

Keeping in Touch with Key Constituents: A Communication Check List during Times of Crisis

Cindy Grzanowski and Linda Lipscomb, Vice Presidents

External threats such as global pandemics, economic crashes, and natural disasters can send arts and culture organizations into disarray in determining how best to emerge from an uncertain environment. With constantly changing information and ambiguity about the future, there is no one-size-fits-all road map available to guide arts and culture organizations to stability during unprecedented times of crisis. While leaders are running business model scenarios to address financial realities, it is equally important to communicate often, and with transparency, to all stakeholders, including donors, subscribers, members, patrons, and ticket purchasers.

This edition of *Arts Insights* provides an essential check list for development and marketing professionals to communicate effectively with stakeholders beyond the first wave of a crisis. In the midst of unprecedented external challenges, arts and culture organizations face a new operating and revenue environment. The following nine points offer recommendations to strengthen an organization's communication efforts and deepen relationships with various stakeholders during times of crisis.

1. Create a Communication Response Team

Quickly establish a Communication Response Team comprised of board, executive, and artistic leadership and individuals leading the development, marketing, and public relations departments. This team is responsible for creating a short-term plan for 30, 60, and 90 days, integrating all forms of internal and external communications to carry the organization through the crisis. Having this plan in place will create more streamlined and effective communication to the staff, board, donors, patrons, and volunteers. It also allows the organization to better respond to unpredictable situations in a cohesive manner. The Communication Response Team should remain in place as the organization pivots to operating in its new normal. Begin with the end in mind, asking the following questions:

- What facts about the organization must be communicated to donors, patrons, and members at this moment?
- How does the organization want to be remembered for its ethical approach for responding to this crisis?
- What lasting impression should constituents have about how the organization responds in the future when they are able to engage with the organization in person once again?

2. Communicate Often and with Transparency

Because of the prolonged uncertainty and rapidly evolving nature of external crises, transparency in communication is essential. Organizations should be clear about what they do and do not know. Be thoughtful and show empathy while addressing the concerns, interests, and questions of stakeholders. Now is the time to refine stakeholder segments and communicate to each segment directly with a more personalized message. It is okay to tell members and subscribers that the organization does not have all the answers about when doors will open again, when performances will return to the stage, and how the audience/visitor experience may change as a result of safety precautions. Inform patrons that there will be waves of communication as more government guidelines are published, staying positive yet realistic about the future.

3. Stay Close to the Inner Circle

An arts and culture organization's closest stakeholders—such as board members, major donors, and artistic partners—are vitally important to its future financial health and strength as a community asset. The Communication Response Team must be transparent, having honest conversations about the financial impact of the crisis and how the organization is responding to it. Stakeholders should be assured that the organization's financial situation is being managed professionally and that their continued support is a sound investment in the future. The Communications Response Team may need to schedule more frequent meetings with its board committees or offer a weekly call or video conference when members of the senior team are available to answer timely questions.

4. Coordinate and Plan All Communication

If an arts and culture organization does not have a coordinated communication team, a time of crisis is the perfect opportunity to create one. To avoid multiple overlapping messages, develop a detailed plan that maps all communication from the organization—programmatic, news and announcements, digital content, and donor solicitations. The marketing and fundraising departments should develop thoughtful messages that speak to the importance of the organization's mission and thank constituents for their support.

5. Email Broad-Based Supporters

Many constituents will have questions about an organization's future while also adapting to their own personal and professional situations. When will museum doors open again? When will live performances resume at the theater? Keep in close connection with these broad-based supporters by providing timely information and updates. If the fall season campaign has already launched, be prepared to redouble efforts compared to pre-crisis levels in order to achieve desired results. Frontline staff must be prepared and scripted to answer questions about potential changes to the timing of the season, planned exhibits, or performances, as well as refunds and other venue access policies.

6. Add a Personal Touch

When external crises force people to spend more time at home, many long for personal connection. Whenever possible, reach out to key donors by phone or video conference rather than only by email. Sending personal notes by mail will be appreciated and remembered. Arts and culture organizations should consider hosting social gatherings for board meetings and major donor events using video conferencing whenever possible.

