

WHACK-A-MOLE: A LOUSY CRISIS STRATEGY

Remember the Kipling line, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs?” Morgan Lyons takes a calm and methodical approach to crisis communications.

I like smacking arcade vermin as much as the next person. Whack-a-mole is alternatively satisfying and frustrating – but the frustration generally lasts longer than the satisfaction. Just reacting to the problem popping up in front of you only gets you so far. Think about that when planning for or managing a crisis. Communicators don’t have to play along.

Consider coronavirus

The response in some sectors to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic seems a bit whack-a-mole. One problem pops up, it gets hammered, another pops up somewhere else and the cycle repeats – it’s hard to see the strategy through the chaos because all anyone is doing is reacting. There are some notable exceptions, but as the coronavirus situation plays itself out on a global stage it looks like a lot of people are just whacking away without following a coherent strategy.

The pandemic was a significant discussion topic among public information officers at the recent Marketing and Communications Workshop of the American Public Transportation Association (APTA). People compared notes on preparations by their respective agencies. Keep in mind that APTA is a diverse trade association with members as large as New York, and as small as agencies with fewer than ten buses. The discussions were obviously varied and wide-ranging.

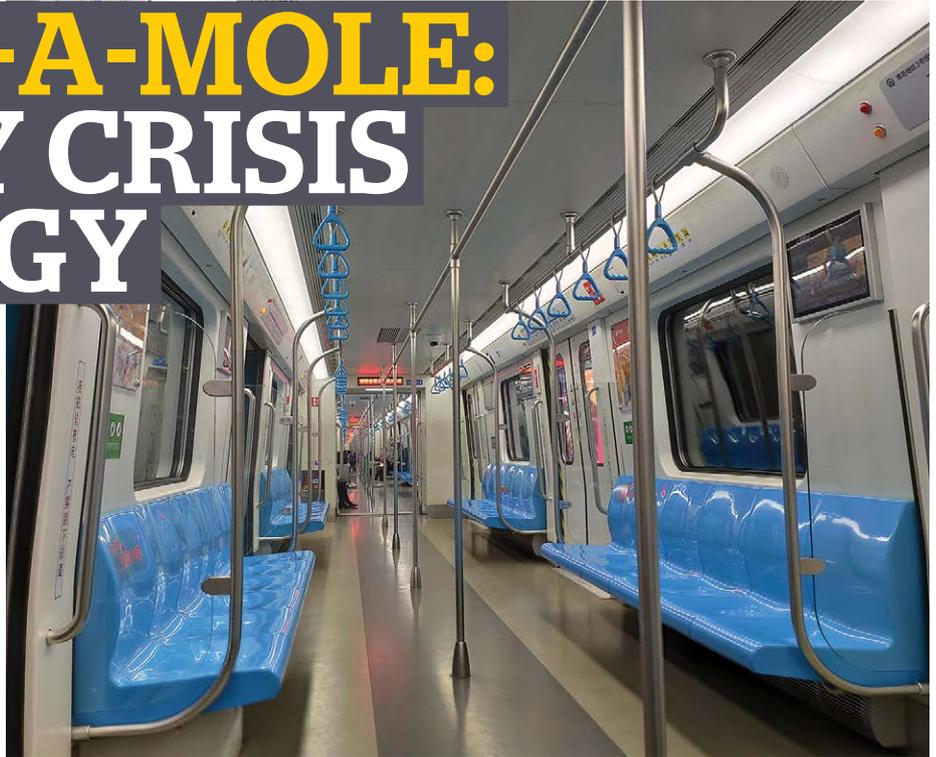
Because I’ve been in the industry a long time, I’ve handled crisis communications at Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) during the Ebola (2014) and Swine Flu (2009) outbreaks, amongst others. I have also lectured frequently on the topic, so my fellow transit communicators had many questions about their current preparations.

It’s simple: focus on what you know.

The nature of a crisis

The events moving a crisis from emergent to imminent are typically fast-moving and confusing. The randomness of the situation is often no-one’s fault, just the nature of a crisis. But while seeking information about larger organisational plans (and being part of the conversation), act upon what is known.

Trust the science. Seek the known experts. Put aside the non-essential tasks, and take



▲ An almost empty Qingdao Metro line 3 service in February; ridership on public transport networks around the world has declined dramatically in many cities due to the COVID-19 outbreak. qdjuncheng / CC BY-SA 4.0

advantage of the time and consider what customers, stakeholders and the media need to know about how this is affecting operations.

