Impact of COVID-19 on Charity Communications

April 2020
Introduction

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Now, more than ever, charity communications matter. But for many of us, the knock-on effect of COVID-19 has created new and unexpected challenges as well as fears over our short and long term survival.

It’s our job as charities to find ways to navigate these challenges effectively and strategically in order to keep delivering the best services we possibly can to our beneficiaries at this crucial time while continuing to get key messages out to donors and volunteers and engage with other stakeholders.

That’s why Media Trust and CharityComms partnered to survey the sector about the main communications challenges charities are facing at this time. We will use these findings to help deliver the support and resources charities need in the weeks and months ahead.

We asked charities what they needed and here’s what they said…
Summary

WHAT THE FINDINGS TELL US

We received 219 completed survey responses with 70% coming from small charities. The survey is therefore not representative of the sector as a whole. However, answers were consistent across organisations of all sizes on the comms channels being used and challenges faced, suggesting the universality of the comms challenges across the sector.

The data highlights the key areas of resource and support charities need in light of COVID-19. The top three comms challenges charities have are supporting users who would normally have access to face to face services, producing digital content (films, vlogs, infographics) and moving services online. Strikingly, 20% of respondents don’t know what resources are available showing the need for better signposting to resources. 97% would like pro bono or volunteer support, underscoring the opportunity for the media and creative industry to get involved and contribute resources, training and volunteer support.

Only 2% (6 respondents) said they aren’t worried about comms challenges at this time demonstrating an overwhelming need for support.

20% of respondents felt they didn’t know what resources are available
Survey Respondents

OVERVIEW

The respondents' organisation type/area of work was widely spread across the sector:

The highest number of respondents were charities working in Health including Mental Health – 21% (45 responses) which is reflective and consistent with the wider charity sector.

A high level of respondents were organisations whose work focuses on face to face interaction with their service users including:

- Disability – 11% (23 responses)
- Education and Training – 7% (17 responses)
- Community groups – 6% (18 responses)
- Children – 5% (12 responses)
- Housing and Homelessness – 4% (9 responses)

Half of the organisations were located in London and Greater London (50% –101 responses). The rest were spread out across the UK but mostly located in the south of England.

The top three roles respondents held were:

- Director/CEO - 26% (57 responses)
- Communications Officer – 21% (46 responses)
- Senior Managers – 20% (43 responses)
Charity Size

70% of respondents were from small charities (income under £1m).

Most respondents were from micro charities and when combined with small charities, this made up 70% of total respondents.

Breakdown

- Micro - less than £0.5m turnover: 47% (102 responses)
- Small - £0.5m - £1m turnover: 23% (51 responses)
- Medium - £1m - £5m turnover: 21% (47 responses)
- Large - £5m - £10m turnover: 5% (11 responses)
- Super - £10m+ turnover: 4% (8 responses)

Note: Size categories are based on Media Trust’s bandings
Communication Channels during COVID-19

The comms channels charities are using the most during this period of isolation and remote working are **Emails**, **Facebook***, **Website** and **Twitter**.

More than half (119 respondents) **intend to use all four of these channels combined** to connect with stakeholders.

This was consistent across all organisation sizes demonstrating the popularity of these channels.

*84% of respondents said they would be using Facebook and 34% also said they would be using Facebook Groups

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### Communication Channels Intended for Use (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Channel</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>189 (86.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-Newsletter</td>
<td>136 (62.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>185 (84.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Groups</td>
<td>75 (34.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>123 (56.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Meetings</td>
<td>120 (54.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>141 (64.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>2 (0.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>172 (78.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>179 (81.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td>75 (34.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>54 (24.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>46 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communication Channels during COVID-19

Other ways respondents plan to communicate with their audiences:
- Printed Newsletters
- Post
- Leaflet dropping
- attendanywhere
- vimeo
- zoom
- TikTok
- LinkedIn
- slack
Communication Challenges

THE TOP FIVE COMMS CHALLENGES CHARITIES ARE FACING AS A RESULT OF COVID-19 ARE:

- Supporting users who normally have access to face to face services: 61% (133 responses)
- Producing digital content for example, films, vlogs, infographics: 53% (115 responses)
- Moving our services online: 41% (90 responses)
- Digital fundraising: 40% (89 responses)
- Communicating and engaging our stakeholders: 39% (87 responses)

Charities are clearly feeling the digital divide with key challenges including:

- Digital content: 53%
- Digital fundraising: 40%
- Digital leadership: 34%
- Digital campaigning: 32%
- Digital comms: 29%

Other comms challenges include:

- Internal communications: 23%
- Mobilising volunteers: 21%
- Communicating safeguarding advice for frontline staff and volunteers: 19%
- PR: 17%
- Media interviews: 8%
### Communication Challenges

**By Breakdown of Themes**

When grouped together in the categories below, the biggest communication challenges related to digital communications, closely followed by stakeholder engagement and communications and then service delivery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digital comms</th>
<th>Engagement and comms</th>
<th>Service delivery</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Producing digital content</td>
<td>Engaging stakeholders</td>
<td>Supporting users used to face to face services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital campaigning</td>
<td>Mobilising volunteers</td>
<td>Moving services online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lack of digital communications skills</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Internal communications</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Operational</th>
<th>Fundraising</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing workloads and projects</td>
<td>Digital fundraising</td>
<td>Digital leadership: how to make our organisation more digital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating safeguarding to frontline staff and volunteers</td>
<td>Diversifying funding streams/review business model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Digital comms: 22%**
  - Producing digital content: 53%
  - Digital campaigning: 32%
  - A lack of digital communications skills: 29%