7. Utilize Digital Media

According to *The New York Times*, statistics have shown that social media usage, specifically on Facebook and YouTube, increase significantly during times of global crises.¹ Marketing and development teams should take advantage of their organization's social media channels to stay connected and engage with audiences through new digital offerings. Offline content can be duplicated through virtual art exhibitions, performances, or master classes. More intimate experiences can be created for donors and long-time members and subscribers by hosting exclusive Q&A sessions with artistic leadership via video chats, virtual tours, or other inner circle exclusive content. There are plenty of great examples of how arts and culture organizations can provide unique and inventive digital content to leverage their assets to increase patron engagement and maintain loyalty. Resources such as Capacity Interactive can provide arts and culture organizations with a wealth of bright ideas to explore during times of unprecedented challenges.²

8. Speak Authentically

Communicating with compassion, empathy, and authenticity is key during a crisis. Keep this in mind when setting the messaging tone in all channels and speak with a consistent voice. What was once routine correspondence, such as subscription or donor renewals with a primary focus on the impact of the arts in the community, must now convey empathy and reflect supporters' current lives. Development and marketing professionals must remain focused on retaining revenue due to the added pressure to maintain cashflow that will keep operations moving forward. Pause and reflect before writing to consider the audience and patron experience, their connection with the art and the organization, and what matters most to them.

9. Continue Building Trust Once the Crisis Has Passed

Once the immediate crisis has past, it is critically important to continue communicating the changes to operations, how the organization responded, and the plan for moving forward. With the profound impact that external crises can have on the arts and culture sector as a whole, it is essential to build patron confidence and trust so that their experience will be safe. Define the conditions and proactively communicate them. A realistic and optimistic message can inspire stakeholders to support an arts and culture organization through difficult times.

¹ Ella Koeze and Nathaniel Popper, *The New York Times*, "The Virus Changed the Way We Internet," April 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html>

² Capacity Interactive, "Digital Marketing Recommendations for Our Arts Community During Covid-19 Outbreak," March 13, 2020, <https://ideas.capacityinteractive.com/digital-marketing-recommendations-for-our-arts-community-during-covid-19-outbreak>

Conclusion

The nature of this current pandemic has forced arts and culture organizations to respond rapidly to new information, regulations, and uncertainty while the length and the overall impact is unknown. Take this opportunity to coordinate and clarify communication across the organization, refine messaging to various stakeholders, and utilize multiple channels. As arts and culture organizations adapt to the post-pandemic world, they will be better positioned to communicate effectively and to build trust and excitement about the future with key stakeholders.



Cindy Grzanowski, Vice President

Joining ACG in 2017, Cindy Grzanowski leads the firm's Earned Revenue Enhancement practice, bringing more than 20 years of experience in marketing high-profile arts, cultural, and entertainment institutions. She has demonstrated success in creating strategic, multi-channel marketing campaigns through paid, owned, and shared media that build attendance, brand visibility, and sustainable revenue growth. Her areas of expertise include sales revitalization, demand pricing and revenue management, audience development, data-driven CRM strategies, digital advertising, media planning, website and social media strategy, and direct response marketing. Throughout her career, she has consistently delivered or exceeded multimillion dollar earned revenue goals, created practices that improve return on investment, developed strategic marketing plans designed to maximize single ticket revenue, provided mentorship and training in revenue budget forecasting, and produced numerous benchmarking studies.

Prior to joining ACG, Ms. Grzanowski served as Director of Marketing for Single Ticket Sales at the Minnesota Orchestra, Associate Director of Marketing at the San Francisco Symphony, and Director of Marketing and Public Relations at Underwater Adventures. She holds bachelor of arts in economics and Latin from St. Olaf College and a digital marketing certificate from University of St. Thomas, Opus College of Business.



Linda Lipscomb, Vice President

Linda Lipscomb joined ACG in 2016, bringing nearly 30 years of experience in all areas of fundraising, including facilitating major capital campaigns, maximizing annual funds and major gift programs, conducting feasibility studies, and performing interim management services. Ms. Lipscomb has served in several interim management roles, leading the development departments at Fort Worth Opera, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, and Vancouver Art Gallery. She has also guided capital campaign efforts at Ruth Eckerd Hall and The Independent School, among others. In her role as Interim Vice President of Development at Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, she was responsible for achieving annual contributions of \$5 million and successfully led the effort to meet a \$1.5 million challenge grant goal. Her work extends to ACG's Executive Search practice, supporting clients through critical leadership transitions and assisting with the placement of executive leadership and key fundraising roles. Prior to joining ACG, she led the

development departments for the Dallas Museum of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, American Red Cross in Dallas, and Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Ms. Lipscomb holds a bachelor of arts in history of art from Sweet Briar College in Virginia and a master of business administration in finance and marketing from Southern Methodist University. As an active volunteer, she currently serves on the board of directors for Friends of Art of Sweet Briar.

**Contact ACG for more information on how we can help your organization
with essential development and marketing communication efforts.**

**(888) 234.4236
info@ArtsConsulting.com
ArtsConsulting.com**