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The psychology of communicating in a crisis

Not what you say,
but how you should say it.

March 2020



The Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown have unsurprisingly led to a flurry of articles, blog posts and thought leadership on communicating in a crisis.

All of them seem to focus on what you should say – **this is not about that.**

A crisis like the current one fundamentally changes how people absorb, process, and retain information, so how you communicate will have to change if you want to remain effective.

This whitepaper is an attempt to summarise the psychological changes people go through in crises and how brands can adapt their messages to these changing behaviours.

I should caveat that I am not a psychologist, just a strategist with a keen interest in the subject (although we have consulted a psychologist and numerous academic papers for this piece). For the last few years our agency has been working on large scale behaviour change campaigns which have required a complete rethink of some communications fundamentals. This document reflects what we have learned in that time.

Ollie Burch

Campaign Director
Radley Yeldar

The **threat**, and our **irrational response** to it

As humans we are never as rational as we like to think we are, in a crisis this is especially true. A few minutes reading the news or on social media at the moment is all that's needed to prove that.

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Coronavirus isn't life-threatening to 97-99% of the population. But a lot of people are acting as if their lives are in real peril. Meanwhile there are plenty of stories of people who are in at-risk categories continuing to go about their lives as if nothing has happened. **Mass hysteria** – the transmission of collective illusions of threats through a population – is a well-established phenomenon, and it is quite clear coronavirus is causing it right now.

There is also **emotional contagion** to consider – another-person's emotions and behaviours can trigger similar emotions and behaviours in other people. This is all coupled with the fact that people are terrible at **understanding risk**. Research shows that people are unable to evaluate and act on risks in a rational manner. In fact, some research shows in some situations people respond to threats and disasters by fleeing towards familiar places and situations that may not be objectively safe, rather than just away from the threat.¹

The **threat**, and our
irrational response to it
Continued

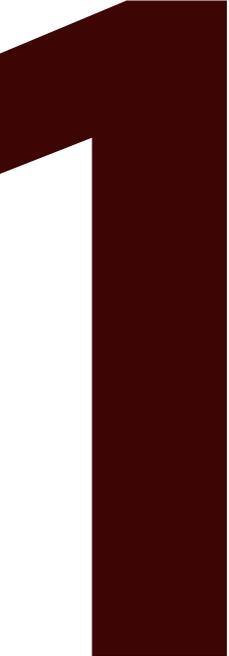
At the end of the day we are social creatures, easily influenced by those around us (even if we like to think we are not) and if it feels like the whole world is panicking, we are going to freak out too. I'm not an epidemiologist, but I am pretty sure this is the first time we have ever had a global pandemic with 24-hour news and social media that feed on and amplify extreme reactions.

It all adds up to calm, reasonable people being panicked, anxious and stressed. Research shows that these kind of emotionally charged states change how people process and retain information, with clear implications for communication.

All of this will have a host of impacts on how people perceive and respond to communications, but some of the most important impacts are:

1. We are **less able to process information**
2. We are **not as easily able to recall information**
3. Our **attention is split, and overwhelmed**
4. Decision-making changes, and we might be more **selfish**

The impacts of increased stress and threat:

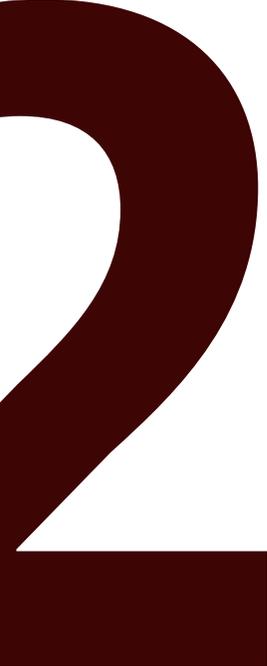


We are less able to process information

Our working memories – the short-term memory we use for reasoning and decision making – are restricted when we feel under threat. One reason for this is the production of cortisol. When we are stressed our body produces additional cortisol, which increases our heart rate and blood pressure. This was probably useful for outrunning threats in the past, but it also impairs working memory.

While there is disagreement, some research suggests our working memories are limited to managing around seven objects.² Others suggest we can only manage 3 to 5 'meaningful items', each meaningful item being a couple of words or a number.³ If this is restricted, we could expect our working memory, and therefore our ability to reason and process information, to be even more restricted.

