



What Can I Say?

Simple tips for communicating well in uncertain times



In times of crisis...

our first instinct is often to take some kind of action. Whatever challenge may confront us, we have to do something in response. We want to make an effort to make a difference, however we can.

For many of us—as marketers, communication professionals, business or community leaders—doing something means saying something. Communication is an essential part of what we do during normal times, so it's natural that we want to reach out when things get bad.

The key is what happens between impulse and execution. How can we be sure we're saying the right things, in the right ways, in order to have the right impact? The answers to these questions are always important, but they matter even more during a crisis.

That's because the stakes are very high. A timely communication sharing critical information or vital support can, in some cases, literally save lives or livelihoods. On the other hand, ineffective, inaccurate, or ill-conceived communications may have little or no impact at best. At worst they can negatively affect your brand, your reputation, and your relationships.

There is no formula for foolproof crisis communications, but considering a few key questions and following some basic, common-sense guidelines can go a long way.

Why?

MOTIVATION

In many cases, our tendency is to start with the message, thinking about what we want to say. Even before this, we should consider a more basic question: Why?

Why do we want or need to communicate right now?

Why would our audience want or need to hear from us, as opposed to anyone else?

What do we hope will happen as a result of this communication?

The key is to be clear about our **motivation**. There are many good reasons to communicate during a crisis, but it's also easy to reach out for the wrong reasons.



GOOD REASONS

Help—Offer support or assistance, ideally in a tangible and immediately accessible way, to those in need.

Inform—Provide answers to questions they may have, or share ideas or information they may want, or would find helpful.

Encourage—Offer emotional support, empathy, understanding, or a sense of community, to help them feel less overwhelmed, discouraged, or alone.

Celebrate—Shine a spotlight on the helpful actions of others, or progress in addressing the crisis.

NOT-SO-GOOD REASONS

Sell—Trying to boost sales, increase revenue, gain customers, build market share, launch products, etc.

Brag—Talking up your accomplishments or contributions, or sharing information about your organization for its own sake.

Position—Attempting to shape perceptions of yourself or your organization, seizing the spotlight when emotions run high and attention is intense.

Act—Reaching out for its own sake, absent any specific reason other than a general desire to “do something.”

JUST REMEMBER, IT DEPENDS

Crisis communication is an art, not a science, and one's motivation is seldom wholly positive or negative.

You may want to “sell” due to a genuine belief that your product or service can help right now, to keep repeat customers supplied, or to preserve jobs and salaries. You may want to “inform,” but have little to share that's new or truly relevant. You may want to “encourage” by reassuring customers that you aren't going anywhere, but it may be hard to avoid some positioning and bragging while doing so.

Overall, the key is to take an honest look at why you want to communicate. A simple litmus test is to ask yourself, “Is this about us (sender), or them (recipient)?”

If it's the former—if you have no compelling, immediate, and unique reason to communicate right now—it may be better to stay silent, and not add to the noise and confusion.

What?

