



channel mastery

Channel Mastery Podcast, #120: Kristin Carpenter

www.channelmastery.com

Hey there everyone - welcome to a special episode of the Channel Mastery podcast. This podcast is produced by Verde Brand Communications, a company I founded 19 years ago from a journalism background. I spent 11 years as a journalist and almost two decades as an agency owner, and I work with an incredibly experienced and dedicated team of 22 expert communication practitioners at Verde. We've been in the trenches helping our clients proactively manage communications around the fast-moving COVID-19 virus crisis. Today, I'm sharing Verde's crisis communications framework developed for this purpose, with the hope that it will help you lead your specialty brand through this incredibly challenging time.

There's an abundance of information (a lot of it is fear-based) available online, but there's very little direction being offered to leaders of specialty businesses.

Our goal in this episode of the Channel Mastery episode is to offer such a resource to you in this podcast.

I encourage you to download the transcript and grab the podcast notes at www.verdepr.com/blog and the channelmastery.com website. Please note that Bicycle Retailer & Industry News, SNEWS and SIA will be syndicating this podcast episode as well, and all offering resources on their own respective websites.

SNEWS is compiling a daily round up of COVID-19 news from the outdoor active lifestyle industry, the link to which is also in the show notes. **Please note that I'm recording this show on Friday, March 6, 2020**, and Verde will be offering updates through our social channels, and through my personal LinkedIn page (at Kristin Carpenter). The links to our social channels will be in the show notes.

Okay, I'm going to dive right in.

Your specialty business has a different responsibility to its internal and external stakeholders, and consumer audiences. Here's why.

- Today, the brand is the community. Your shopper or brand fan is emotionally connected with you. This is more true of specialty brands and retailers than any large retailer, brand or marketplace. The reason? Our specialty brands are humanized; we have stories and solutions for

our specific fans and we connect very well with them. This is why they're emotionally connected with us - we are part of their identities

- They're self-identifying with their favorite brand more than ever before. This is partially from the access they have to connect with your brand (thanks to the Internet), but it's also very much due to the fact that today, people just do not believe that institutions like government or even religion can affect the change they want to see in the world. So they're turning to companies to make the change.
- Needless to say, what your company does in this crisis matters - action speaks louder than words, but words are equally important during a crisis.
- The most important audience you have is your internal workforce. Communication with your internal team is top priority as a matter principle, but also know that your workforce is comprised of your biggest brand advocates, all of whom have access to large reach on social media

There's a single commonality we all share, however, whether we are specialty businesses or the world's largest marketplace.

We're all either leading people through this crisis, or looking to leaders within our companies for guidance during this time.

That's why having a consistent and strong communications strategy for this crisis is so important.

The COVID-19 virus has ushered in a time of incredible unease and uncertainty that is affecting all of us. The headlines evolve with every hour, it seems.

With this evolution comes a priority that we all share no matter what it is we do in our businesses - **we are managing expectations.**

This is from the Harvard Business Review's [article](#) titled: Lead your Business through the Corona Virus Situation. I highly recommend reading that, and the link is in the show notes for this episode:

Unanticipated twists and turns that will be revealed with each news cycle. Truly, we will only have a complete picture in retrospect.

With that said, here's our framework. I truly hope that it supports your team building and updating an authentic communication approach from your specialty brand to its stakeholders and audiences. They want to, and need to, hear from you at a time like this.

Step 1: Identify and prioritize your audiences

- Internal workforce is the primary audience for any business, and consistent communication must happen now. Initiate it in an all-company communication, and in that communication, make sure you let them know what to expect in terms of hearing from you going forward
- Internal stakeholders is the next primary audience, and includes sales reps, retailers, athletes, ambassadors, contractors)
- External stakeholders comprise the third audience, and includes: end consumers, business community [local and industry])

Step 2: Agree to a Goal and Guiding Principles

Your company leaders must align on a goal with your crisis communication to set, guide, and manage expectations.

Here are some examples:

- The Centers for Disease Control website offers “Important Considerations for Creating an Infectious Disease Outbreak Response Plan.” It leads with: All employers should be ready to implement strategies to protect their workforce from COVID-19 while ensuring continuity of operations”
- Coinbase is a company that crowdsourced a communication plan, I think that the goal behind it was spot on (paraphrased):
 - Our goal is to have a response that’s based on fact and science, and avoids both panic and apathy. The best way for all of us to get through this crisis is to listen to the science and operate as a community, not allow fear to drive make-believe wedges between us

It lists ‘guiding principles’ as follows:

- To keep employees safe
- To continue to serve customers with highest standards
- To do our part to slow community spread of the virus where there appear to be outbreaks, so that the most vulnerable people are able to get the care they need

Step 3: Identify/agree on a vehicle to communicate with, and cadence of consistent communication

- An internal newsletter for employees and another for stakeholders make the most sense with the remote, work from home and travel bans occurring
- If you’re a small company, the CEO should author; if you’re a larger company with an HR department, that lead is most appropriate
 - TIP: Be aware that newsletters can be forwarded easily
- It’s important to be consistent and timely; the news cycle is accelerating so quickly with the virus that you may choose to communicate everyday or every other day right now. Every touchpoint brings more trust with your stakeholders