The impacts of increased stress and threat:



We are not as easily able to recall information

Real world results and experiments have shown that people in highly stressful or anxiety provoking situations are less able to recall information.

For example, newly diagnosed cancer patients who are highly anxious are less likely to recall information they are given when visiting a clinic.⁴ A cancer diagnosis is likely to rock anyone, but in research that simulated cyber-attacks, people who were anxious were less likely to recall information in news reports than those who were not anxious.⁵ Even when there was no real threat people's recall was reduced.

This is not just a short-term effect; long-term stress takes a real toll on our minds and bodies. The implications of the coronavirus crisis could roll on for months. If people feel under threat for that entire period, they are likely to remain stressed. This will have a negative impact on recall, memory and learning.⁶ Research on the impact of stress on recall in the classroom has shown that **stress can even change how people think**, forcing people to shift from flexible ways of thinking to revert to habit-like behaviours.⁷

The impacts of increased stress and threat:

3

Our attention is split, and overwhelmed

Successful communication depends on keeping the attention of our audience – that attention is a finite resource. There are various theories for how our attention and distractions work. They differ over whether we have a limited “**perceptual load**”; if it is not being used up, we are more easily distracted. However, others argue that what matters is how salient distractors are. Either way, people who are stressed, or living in fear whether justified or not, are going to be **focused on whatever they are afraid of**.

Even if you are communicating about the crisis itself, trying to reassure or give useful direction, you face challenges. With the vast quantities of news stories, rumours, government announcements and other conflicting pieces of information that exist in a crisis, you are competing with a lot of other information. People may well be in **information overload**.

[Discover more information overload](#)



The impacts of increased stress and threat:

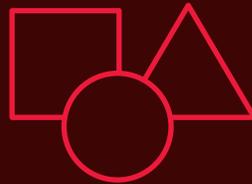
4 Decision making changes, and we might be more **selfish**

Stressful situations impact decision making in a range of ways, and it can really depend on the individual and the situation. Some studies have shown it impacting women and men differently, or old and young people. Some have shown people become more dependent on the decision making of others in stressful situations. Some people seem to become more altruistic, others more selfish. More often than not it seems to lead to **poorer quality decision making**.⁸

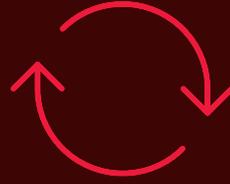
What you can do about it

In the case of coronavirus, a new normal may soon set in with people bored trapped at home or going about significantly different lives. If the sense of imminent danger is reduced, routines will still be disrupted and longer-term fears about jobs, mortgages and the economy will set in. We don't deal well with uncertainty, so we can expect people to remain stressed for quite a while.

So, with these issues and limitations in mind, what can you do about it to try and ensure your communications are as effective as possible?



Radically simplify your message



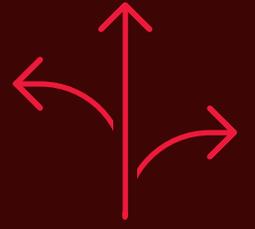
Reinforce your message as much as possible