CONTENT

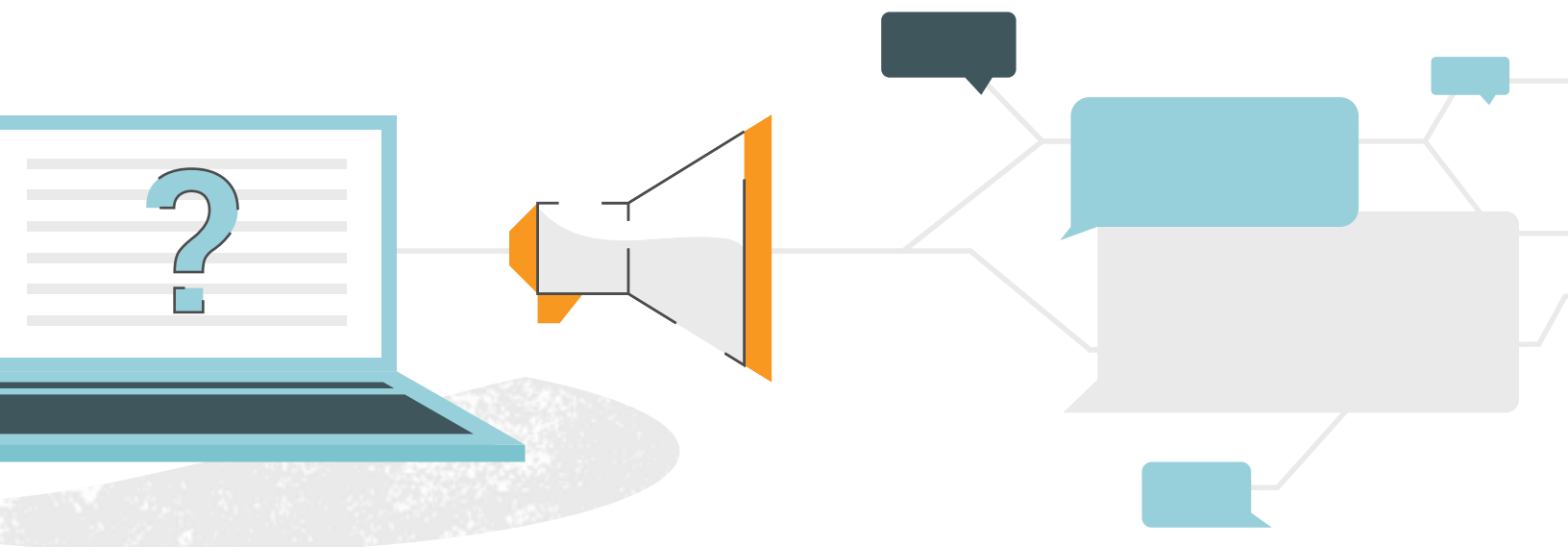
Once we're clear on our reasons for communicating, the biggest question is what we have to say. The what may be determined to some degree by the why, but this is where we get specific. If our motivation is helping, we need to figure out what we'll do to be helpful. If we want to encourage, what can we say to help lift spirits and inspire hope?

What news or updates do we have to share?

What can we give or offer the audience that they might want or need right now?

What information would be relevant and timely?

This step is about defining the **content** of our message. To be clear, it's not time to worry about specific words and sentences here. This is the substance of what we want to communicate. Think outlines or bullet lists, not headlines and paragraphs.



GOOD CONTENT

Direct support—Let them know about relief or assistance they will get automatically, with no further action required, such as a refund, rebate, extended deadlines or status, product, or service upgrades.

Conditional support—Offer help they must request, or that not everyone may want or receive (based on circumstances, qualifying criteria, or other factors).

Resources—Recommend tools, documents, programs, organizations, and other potential sources of support or information that may prove helpful.

Ideas/insights—Share tips, advice, ideas, success stories, lessons learned, or other information that they could apply, adapt, or pass along.

News/updates—Provide new or current information that is relevant, timely, and helpful.

Encouragement—Express empathy, acknowledge challenges, recognize effort, celebrate progress, and share gratitude in an effort to provide comfort, sustain hope, and inspire perseverance.

Community—Remind them that they are not alone, others recognize and share their situation, many want to help and are actively trying to do so, and we will all get through this together.

NOT-SO-GOOD CONTENT

Self-congratulation—Celebrating your accomplishments or efforts (as opposed to theirs).

Sales/upsell—Promoting solutions or resources that require additional payment or commitment.

Boilerplate—Sharing standard company information unaltered to suit the current circumstances.

Repetition—Sharing the same information multiple times, with nothing substantially new added.

Vagueness—Sending messages with no clear purpose, relevance, or application.

AGAIN, IT DEPENDS

As with motivation, decisions about content can vary based on the situation. Something extremely important or helpful may be worth repeating multiple times or offering despite some cost or catch. Creating a sense of community or offering encouragement may involve a bit of self-congratulation or boilerplate, if it's necessary to express solidarity or inspire confidence.

