

INSIGHTS IN ACTION:

COVID-19 Higher Education Best Practices

The COVID-19 crisis is changing the landscape of our nation. As a national strategic communications agency advising clients across multiple industries including higher education, Brian Communications commissioned an independent national survey among parents of college-bound high school seniors to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on decisions about their children's academic future.

The national survey reveals that 40 percent of parents say the COVID-19 crisis may prompt their children to delay going to college, and more than 85 percent say colleges need to provide more information to parents and students about their schools' safety plans for the fall term. Parents are feeling anxious and ill-informed as they look for clear communication on how institutions are handling and responding to the pandemic.

As we continue to sort through the long and short-term implications of the pandemic, these findings emphasize that higher education institutions need to take early and proactive action. Improved communications can instill heightened confidence so that parents can make informed decisions about their child's academic future.

Here are some best practices that you can apply to your COVID-19 communications.

1

Understand Needs Across the Organization

The Challenge

Every organization has multiple constituencies: employees, shareholders, customers and more. One of the first—and most important—things to do in a time of crisis is to have your finger on the pulse of each stakeholder group. It's crucial to understand what the unique needs are in each sector—and what issues will be most important to them. Based on the findings of our recent survey, we understand what's lacking for one particularly critical audience, the parents of prospective students. Do you clearly understand the concerns of your other stakeholder groups? If not, how can you gain these insights? And once you understand them, how can you address them?

What We Deliver

An assessment that provides the foundation of a roadmap for addressing the situation on each audience's terms, as well as yours. You must determine how the problem at hand affects each constituency and how you can manage the flow of information so that they have more security, more clarity, and less anxiety.

2

Act Quickly, and Often

The Challenge

With more than 80 percent of parents of college-bound high school seniors noting the need for more information about schools' safety plans, early and consistent communication is vital during this time. Prospective students and their families are looking for answers, reassurance, and information to put their minds at ease. These communications should always balance truth with empathy.

What We Deliver

Crafting an initial statement on behalf of university leadership is an important, and likely already completed, first step in letting parents know the institution is carefully considering these issues and working diligently to address them. They also want to know as things change. As there are updates, there should be communication—consistent, but not overwhelming. This cadence of communication should anticipate the needs and questions of its intended audience.

The cadence of these messages should be carefully planned out and segmented by spokesperson. While a video from university leadership may be less frequent, there should be additional communications coming from admissions representatives, social media, emails, etc. to continue informing parents of the most current situation.

3

Clear, Concise, and Accurate—No Guessing

The Challenge

Clarity is the first piece of the puzzle when it comes to strategic and timely communications. Ensuring that there are no mixed messages, speculations or strong opinions in circulation is crucial. The COVID-19 crisis presents many unknowns and long-term implications, so rather than speculating, simply communicate what is known and available now. Lay out the steps that you are taking today and in the near future to provide the most up-to-date plans as possible—and continue to acknowledge that there's more to come.

What We Deliver

Communication should be also be easily digestible and exclude industry jargon or otherwise hard to understand information. The overall tone should be candid and confident while positioning your institution as a trusted partner in students' pursuit of higher education.

During this time, the institution should not sway from its core values. Students and their families are the lifeblood of your institution and they should continue to be at the forefront of the action plan. With no students, there is no institution.

4

Don't Just Announce. Engage.

The Challenge

Rather than simply telling stakeholders what you're doing, ask them directly, "How can we work to best address your needs during this unprecedented crisis?" While communications have likely already gone out to the appropriate parties, these messages may not be breaking through or having the impact intended.

What We Deliver

Allow your stakeholders to have their voice heard—open platforms for a two-way conversation and encourage a candid dialogue. Provide regular opportunities for stakeholders to share questions, concerns and get quick responses. What are they missing from you?

5

Redeploy Resources

The Challenge

Just as health care institutions are redeploying staff from all practice areas to fight COVID-19 on the front lines, now is the time to engage all university staff to aid in the fight to fill classrooms.

We know the freshman class is the lifeblood of many colleges and universities. With many schools today being very tuition-dependent, getting minimally 30–40% and often more of their revenue from that source, it is not good news to hear that 40% of parents are considering delaying their child going to college. Now is the time to take action in filling the class of 2024.

What We Deliver

Utilize staff to make personal connections with prospective families during this time. Handwritten notes, phone calls or personalized emails are just a few of the ways to stand out and make your message heard.

Contact us for more on this national survey and strategically navigating communications in higher education.

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