Step 4: Be Consistent and Fact-Based

- It's important that your communications to stakeholders (internal workforce in this example) are consistent and timely
 - TIP: The news cycle is accelerating so quickly with the virus that some companies are electing to communicate everyday or every other day right now
 - TIP: Do not re-deliver the negative headlines or fear-driven content - stick to what you know and the facts
 - TIP: Remind your entire workforce to be cognizant of how they are discussing the outbreak - we do not know how a person is being affected by this news, and it is important encourage you company culture to be professional, conscientious, empathetic and genuine during this crisis (and beyond, really)

Here's an example of an internal company communication from Walmart:

"You've heard the term "coronavirus" used a lot recently. Coronaviruses are a type of virus. There are many of them and they are fairly common. COVID-19 is the name given to the disease caused by the new coronavirus that appeared recently in China. Because COVID-19 is new, you might be hearing information that is confusing or conflicting."

It goes on to say "here's what we know," sharing facts with the internal audience. This is reassurance, but does not mislead employees that there's any sort of direction or outcome to the crisis in the near term.

It continues:

"We'll continue to share information as it becomes available and do our best to keep you informed about what we are doing as a company and how best to prevent the spread of the virus. If you have travel planned and have questions, please reach out to your manager."

There was more in that memo, obviously, regarding what the COVID virus is, best practices about how to prevent it, etc., but the tone was one of letting the workforce know that the company leadership was working to be communicative and supportive of its workforce during a time of incredible uncertainty. In no way did it set unrealistic expectations. Remember, no one knows where this is going, be honest, be consistent, do what you say you're going to do. This is a time to build, not break down, trust.

Consider the following outline as you create - and continually update - your own internal workforce communication:

- Create context; regionalize or localize your communication to your workforce
- Explain the precautionary measures being taken on behalf of the workforce

- Ensure your team knows that this is a living plan and approach - with the changes and evolution of the crisis, will come changes in strategy, but ensure they know you'll be communicating with them about it
- Update on operational changes (fact-based) (i.e. our offices are closed, employees are to work remote, etc.)
- Share CDC best practices (link in show notes)
- Updates on other locations, important facts about day-to-day operations (i.e. our location in XY state or country remains open and unaffected)
- Provide additional reassurance of your company's approach by sharing how you've connected with government resources, etc.

Step 5: Mind your Channels

I'm going to reiterate the importance of setting realistic expectations on public- or internal-facing communication platforms or vehicles (such as newsletters). Stick to the facts, do not pontificate about progression of the news or of the virus. Always refer back to your shared communications Goal.

Regarding prioritization, it remains the same: Work from the inside of your company out. For example, internal centralized company communications platforms are top priority. From there:

- Company website - this is where your brand fans will look for your position or action taken regarding the crisis
 - TIP: Encourage communication - offer an email that consumers can use to reach out to your company
- Rep and retail communication channel - make sure you post an overview of how often you'll be updating the platform (or the site) and with what information, encourage two-way conversation
- Company social media - keep this fact-based, and update when you have something substantial to post. Do not go dark, post your action, your reasons, and monitor responses

Specific Disruption Communication:

EVENTS:

As we've seen this past week, major gatherings and events are being postponed and cancelled. This news is causing heightened emotional / panic responses, and it's not uncommon for people to construe this news as proof of an insurmountable challenge.

Keep that in mind as you're updating your audiences, and have a base tone, stick to the facts, and stay consistent in what you're delivering to your audiences around the virus and how your company is responding to it.

In the case of an event cancellation, managing expectations of exhibitors and participants is of paramount importance:

Good rules to follow:

- Be careful about using the word "refund" or "rebook" - it's truly too early to tell your stakeholders what your plan is as there is still a lot of uncertainty
- Watch what the airlines are offering their customers, we view the airlines as a barometer of sorts in that they are likely setting consumer expectations
- Remain open to and capture audience feedback and use it to further your company's position on the crisis as it evolves - we realize that this is not always fun, but it's really important to maintain that emotional connection and relationship. People are not at their best during a crisis of any kind, let alone a global crisis like COVID-19 with so much uncertainty.

Consider alternative ways to "hold" events

- o Virtual meetings
- o Remote sessions

TIP: Engage with your audience and ask for their preference

SUPPLY CHAIN CHALLENGES - PRODUCT SHORTAGES:

- Considering the rule about managing expectations, it's critical that you find a balance in how you're communicating with transparency regarding your supply-chain challenges, and eventual product availability. Transparency is important, but there is a lack of information from Asian manufacturers presently. Be careful with predictions on when business will regulate, while staying consistent with what you can share.
- Consider developing a shared communication platform with internal workforce + stakeholders; consider a newsletter just for updates on the impact of the virus on day-to-day operations of your businesses
- Avoid re-sharing negative coverage about supply chain, as that heightens the concern. Again, your goal is to craft communication that's based on fact and science, and avoids both panic and apathy
- Script all front-line stakeholders like customer-service leaders, sales reps, athletes and ambassadors, etc. to ensure that they're able to offer consistency in messaging - nothing builds (or erodes) trust faster than consistency among the entire team

In the show notes, we've pulled together recent and relevant articles on how companies are leading through COVID-19, and managing supply chain disruption. We've also pulled together website resources for the most current news, along with the link to the CDC employer best practice report referenced in this show.