Here too, it may help to cut through the complexity with another simple question: Are we giving something, or trying to get something?

If it's the latter—if the goal or unavoidable outcome of the message is sales, prestige, or gain for you—it may be worth considering how you could adapt to focus more on the recipient's needs.

How?

WORDS

The next step is where many people start—actually writing a draft. Even after defining our motivation and mapping out content, there are countless ways to express a message. The words we choose and the sentences we craft can make a huge difference.

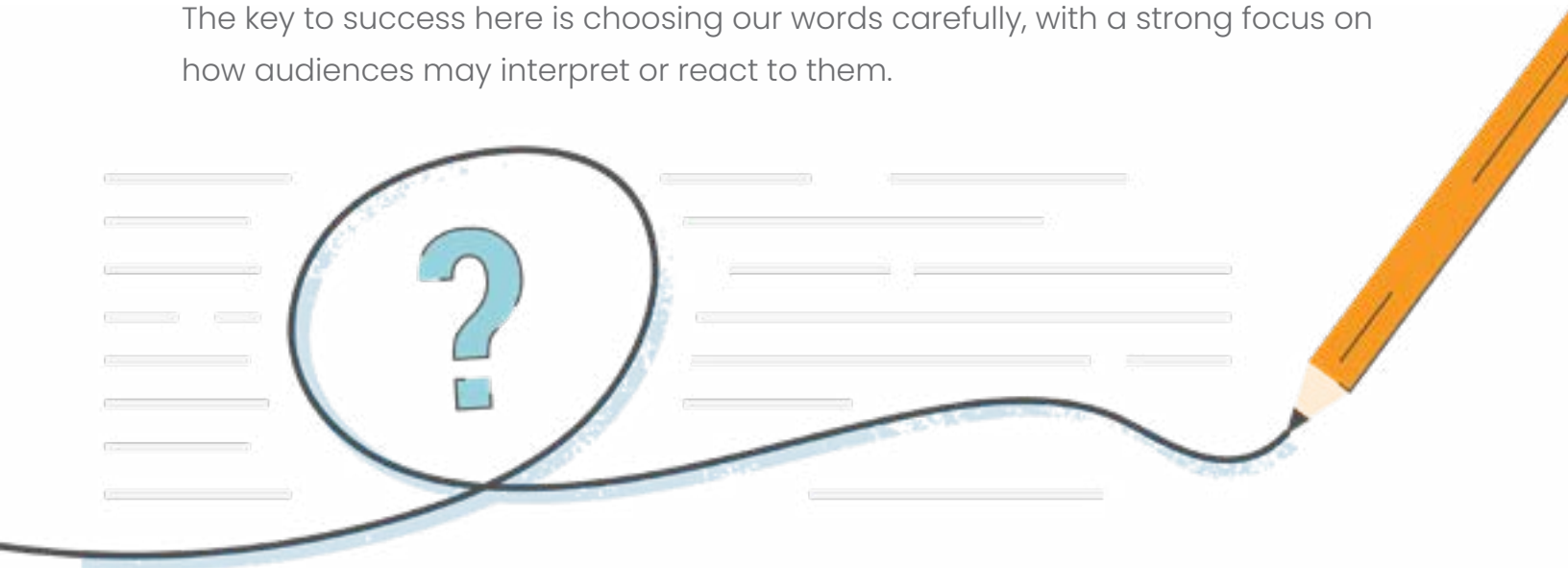
We may have noble intentions and valuable information, but if we don't communicate clearly and effectively, the opportunity may be lost. That's why our third question may be the trickiest: how do we want to say this?

What language will resonate with the audience? What emotional tone do we want to strike?

Are there any terms, ideas, or issues we should try to avoid?

Is there any area with a high potential for misunderstanding or negative reaction?

The key to success here is choosing our words carefully, with a strong focus on how audiences may interpret or react to them.



