist immediate target audiences at each stage of the pandemic, and be ready for the next
- To demonstrate that the nonprofit is a trusted advisor
- To ensure the health of the nonprofit during and after an economic slow down

### Purpose of this document:

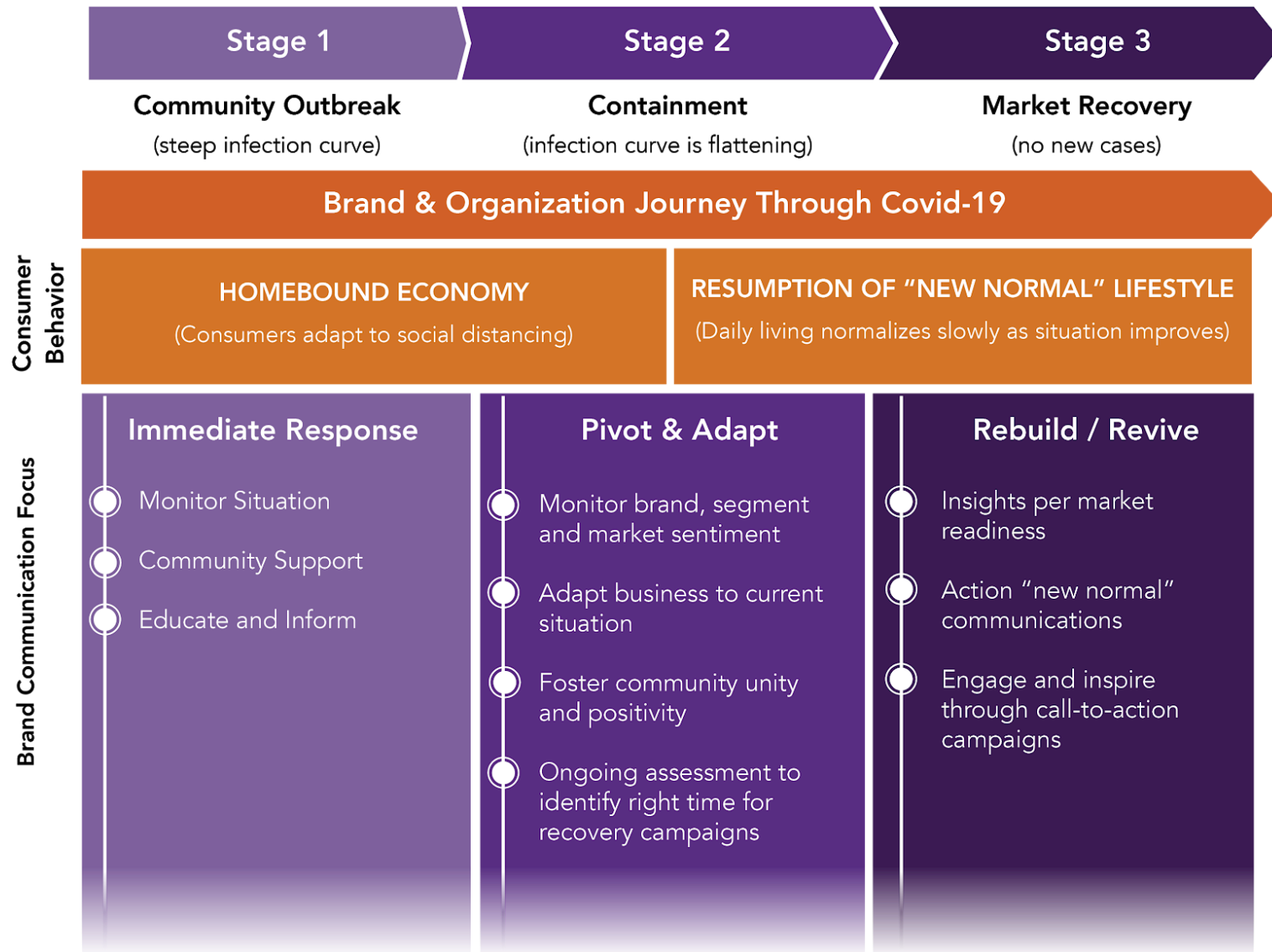
Provide a framework for communications planning in each of three stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

- 1) Immediate Response;
- 2) Pivot & Adapt; and
- 3) Recover/Revive.