Make it relevant

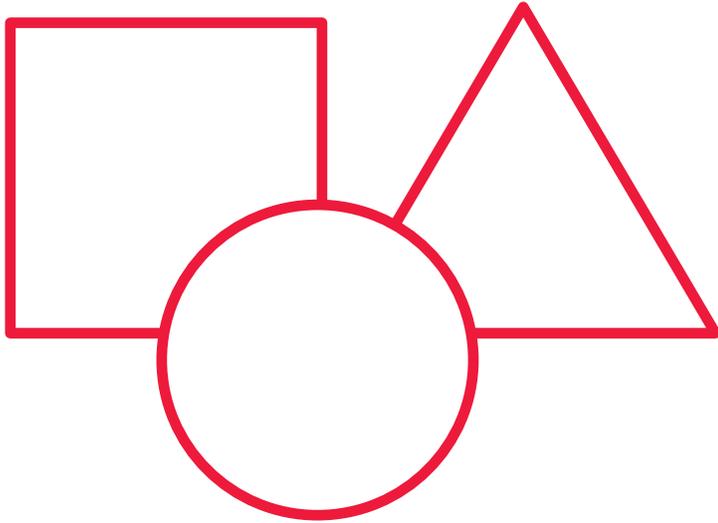


Pick the right messenger



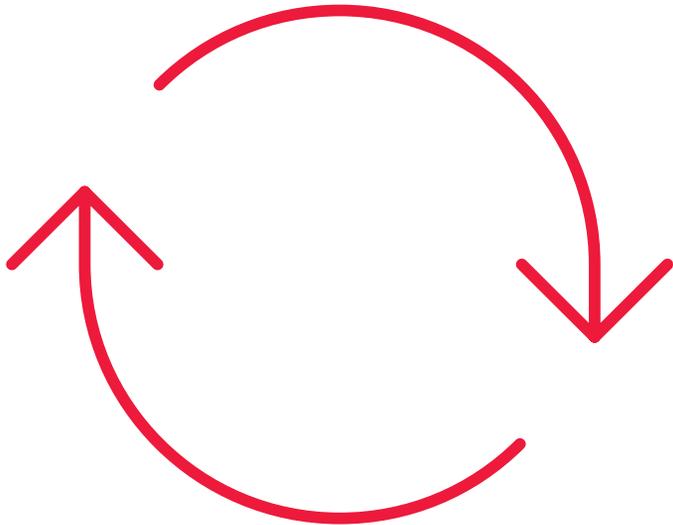
Work as hard as possible to make your desired outcome the default

Radically simplify your message



If people's ability to process and recall information is restricted, you want to make it as easy as possible for people to understand what you are trying to communicate. Whether it is advice on what to do in the crisis, or an advert trying to sell to people you want to simplify your message as far as possible **stripping it back to the fundamentals** with as few 'pieces' of information as possible.

Reinforce your message as much as possible



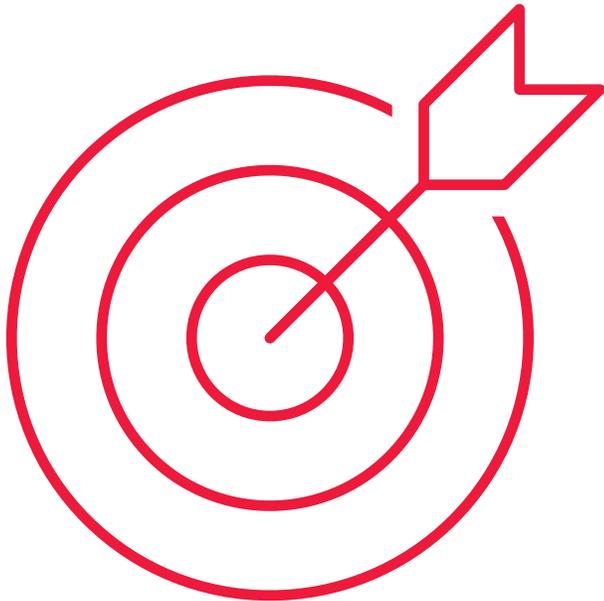
If something is important, say it more than once! Visuals are an easy way to convey a lot of information in a short amount of time. Whether it's video, photography, illustration or iconography make sure your visuals clearly reinforce any spoken or written messages.

The more you can communicate things visually, the better.

If you are engaged in marketing or advertising, you probably need to use a **higher frequency** than you normally would. I can't prove this (but if anyone wants to test it and let me know the results, that would be great) but given people's reduced attention and recall, it stands to reason.

“The more you can communicate things visually, the better.”

Make it relevant



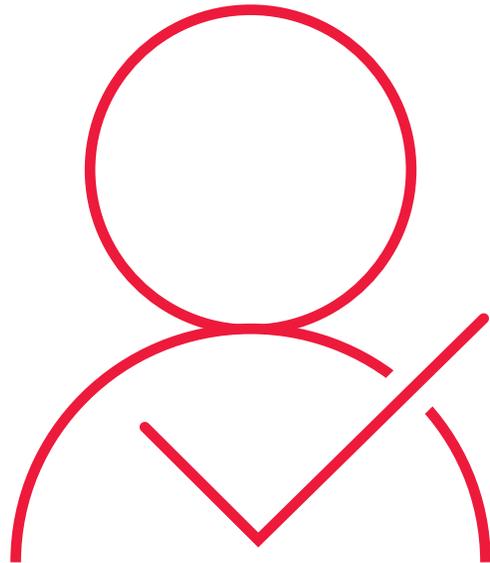
Any good communicator aims to be relevant to their audience, but right now you need to work even harder at that. People are distracted, their decision making may be poorer, they may be making more selfish decisions or at least focused on things that are closer to home. You need to make sure your message feels directly relevant to them and their situation.

