



Four phases of COVID-19 and Marketing Communications

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Cision: Lessons from China

[Cision](#), which maintains a global database of journalists used by the Bradford Group, has studied the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in China on marketing and communications – and has mapped out the likely trajectory of marketing communications in the United States, where we are running 6-8 weeks behind China. (Click [here](#) for a copy of the study.)

We are now in Phase 2 – Preparation and Prevention – the most intense stage, when COVID-19 dominates communication and news. All marketing communications should be focused on corporate social responsibility issues during this time – not on product news or sales. This is also the time to create new content to debut in Phase 3.

The biggest opportunity for businesses to break out from the pack – and leapfrog their competitors, rearranging the pre-pandemic competitive landscape – comes in Phase 3, when the rate of infection begins to level off. Everyone’s anxiety levels will go down and we’ll be looking for something else than the pandemic to think about. Most of us will also still be in some form of quarantine, so we’ll have plenty of time for news consumption.

The focus will still be “health first,” and corporate social responsibility themes should still dominate marketing communications, but it can now be mixed with product news – especially if this news can be linked to hope for a better life after the pandemic subsides.

“Contactless business” will be trending, as people will still be wary of personal interaction. Companies that spent time during Phase 2 developing new ways to conduct business without physical interaction will have a distinct advantage during Phase 3.

Likely to begin between late spring and early summer 2020, the 6- to 8-week period of Phase 3 is a make-or-break time for businesses.

Phase 3 corresponds to the “inflection point” highlighted by the Boston Consulting Group in an early March report titled “COVID-19: Critical Business Response.” (You can find an overview of

this report in the coronavirus section of the Bradford Group’s website by clicking [here](#).) Like the Cision data, the data from the Boston Consulting Group emphasizes the concept of “rapid rebound” – that is, focusing marketing efforts in the midst of the pandemic on preparing messaging and materials in advance so you are prepared to bounce back quickly when the pace of the disease begins to level off.

Phase 4 - Recovery and Repair – is likely to last from late summer 2020 through late summer 2021. This will not be a time of “return to normal.” In fact, there probably will not be a “return to normal” for a year or so. Instead, people and businesses will be focused on turning the economy back on, restarting production, getting people back to work. It will be a busy and hectic time, a time of stress, of trying to make up for lost ground. People will have less time for news consumption – and less time for your message unless it relates to the business at hand of regaining ground.

Your message during this phase should focus on new beginnings and hope, new opportunities in a new world. Look for ways to highlight the positive outcomes of the pandemic, such as the return to politeness and consideration of others that “social distancing” is likely to foster. Show how your product relates to the theme of a people being stronger, more joyful, more alive, more grateful, more aware for having come through a difficult time.

Phase 1: Detection: February and early March in the U.S.

- Low level impact – intensity and rapidity of disease not yet apparent

Phase 2: Preparation and Prevention: possibly early March through end of April in the U.S. (*the timetable for your business/industry may vary*)

- Only topics pertaining to COVID-19 will break through media clutter
- Focus on corporate social responsibility, not product news
- All product news should be moved to Phase 3
- Use this time to create new content for Rapid Recovery in Phase 3
- Craft new product and service story and create new selling points

Phase 3: Containment, Mitigation & Damage Control: possibly May and through June in the U.S. (*the timetable for your business/industry may vary*)

- A 6+ week window to explore new themes, achieve a “Rapid Rebound”
- Happens at the inflection point, when rate of infection stabilizes
- Conduct top-down scenario assessment on possible “inflection time point” – when the situation gets stabilized and consumption confidence returns.
- Leverage intelligence (for example, activate your salesforce for customer / distributor contact or surveys) to identify “inflection point” and ramp up sales activities, inventory and trade support.
- Increasing acceptance of, even yearning for non-COVID-19 coverage
- Focus on all topics in this phase should still be “Health First”
- People in quarantine with time for news consumption

- Run new digital formats, creative, messaging
- “Contactless business” will be trending – prepare during Phase 2 to make it easy for people to do business with you without physical contact

Phase 4: Recovery & Repair: possibly July 2020 through July 2021 in the U.S. (*the timetable for your business/industry may vary*)

- Less time for news consumption
- Focus on restarting production, reinvigorating the economy
- Focus on positive outcomes of the crisis – i.e., rediscovery of politeness and considerateness
- There probably will be no return to normal for 12 months – big events will be discouraged, need to focus on individual interaction
- Previous crises show that business positions will change as industries recover
- Business leaders need to be alert and active in understanding shifts and how to invest, position, and build structural advantage for this new reality

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