In the case of transit systems, people want to know if the trams, trains and buses are running and if they will be safe when riding.

1. You have been here before

Your organisation may not have experienced a pandemic, but chances are it has been through something that has significantly interrupted its business. In the case of transit, something that has forced a service reduction. Remember what you told people then and review your notes – this might not be hugely different.

2. You are not a healthcare expert

This is the part where the operations and emergency management folk tell communicators to “stay in their lane”. They’re right. You run public transport systems; you talk about trams, buses and trains. It’s your job to know how the timetables and schedules are being affected. What you’re not is an infectious disease specialist. Stay focused on your operations, and in online comments link widely to the vast resources of agencies like the World Health Organisation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (in the US), or Public Health England (UK), as well as local and regional emergency management officials.

In any case, those agencies should be the principal communicators on all things related to public health.

3. Stay connected with your peers

This is another element of being prepared. Make sure you understand who has the lead in your organisation for the agency response and know who they’re going to for their facts. Establish (or re-establish) contacts with counterparts at the local emergency management or health agencies. They should

talk about what they’re doing, and you should do the same. The good news is that health and emergency management agencies are going to get a lot more media attention than transport operators.

Take extra steps to keep those organisations in the loop about your operations and future plans so they can be included in their communications. Transit operators live in a political environment and it is never a bad thing to have local officials brag about your service in the media. After all, this is about keeping the communities we serve healthy and happy – we’re all in this together.

Follow industry colleagues and see what they’re doing. Compare notes. Vent frustration with trusted friends and counterparts as needed. Do what it takes to stay sane. These events can break quickly but tend to resolve themselves slowly. Remember that every location will handle things differently. Also remember not all of your excellent advice will be followed. It’s likely to not be the first time that’s happened.

4. Keep your messages clear and your information easy to find

Your core message is simple and should be familiar: “We are going to keep you safe.” It’s not only the truth, it also provides some coverage if you have to change your normal operations at short notice.

During your communications planning, consider the best ways to deliver information. How can you use your website or social channels? E-mail still works. Can you use local media to spread the word? How can you reach people outside regular work hours?

Tell the truth. Always.

Predicting the future

Posing hypothetical or ‘what if?’ questions is a common media interview tactic. It’s a cheap

and easy ‘gotcha’ that makes for fun live television or radio. But the answers are rarely illuminating and that’s why most media advisors counsel their clients to pivot from them back to their message. In any case, one cannot predict the future.

Just as a person preparing for an interview has to anticipate these kinds of questions, crisis managers must not only expect hypothetical incidents or outcomes, they are well-served to develop contingency plans. They cannot be expected to develop complete plans for every eventuality (again, no-one has a crystal ball), but multiple scenarios should be discussed with the crisis and executive teams. Such work is rarely wasted time.

Let me give you an example. A driver on a break at a busy end-of-the-line station is seen sneezing and coughing by customers. She’s actually dealing with a pre-diagnosed sinus problem, but almost immediately a nervous bystander shoots a video and posts it to their social network with the headline, “Hey ‘X’, what are you doing about your infectious drivers?!”

The mind boggles over the possible outcomes in the current overheated communication environment. It is reasonable to expect broad social sharing of the content, which leads to panicky media coverage, which leads to increased calls to the transit agency customer service, which in turn leads to complaints from the transport workers union about health and safety at work protocols. In quick succession this leads to a demand for more detailed cleaning of transport facilities, to possible service reductions caused by the need to limit vehicle pullout to allow for more time for servicing. However this is already slowed because vehicle maintainers are either actually sick and cannot come to work, or they are scared to come to work, or they have to stay home because their child’s school is closed in response to concerns about a local outbreak. And all following the public sighting of a ‘sick’ operator at a busy station.

Perhaps less dramatically, think how service adjustments can be more sanely made and effectively communicated when demand is

reduced (and revenue lost) because large ride-generating events – sporting events or concerts – are cancelled or closed to the public.

Whack-a-mole players know the varmint is in the box and will pop up. But they do not know when, where or how many will do that at the same time. The best players consider the possibilities based on previous experience and plan their strategy accordingly.



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Review, adapt, act, repeat

One advantage to sustained critical incidents like the current coronavirus outbreak (or any major public health emergency) is the ability to do things differently – and better. Calm and considered situational analysis and planning is the key to success. While there will likely be no slow days, take the time to review what has been done in your organisation and peer agencies. Was the communication quick, clear and did it promote calm action? Want a do-over?

