

Essential Communications for Public Districts During COVID-19

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We are here to help -

Many agencies and districts operate with limited staff and small budgets making it difficult to figure out a communication strategy during the current COVID-19 pandemic. This booklet is specifically intended for those smaller agencies, giving ideas and specific messages for communicating with agency constituencies. These strategies are helpful in any crisis but even more so during this time when most states have issued orders to shelter in place.

Use any section that you find helpful keeping in mind that each agency has its own style and needs. It is vital, however, to keep up a steady drumbeat of outreach to stakeholders and employees. Those in leadership positions can go a long way in assuring the public that all is well and that essential services will continue to operate.

This is also an open offer that you may send us any messaging you have written to obtain our feedback, for proofing, or for general advice about what your agency can do in this time of crisis. Our staff has over 40 years of combined experience working with small agencies and we've advised them on hundreds of different projects. We are here to help.

Completely gratis.

Be well!



Jennifer Harrison
CEO, Pando Public Relations
jennifer@pandopublicrelations.com

Twitter

Best practices for using Twitter

- Use the longer Twitter length but only if it makes sense.
- Post photos occasionally but don't dwell on them.
- Share other content especially from your community leaders and vital information.
- Repost content from local businesses. Encourage people to buy gift cards "It's like cash in the bank for struggling businesses."
- Be human and give kudos to your staff and board members.
- Post 3-5 times per week.
- Do NOT let Twitter be the first place where you announce shortened hours or other adjustments. You may highlight specific announcements on Twitter but they MUST link back to more detailed information on your website.

Facebook

Best practices for using Facebook

- Facebook values images these days. Use the same image strategies as with Twitter.
- Write longer posts.
- Tag local businesses.
- Engage and comment on other agency posts and share guidelines from your city/county manager.
- Like, share, and comment on other people's posts. Even if you only do this one time per day, it will help.
- Do NOT make significant announcements on Facebook.
- Post 1-2 times per week. Comment on other posts every day.

Website

- Update your site often, even if just to post a fresh image.
- State when you will publish updates: *"We'll post an update every Wednesday by Noon and we will post more often if warranted."*
- Use Frequently Asked Questions page (FAQ).
- What should you have on your website?
 - Custom email address
 - Contact Us form
 - Blog
 - Photographs on home page. Don't use a carousel unless your page is already well designed for that (meaning, it cycles through one time then stops).

Blog

- If you do blog, keep it short. Don't speculate. Be positive and personal. Let your constituency see that you can identify with their concerns because you are dealing with the same issues.
- Allow only one person to post. Others can *write* the post but one person should review that post and have their name stamp on the post. Why? While we would typically advise having multiple people post on your blog, this is an unprecedented time where consistency and proper messaging are more helpful.
- Blogs and posts should use plain language. Use varied length sentences to hold interest. Paragraphs should be 3-4 sentences in length. Consider using bullets.
- Post a photo or video if you can, even one of your own family. Authenticity is key. It need not be posed or retouched. It can even be slightly out of focus. The point is to be human and approachable.
- Need topics?

- Profile your employees and board members. Talk about cool equipment. Write about a vendor and how they stepped in to help. Write about the community or how someone has helped you.

Email

- Use email to communicate with constituencies, employees, board members and other stakeholders.
- Use simple language and short messages.
- Consider creating a special email box monitored by multiple people or retask a general inquiry box for this purpose.
 - Set up an auto-reply that it was received and then follow up quickly.
- Don't forget staff and board members
- Email your staff regularly even if you have nothing business critical to say. Be sure you know their family members. Check out Facebook or Instagram for a refresher on their kids' names and ages. Ask about extended families and grandparents.
 - Email is fine but phone calls are better and a live video chat is best. You can even send a handwritten note.
 - Share stories about your own family. You can be humorous with your own staff but in a respectful way.
 - Be willing to expose your flaws and foibles. "I tried to login to Zoom last night to visit with my parents. Little did I realize that 6 million other Americans logged in at 5 p.m. PT on a Saturday night! Now I've learned to pick an odd time like, say, 5:19!"
 - Reassure employees that business goes on. Write a small note about looking forward to getting a project off the ground when business resumes. "I'm really enjoying the extra time spent with my family right now, but I confess I'm also looking forward to getting the new clarifier project underway. That project will go a long way to alleviating strain and giving us the capacity for those drastic fluctuations we saw last year."

General Agency Protocols

- Assign one designated spokesperson and backups.
- Remain consistent with messaging.
- All board meetings, including virtual, need to be agendized and posted with the link to join the virtual meeting.
- Share key messages with all staff and board members.
 - Be reassuring and calm.
 - Avoid levity in this crisis.
 - Avoid making predictions.
- Consider using video messages because they resonate more strongly in uncertain times.
- Take frequent photos and post to social properties and website.
 - Types? Take photos of staff in protective gear doing their usual jobs. Take photos of office staff and board meetings. Take photos of video conference meetings.

Appendix 1 – Sample Messages

- Our priority is the safety and well-being of our customers, staff, and community. As your utility provider, our services continue uninterrupted.
- Water, wastewater and solid waste services are essential services. Services remain fully operation and will continue to be provided without interruption.
- Our customer service counter is open for in-person services. Follow current safety guidelines and maintain social distancing. If you are ill wear a mask or send a representative. Our hours are:
- In response to COVID-19, <<District>> has suspended in-person customer service operations. Please contact us by phone or email << numbers>>.
- Our customer service phone lines will continue to be staffed. Please be patient while calls and emails are being processed. Contact us at (list phone number and email).
- Operations and maintenance crews continue operating all facilities in the same, efficient manner as always. We are responding to customers in the same manner and with the same speed as usual.
- Our crews will respond to maintenance issues as quickly as possible.
- If there are delays in service:
 - We appreciate your patience if it takes a little more time than usual for a response from our staff. We estimate that response times may be 25 percent slower than usual.
 - Our <<agency>> is fully staffed and operations but slightly delayed due to factors outside of our control.
- Our customers are important to us and we are here to offer assistance. Please contact our office should you have concerns about paying your utility bill.

Appendix 2 – Additional Notes

- Remember to include language translations.
- Errors can be corrected. While we don't like typos and do our best to avoid them, it is more important to publish quickly and regularly. Don't let the fear of perfection slow you down. Content and tone are more important than a misspelled word here or there. Some tips for proofing documents:
 - Change the font several times. A new font registers differently and might make typos stand out.
 - Proof by reading backwards.
 - Post as a draft and put your kids to work as proofreaders.
 - Print out on colored paper in in very large font size to proof.
 - Use "find" to locate typically misspelled words or even common words.
 - Paste text into different word processors like a Word document into a Google doc and vice versa.
- Use a recorded phone message only when you cannot monitor phones. It is important to have personnel answering calls. For after hours, have Option 1 be an update from the district manager. Write a script and talking points for the front desk.

Feel free to reach out to us for help. In addition to our team of writers, graphic artists, and marketing specialists, these three team members may be contacted directly.



Jennifer Harrison, CEO
916-716-0636
Jennifer@PandoPublicRelations.com



Schaelene Rollins, Principal
916-397-1915
Schaelene@PandoPublicRelations.com



Alyssa Reynolds, Social Media Specialist
916-792-4369
Alyssa@PandoPublicRelations.com



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