### How it should be used:

This document provides insight and guidance into audience mindsets, organizational priorities and opportunities at each stage of the pandemic, which should be used to develop audience-specific plans.

# Three Stages of the Pandemic, and Considerations for Each



## Stage One - Immediate Response (*Timing: now*)

Major disruption and widespread uncertainty. Frequent operational changes are required as new and unexpected developments quickly occur. Nonprofits and foundations should focus on being of service to their community. How are you helping your audience? What are you providing during this critical time period? Are there resources you have? Consultations you can provide?

Now is the time to understand the needs of employees and key stakeholders, support local efforts to contain the spread and follow local government guidelines on social distancing. Organizations can be proactive changemakers in their community by taking positive actions and stepping up to the challenge.

**Guiding principle for nonprofits: Solve don't sell.**

While this might be obvious to some, others might see this as an opportunity to sell a webinar, conference registration or membership. This is not the time. That time will be later. Focus on engagement, support and providing expertise.

## Stage One Approach

Situation Monitoring & Analysis	Brand & Organizational Monitoring	Sentiment Analysis	Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real time monitoring of local situation across media and social media channels</li> <li>• Follow official government and health authority channels for first-hand information and updates</li> <li>• Be a timesaving curator for members - deliver what they uniquely need now, for themselves and their audiences. If you are a funder with grantees, provide details on how the grant will continue or change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activate social listening tools to better understand what your members, partners and community allies are talking about</li> <li>• What are their pain points? How can you help?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attentive to people's current mood and needs</li> <li>• Analysis across key audience segments to understand differences</li> <li>• Trust analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't be silent</li> <li>• Proactively engage</li> <li>• Use simple messaging that shows support</li> <li>• Notify and educate about measures taken in response to the outbreak</li> <li>• Utilize paid search programs to ensure motivated searchers are finding you.</li> </ul>

## Stage Two: Pivot & Adapt (*Timing: Curve starts to flatten, estimate April/May*)

Consumers adapt to social distancing: self-isolation/quarantine, working/schooling from home, mandatory business closures, travel bans, border restrictions. Your audience is actively looking for pastimes to keep them occupied, ways to learn and opportunities to help them with unfamiliar approaches. In this stage, it is just as important to stay connected with audiences, and be authentic with relevant content. This is also an opportunity/need for organization leaders to pivot and to adapt to changing needs in their communities. For example, for a housing nonprofit's first need may be helping local renters with tenant-landlord negotiation tactics. The second phase might involve utility and bill pay tactics. Audience behaviors and priorities shift dramatically. Nonprofits and foundations need to understand constantly shifting audience perceptions, while taking the opportunity to diplomatically and thoughtfully communicate and add value.

### Consumer sentiment at this stage:

- Home-based focus
- Uncertain and anxious
- Spending very cautiously
- Looking for new ways to live and be entertained in full-/semi-isolation
- Will respond to positive messaging and encouragement from organizations that offer support

### Recommended brand/company actions:

- Monitor audience sentiment to understand reactions/issues/needs
- Stay true to organization values and personality even while pivoting business model
- Adapt offerings and approaches to serve homebound and audiences most in need
- Regular communication with employees, suppliers and stakeholders
- Compliance and cooperation with government directives
- Start planning for recovery

### Highest opportunity comms approaches:

- Digital video/webinars/Zoom meetings
- Social media - organic and/or boosted
- Email marketing/newsletters/reports
- SEO/SEM

- Blogs/content hubs
- Podcasts
- Earned media (depending on pitch/content - what unique way your team is supporting employees/community)

## Stage Two Solutions to Consider:

- Monitoring
  - Pulse surveys to monitor audience perceptions (members, grantees, corporate funders, etc.)
  - Social and traditional media monitoring
- Government relations (where applicable)
  - Communicate industry and organization specific impacts back to government
  - Analyze government programs in the midst of COVID-19 and where they can assist clients
  - Be a good partner to government
  - Remind government that you're there and willing to help
  - Show leadership/solutions/guidelines
  - Be part of/establish committees, roundtables, etc.
  - Beat the post-pandemic rush by adding value to government now
- Employee communications
  - Policies/direction on new operations and protocols
  - Professional development webinars
  - Mental health/PTSD/healthy living resource distribution
  - Culture enhancement strategies (quizzes, Zoom/online trivia or meet-ups, etc.)
- Content marketing
  - Short- and long-form videos
  - Tips and advice
- Online communities of existing customer bases
  - Online meet-ups among committee leaders and advocates
  - Facebook live influencer appearances
  - Experiential online activations
- Repurposing assets and platforms