GOOD WORDS

Clear—The #1 priority is making sure your message is understood. Stirring rhetoric may have its place, but simple, direct language and specific details are often more effective.

Brief—Don't "bury the lede" or make recipients wait and work to get the message. Time and attention may be limited, so get to the point quickly.

Honest—It's vital to be truthful, even when news is bad or mistakes have been made. Not doing so risks undermining the impact of your message and the credibility of your information—and your organization.

Sincere—Truth applies to emotion as well. Expressing genuine worry, uncertainty, or regret (without becoming too negative) can build camaraderie and, again, helps with credibility.

Selfless—Keep the audience in mind, always. Think less about what you want to say, and more about what they may need to hear. Consider how the message could be understood (interpretation), not just how it should be understood (intention).

NOT-SO-GOOD WORDS

Basically, anything opposite to the ideas above.

Don't be overly complex or convoluted. This applies to word choice, sentence structure, and overall flow/layout.

Try to avoid vague or generic statements. While heartfelt, they may not be helpful.

Avoid spin and selling. It's fine to share a positive perspective or offer help, but tolerance for traditional marketing or pushy sales pitches may be extremely low.

Be wary of self-indulgence or self-congratulation, even if you're doing a lot to make a difference. Celebrating your customers and community members is fine, but a crisis is not the time for self-promotion.

Writing is endlessly open to interpretation, so here especially, we may find exceptions to every suggestion. A situation may be too complicated for a terse message to do it justice. Sharing all the facts may not be advisable or possible, especially in the early stages of a crisis. Encouraging sales may be necessary to help preserve jobs or legitimately assist potential buyers.

The key is balance.

If information is very complex, our sentences may need to be simpler. If we can't share everything openly right now, maybe we can be honest about the fact, and our reasons for holding back. If we need to seek new business at a difficult time, we might do well to share our reasons and gratitude while doing so.

Our guiding question should always be: How will (or could) this be received?

It's impossible to be all things to all people or plan for every potential scenario. What matters is that we're thoughtful about our message and choose our words carefully.

When and Where?

DELIVERY

The final consideration is when and where to communicate. Timing may be affected by many factors, including when information is available, how quickly we can take action, and how events are unfolding. Delivery involves decisions about our choice of media or format, channels for distribution, and the sender or spokesperson associated with the message.

For both factors, there may be more than one answer. We may want to share a message more than once or use a variety of different formats or channels, such as posting a message to social media, sending an email, and distributing a press release.




How can we reach the right audience for this message?

Can we reach people more effectively by using different media or methods?

Would it help to reach out multiple times with the same message, or to share new information over time?

Should the message come from an individual, group, or the organization overall?

The final decisions revolve around delivery of our message, and how it will actually reach those we want to contact.



CONSIDERATIONS

There really aren't good or bad approaches to message delivery, but it pays to consider some key decision factors.

Timing—Sometimes it may be important to communicate as soon as possible, sharing whatever we can right away. In other cases it may be wiser to wait for additional detail, greater clarity, or a calmer moment.

Frequency—Regular updates and reinforcement of key messages may be helpful. Outright repetition or outreach too often may risk diluting our impact or alienating audiences.

Ownership—Some channels may be within our control, like emailing customers or posting to social channels. Others may require outside help or approval, like third-party mailing lists or TV or radio appearances.

Reach—The nature, size, and engagement of audiences will likely vary by channel. Our own customers or followers may be a small but motivated group, while industry lists or general media consumers may be much larger, but less likely to pay attention.

Cost—Cost can also vary across channels. Emailing customers, posting to social media, and sending press releases may cost little or nothing. Placing digital ads, leasing contact lists, or promoting posts could involve substantial expense.

Impact—Whenever possible, try to gauge impact. You may be able to measure outcomes (calls received, links clicked, actions taken) or note qualitative changes (different questions/comments, anecdotal experiences).

The Last Word

It's worth repeating: there is no rigid formula for crisis communications. All we can do is try to approach the challenge thoughtfully, ask the right questions, and keep our audience's needs and perspective firmly in focus.