- **Engagement and comms: 21%**
  - Engaging stakeholders: 39%
  - Mobilising volunteers: 21%
  - PR: 17%
  - Media interviews: 8%
  - Internal communications: 23%

- **Service delivery: 20%**
  - Supporting users used to face to face services: 61%
  - Moving services online: 41%

- **Operational: 18%**
  - Managing workloads and projects: 38%
  - Digital leadership: how to make our organisation more digital: 34%
  - Communicating safeguarding to frontline staff and volunteers: 19%

- **Fundraising: 15%**
  - Digital fundraising: 40%
  - Diversifying funding streams/review business model: 33%

- **Other: 4%**
Impact of COVID-19 on Charity Communications: Survey Insights

Communication Challenges

OTHER COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AND AREAS OF CONCERN RAISED BY RESPONDENTS:

- We want to build our website to support members, but all funds are on hold or cancelled.
- Communicating to older people using technology.
- We are a small independent employee assistance provider supplying 24/7 mental health support to over 1m employees worldwide. We work with many NGOs and media organisations and would really appreciate any support you can offer us as we move from face to face therapeutic support to digital mental health programmes.
- Increasing digital literacy and capacity among our local networks.
- Most of our face to face customers do not have or cannot operate digital services.
- How to engage with the media while press is so focused on the virus.

Impact of COVID-19 on Charity Communications: Survey Insights

CharityComms

MediaTrust
Charities are struggling to effectively communicate with stakeholders.

The top three barriers they are facing are costs, lack of in-house skills and time.

28% said their audience are not on social media. 92% intend to utilise emails to communicate with stakeholders during this period.

Other ways of communicating cited were print and post and online chat platforms including Teams and Zoom.
Communication Barriers

OTHER BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION RAISED BY RESPONDENTS

- Knowing what our supporters want from us
- Most of our audience is online but the most vulnerable are not
- Planning and executing comms through a remote team
- Reaching some of our audience who are not on social
- How best to use what we have and manage longer term digital strategy
- Too much information – what is going to cut through?
Communication Support Needs

Over 20% of respondents don’t know what their needs are, suggesting the need for a concerted effort to help charities evaluate and benchmark their comms capabilities as a longer-term goal for the sector, perhaps once the current crisis is over.

Over 20% of respondents also don’t know what is available in terms of support, indicating the need for better signposting to resources, advice, training, and pro-bono and volunteering support.

A large majority of respondents said they would value help with comms-related training and skills development through webinars, online guides and other shared resources.
Communication Support Needs

Charities clearly want help with comms training and skills development.

Respondents cited webinars, shared resources and online guides as their preferred methods for delivering training. This was consistent across all sizes of organisations.

Other requests included direct contact for more organisation-specific issues, strategy templates, phone calls and face to face support.

**INTENDED COMMUNICATION CHANNELS USE BY CHARITIES (%)**

- **Group chats**: 84 (38.4%)
- **Online guides**: 129 (58.9%)
- **Online mentoring**: 87 (39.7%)
- **Online training**: 119 (54.3%)
- **Online 1:1 volunteer support**: 79 (36.1%)
- **Shared resources**: 131 (59.8%)
- **Webinars**: 133 (60.7%)
- **Other**: 10 (4.6%)
97% of respondents said they would like appropriate pro-bono or volunteer communication support. The pro-bono or volunteer support charities are most in need of right now include:

- Social media and digital marketing: 48% (105 responses)
- Communications strategy and planning: 41% (89 responses)
- Digital strategy: 40% (88 responses)
- Film and content production: 34% (78 responses)
- Website design and management: 28% (62 responses)
- Crisis communications: 26% (56 responses)

Other areas include marketing (21%), campaigning (20%), copywriting, editing and proofreading (18%) and IT and data management (18%).
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Communication Support

Other pro-bono and volunteer support charities said they are in most need of right now:

- Strategic oversight for the sector in this geographical area
- Digital engagement i.e. all our engagement was face-to-face (using digital comms to communicate the value of this). Now the only way to connect is digitally
- eLearning advice and platform recommendations
- Creating relevant support content for digital channels to free up our helpline for urgent enquiries

We want to continue to fundraise and we could do with some advice on that given the current climate.
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Media Trust Communications Support

Media Trust’s Volunteer Platform connects charities with professionals from across the media and creative industry who want to share their skills and expertise with charities for free. If you would like some virtual digital, marketing or communications support, all you need to do is register your charity and post your volunteer request on the platform to get started.

Media Trust’s Resource Hub is a comprehensive collection of free guides, webinars, toolkits and tips created by our media and creative industry and charity partners specifically for the charity sector. Topics covered include Digital Strategy, Social Media, Creative Campaigns and Digital Fundraising. We have listed a selection of available resources below:

**SOCIAL MEDIA**
Facebook: [Facebook Fundamentals](#)
Twitter: [Get started with the Twitter content strategy playbook](#)
Instagram: [How to use the Donate sticker on Instagram](#)
Marketing strategy: [Digital Marketing Strategy Webinar series](#)

Media Trust’s [Training Programmes](#) provide tailored training for charities from Media Interview training, Social Media and Writing for the Web to Digital Strategy. We will be offering new online training sessions in the coming weeks and months.
The CharityComms website is packed full of free guides, toolkits and tips created by charity sector experts specifically for the sector. Below are a select few:

**RESOURCES**
- Charity communicator coronavirus resources
- CharityComms knowledge hub
- Best Practice Guides
- CharityComms events

**SERVICES**
- AskCharity
- Digital benchmark
- Mentoring scheme
We are here to help

PLEASE GET IN TOUCH IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SURVEY FINDINGS OR SUPPORT WE CAN OFFER OR NEED HELP ACCESSING OUR RESOURCES

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