

**Crafting Communication during Crisis:
An Exploration of the Dairy Industry's Communication Response during COVID-19**

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Introduction/Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

Agriculture is no stranger to nationwide crises. However, COVID-19 affected the entire agricultural industry rather than isolated segments as previous crises had done (Spradley, 2020). Communication professionals play a crucial role in shaping an organization's crisis management and outcome (Troester & Warburton, 2001), and COVID-19 has placed an even greater emphasis on the importance of this role (Spradley, 2020). Recent literature in crisis communication has suggested the audience is of utmost importance. Fraustino and Liu (2017) suggested communicators must consider audience members and their needs when effectively developing crisis communication strategies. When communicators tailor content to audience members, it may allow organizations to ensure their communication contains the most helpful and received content by audiences (Fraustino & Liu, 2017). When considering audiences, an organizations' *stakeholders*, that is - anyone who can affect or be affected by the execution of an organization's objectives, are an important consideration (Freeman, 1984). Xu and Li (2013) state in strategic crisis response, organizations should recognize the interests of a wide number of stakeholders including employees, customers, shareholders, media, government, and the public at large.

Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore communication methods informing the publics' opinions regarding industry issues (AAAE priority 1). To do so, the following research question guided this study: What communication strategies were dairy commodity groups utilizing to communicate with the public during COVID-19?

Methods

We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with five communication professionals from U.S. dairy commodity groups and associations, chosen from the American Marketing Association list of agricultural groups, via Zoom. A phenomenological approach was used to understand each participant's subjective experience and interpretations of the organizational communication during COVID-19 (Erlandson et al., 1993). The semi-structured interview guide used for this study was researcher created and revised by colleagues for dependability. The IRB approved guide consisted of 12 questions, focused on communication strategies, platforms used, and audience response during COVID-19. To ensure trustworthiness, the interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. We used an inductive, bottom-up approach to analyze the narrative for emergent themes through open and axial coding using MaxQDA (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Throughout the analysis, we developed an audit trail to detail theme formation, definitions, and researcher notes. To ensure transferability, we self-reflected, peer debriefed, and confirmed themes that emerged (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Findings

The following themes emerged from the narrative regarding crisis communication strategies implemented during COVID-19: 1) have a plan in place, 2) find the right platform, 3) develop content driven by stakeholder needs, and 4) be adaptable and transparent.

Have a Plan in Place

Each of the organizations recognized the need for crisis communication plans; however, COVID-19 emphasized a greater need for preparation for more effective communication. Organization B noted this stating: “Most of our training was around specific crises that affected the dairy industry in particular... And I think we did okay with it, but I don't think we necessarily prepared as much as we could have...”

Find the Right Platform

Participants discussed utilizing social media, newsletters, podcasts, and TV segments based on stakeholder media habits. In regard to social media, Organization A said: “We have Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. LinkedIn was a really good one, especially to connect with our members. Our members ended up reposting and resharing things that we posted on LinkedIn specifically, because that's the platform that a lot of them use.” Organization B discussed newsletters: “Our members are a wide variety of people and there are some that want a letter in the mail.”

Develop Content Driven by Stakeholder Needs

Each organization interviewed had different messages at different points in time such as the essential worker and dairy product safety, virtual educational tools, negating negative claims about dairy, impact on trade and global dairy markets, and national conference updates. As an example, Organization D worked to ensure their audience knew dairy was safe to consume at the beginning of the crisis: “At the very beginning, the message we were trying to communicate was just trying to let people know that you weren't going to get COVID by drinking milk or eating dairy products or it wasn't on the packaging...”

Be Adaptable & Transparent

Participants suggested being honest, flexible, transparent, and having compassion was crucial during the crisis. Organization A suggested:

Be as truthful and honest as possible about what you don't know especially in a pandemic, where things are changing by the minute. It's okay, and it should be encouraged to say, here's what we know, here's what we don't know. And here's our next steps that we are going to take going forward.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Implications

The communicators at dairy organizations suggested having a plan in place was the first step in effective crisis communication strategies. Agricultural communicators have stressed the importance of crisis planning (Spradley, 2020; Troester & Warburton, 2001). However, our participants noted the need for strategies to be tailored to specified target audiences. Through tailored placement on channels, audience-specific messages can be created to achieve separate communication goals (Fraustino & Liu, 2017). For example, our participants shared how they provide content to producers on platforms such as LinkedIn and direct mail, because it is where the producer-based audience seeks out information. In addition to seeking out specific platforms, content needs to be designed with the audiences' need for information in mind (Xu & Li, 2013), and communicators must be transparent and adaptable as new information is brought forth. The findings of this study indicate how crisis communication campaigns must be audience-driven to be effective. Future research should consider analyzing the public opinion of other agricultural sectors during COVID-19 to compare to strategies across the agricultural industry. Audience response to these strategies is also of interest.

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