Circumstances will ultimately determine how successful we are in rising to the occasion, but considering these questions is a great place to start—and finish.

WHY? (MOTIVATION)

WHAT? (CONTENT)

HOW? (WORDS)

WHEN/WHERE? (DELIVERY)

Like what you've read here? Ready to apply these tips to your own communications?

The planning tool on the following pages is a great place to start.

For additional help with critical communications or other marketing needs, [**contact us**](#).





Crisis Communication Assessment

It's natural and mostly admirable to want to reach out in difficult times, but it isn't always wise or helpful. This quick checklist can help you consider key factors to decide whether or not to communicate right now, and what to say if you do.

HOW TO USE IT

1. Think about your motivation for communicating (why?), the content that your message will include (what?), and the words you'll use (how?).
2. Check the boxes in each column that apply in your case.
3. Count how many boxes you checked in each column and compare the totals.
4. Consider key factors related to delivering your message (when and where?).

If you checked only good boxes, you're likely on the right track.

If you checked only not-so-good boxes, you likely shouldn't proceed.

If you checked some of each, consider the balance.

- Give the not-so-good box count more weight (x2), as small missteps or false notes can have an outsize impact during a crisis.
- Consider revising your plans so you can reach out for better reasons and/or share more helpful content (change the totals).

	GOOD	NOT-SO-GOOD
WHY?	<input type="checkbox"/> Help —Offer support or assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Inform —Share information they need or want <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage —Help them feel seen and strong <input type="checkbox"/> Celebrate —Recognize progress or effort	<input type="checkbox"/> Sell —Boost sales or gain customers <input type="checkbox"/> Brag —Celebrate your company or accomplishments <input type="checkbox"/> Position —Seek attention or acclaim <input type="checkbox"/> Act —Communicate for no real reason
WHAT?	<input type="checkbox"/> Support —Tangible help they will (or can) receive <input type="checkbox"/> Resources —Places to turn or things to use <input type="checkbox"/> Insights —Advice or ideas <input type="checkbox"/> News —New or updated info <input type="checkbox"/> Encouragement —Empathy, gratitude, emotional support <input type="checkbox"/> Community —Expressions of solidarity and commitment	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-congratulation —Talking about yourself and your wins <input type="checkbox"/> Sales —Promoting products or offers <input type="checkbox"/> Boilerplate —Generic, irrelevant information <input type="checkbox"/> Repetition —Saying the same thing again and again <input type="checkbox"/> Vagueness —Information with no clear meaning or relevance
HOW?	<input type="checkbox"/> Clear —Simple, direct language and specific details <input type="checkbox"/> Brief —Gets to the point quickly <input type="checkbox"/> Honest —Truth and facts, even when they're troubling <input type="checkbox"/> Sincere —Genuine feelings (without undue excess) <input type="checkbox"/> Selfless —Focused on audience needs and perspective, not your goals and assumptions	<input type="checkbox"/> Complex —Needlessly detailed, difficult, or convoluted <input type="checkbox"/> Vague —Unclear or generic statements <input type="checkbox"/> Manipulative —Trying to spin or sell inappropriately <input type="checkbox"/> Selfish —Self-indulgence, -congratulation, or -promotion
TOTAL		
WHEN & WHERE?	<p>These factors are also important to consider, but there's really no right or wrong way to proceed.</p> <input type="checkbox"/> Timing —Better to act as soon as possible, or wait for more info or a calmer moment? <input type="checkbox"/> Frequency —Updates and reinforcement can be helpful, but avoid repetition or trying audiences' patience. <input type="checkbox"/> Ownership —Channels you own and control, or those owned/shared by others. <input type="checkbox"/> Reach —Audience size and targeting, and ways they can engage. <input type="checkbox"/> Cost —Use of internal resources, fees for external placement or promotion. <input type="checkbox"/> Impact —How can you measure effectiveness (metrics, analytics, anecdotal input)?	

Thank You.



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