- Use technology to deliver alternate content (e.g. Audible becomes a learning app)
- Shift live activities (e.g. awards shows, professional development, networking) to streaming content
- Promote home delivery, “drop & dash” contactless interactions
- CSR
  - Being creative, and doing the right thing, will be expected. Need to get ahead of it before members and grantors start demanding it.
- Industry initiatives
  - Become leaders in containment in the community
- Corporate Communications:
  - External communications
  - Executive profile/comms

### Stage Three: Rebuild/Revive (Timing: estimate June/July, but highly dependent on U.S. response)

As the pandemic ends, nonprofits and foundations will begin to rebuild/revive. Nonprofits will be trusted leaders, more so perhaps than brands or governments, sadly. In order for the economy to rebuild though, trust in brands does need to be restored. For example, people may still be hesitant to dine out, attend events, spend money on non-essentials or even feel they need to work in an office anymore, creating both opportunities and threats. Nonprofit organizations, foundations and their corporate sponsors may need to work together here.

#### Consumer sentiment at this stage:

- Pent up consumption
- Excited to be back to normal, but also skeptical/distrustful
- New approaches, behaviors and expectations
- Brands will be judged
- New consumer expectations

#### Nonprofit and Foundation priorities:

- Be ready to capture opportunities for business growth
- Re-engage members and audiences
- Rebuild relationships/trust with stakeholders (employees, partners, government)

## Stage Three Solutions to Consider:

- Reset/Diagnostics session
  - What is “new normal?”
  - New strategic approach
  - Deep research (shifting attitudes, new audience segments)
- Trust consulting
  - Executive consulting
  - Employee, funder, sponsor, government, etc.
- Employee communications to: appreciate, guide, explain
  - Pulse surveys
  - Town halls
  - Leadership road-shows
  - Heroes awards/content
- Employee support
  - Mental health/PTSD/healthy living
- Crisis communications/preparedness
  - Post mortem of COVID-19 response
  - Adapt/refine/improve
  - Train and test
  - Package learnings across many member groups
- Revisit organizational, thought leadership and executive narratives: What have leaders learned about their resiliency? How do they now need to position in the market?
  - Extend to defining values and guiding principles to navigate future crisis
- Lead industry-wide collaborations (e.g. ParticipACTION works with gyms, apparel makers and charity runs to get people active together again; Catelli leads efforts to re-ignite dinner parties)
- Government relations
  - Get a seat at the table for post-pandemic regulation changes
    - Immediate regulatory/red tape cuts that could lead to quick turnaround for nonprofits



- Offer open lines of communication from government to membership/industry/employees
- Member and audience experience/relations
  - Reward loyalty/patience throughout pandemic with appreciation events
  - Immersive experiential activations that bring people back to physical locations/pop-ups.

### Emerging Trends We Can Anticipate:

- Surge in healthy living, balanced lifestyle and hygiene will reshape consumer decision-making and buying behavior across sectors over the next year
- The great work at home experiment leads to growth in tools and technologies that enable remote working
- After months of online schooling, adaptation to e-learning sees a surge in education technology and pick up of online courses
- Hospitals and health care facilities understand new needs and work to update their facilities and work practices following this experience
- Boomer/senior segment, who were forced to adapt to digital solutions, are a new force of online consumption
- Rise of streaming, virtual learning, conferencing apps as consumers signed up for more streaming services and formats for education and professional development
- Employee (re) engagement: after extended isolation from workplaces and colleagues, organizations will need support to re-engage teams, shore up (or win) back loyalty and examine company culture. Organizations that downsized during the pandemic will need to improve the employer brand to reacquire talent, while those who did not will need to defend against aggressive poaching of their stars.

### Conclusion:

I am going to end this plan with something you already know: storytelling is important. Tell your audience, donors and members about the people your nonprofit or foundation touches, the population your organization serves, what your employees do, and why their work matters. Make it clear to donors and corporate sponsors what help the organization needs. Even if you're small and focused only on keeping those you serve afloat, communicating fully and clearly will keep the money coming in.

Stay well and good luck.