Be open to new ways of addressing the problem. If a ‘lessons-learned’ process is not already in place at your organisation, put

one in place. By all accounts this incident is probably going to last for some months. Take advantage of the time to improve your processes as the situation develops and look out for future crises. Trust me, you’ll be here again. Just like the flu.

Think about the messages you’ve been delivering. Do some resonate with your audiences more than others? Have you found new tactics, or do some work better than others?

In my long years of public relations practice, and as a working reporter before that, I’ve learned that the crucible of a critical incident can lead to clear thinking because all of the other day-to-day stuff is truly burned away. Consider what you’re doing now that you should be doing after this incident has passed.

Always remember the team

This is a final thought, but maybe it should be the first: how are the employees in your organisation holding up under the pressure? What about the people responsible for communicating all this change? People need rest and need to take a break. High-pressure incidents can, and do, take a toll on mental, as well as physical, health. People need time to NOT be employees and be the face of the organisation. They need time to be human. Their kids are out of school and their family members are in nursing homes or may be dealing personally with serious health issues.

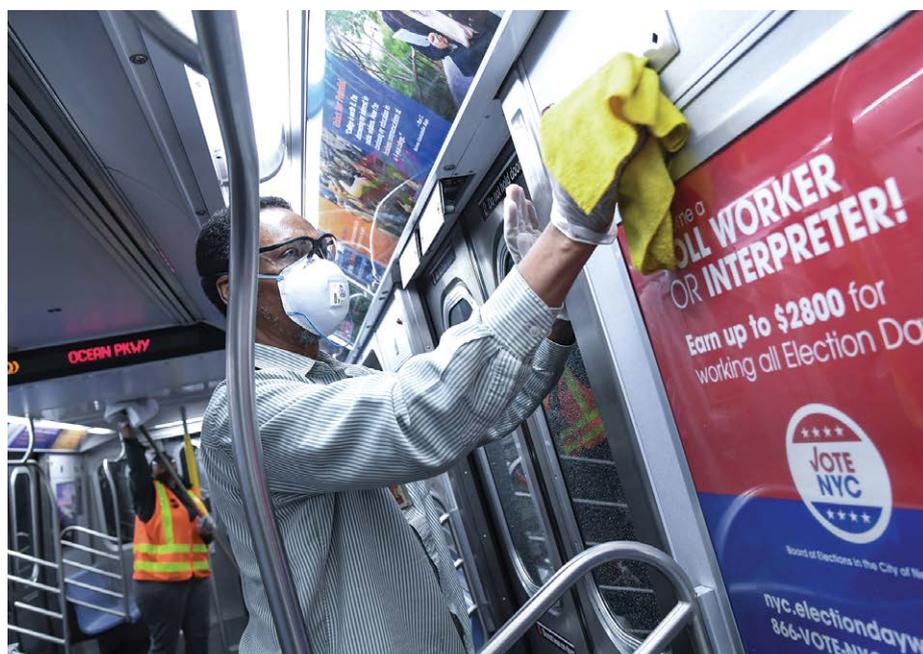
Team leaders need that time and space too. Go ahead, the crisis will be here when you get back.

Conclusion

Viruses and other critical incidents have always been with us – they endure because they size up the current environment and seek opportunities to change and sustain themselves. Effective organisations and the communicators who support them must do that too – in good times and bad.

You and your agency have been here before. It’s all relative, so take a moment to breathe and reflect on what you know and how you’ve managed previous critical incidents. You got through that, so with robust planning you’ll get through this latest round of whack-a-mole too... and the next one... and the one after that. **TAUT**

◀ **LEFT: Transit agencies are ramping up intensive ‘deep clean’ programmes for vehicles and stations. NYCT personnel disinfect a R-160 subway train at Coney Island Yard in early March. M. A. Hermann / MTA**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan Lyons is a recognised expert in crisis communications and media relations. Transitioning from a career as an award-winning journalist, he was Vice-President, External Relations, at Dallas Area Rapid Transit in Texas before opening his own communications consultancy, Lyons Strategic.

Morgan has served as Chair of the Marketing and Communications Committee for the American Public Transit Association, and as a member of the body’s Board of Directors. He is presently a member of the Legislative Committee. Visit his website at www.lyonsstrategic.com