This doesn't mean referencing the crisis if it is not relevant to what you want to communicate. Being seen as trying to capitalise on a crisis, or even just being tone-deaf on it, is a sure-fire recipe for a backlash. It does mean empathising with how people are feeling because of the crisis and creating your communications with those feelings in mind.

It probably also means **restricting your audience**; focusing on those to whom the communication would be most relevant. Again, I have no direct evidence of this, but I suspect tactics like personalisation could be more impactful when people feel stressed and threatened.

“This doesn't mean referencing the crisis if it is not relevant to what you want to communicate.”

Pick the right messenger



Anyone who has spent time working on, or reading about, behaviour change will know about the importance of the 'messenger effect'. The messenger will be even more important in a situation where you are competing harder for people's attention, and when they are not sure who or what to trust.

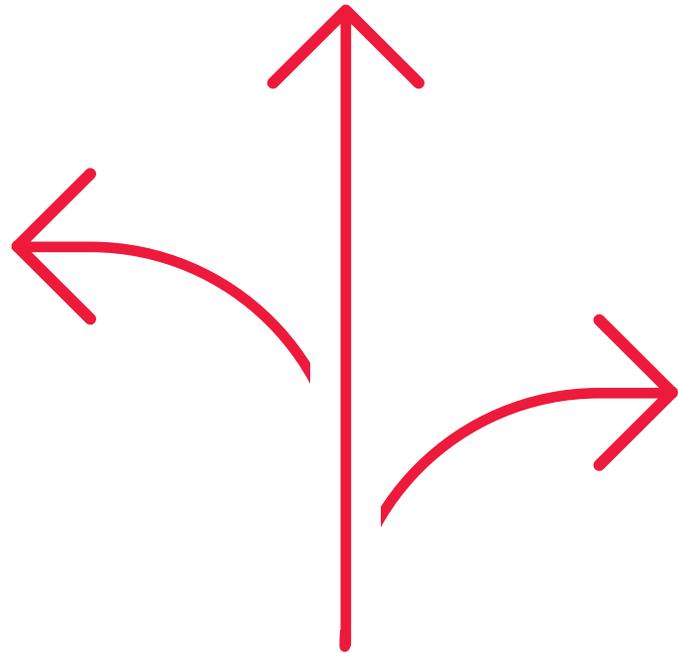
The right messenger will ensure your message cuts through the noise, and they can lend the authority or authenticity needed to help people feel they are making the right decision.

Another unproven speculation, but it seems reasonable that at time of uncertainty people are even more susceptible to perceived **social norms** and **social proof** so having a messenger your audience admires, identifies with, or wants to be like will be more powerful than ever.

[Discover more](#)
Social norms and social proof



Work as hard as possible to make your desired outcome the default



If our attention is divided, our ability to process information reduced, and our rational decision-making compromised, there is a pretty good chance we are going to go with whatever seems easiest. As far as possible you want the easiest decision for people to make be the one you want them to make.

This is another point that should be obvious to those familiar with behaviour change, but again one that is probably truer than ever in a crisis.

“As far as possible, you want the easiest decision for people to make be the one you want them to make.”

Although it feels as though our vision of the future is fogged by uncertainty, the world will not stand still. It is imperative to keep communicating to your customers and to keep your business going. I hope these tips help you navigate these tumultuous times.

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If you need any help, we're **Radley Yeldar**, an award-winning, independent London and Birmingham-based creative consultancy with more than 200 communications specialists.

We've been working with organisations of all shapes and sizes for over 30 years to help create a world that believes in business.

We can help you with crisis campaigns across all types of stakeholders, as well as sustainability communications, corporate messaging, employee engagement, digital experiences, and more.

Interested to hear more?
We'd love to chat

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Also worth a read – Worth reading from The Psychologist: Survival – mind and brain <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-24/edition-1/survival-%E2%80%93-mind-and-brain>