



BUSINESS SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Communicating long-term plans is the biggest issue facing Business School communications professionals right now, says **Stephanie Mullins**, Associate Director at PR consultancy, BlueSky Education

More than half of Business School communications professionals state that the single biggest communications challenge they are facing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic is communicating long-term plans.

That was the key finding from a targeted LinkedIn poll run by specialist PR consultancy, BlueSky Education, to really understand what was keeping industry practitioners awake at night. Communicating long-term plans wasn't the only challenge singled out by those polled – 29% of these communications specialists felt that their main problem is showing the value of online learning, while for 14% it is attracting international students, and for the remaining 5% it is securing coverage for expertise.

The respondents were spread across the globe, with responsibility for communications at institutions that include Warwick Business School, Bocconi University, NEOMA Business School, Alliance Manchester Business School, Wits Business School, Nyenrode Business University, BI Norwegian Business School, and more.

The challenges span borders

All of the institutions listed above are home to excellent communicators – but this is an unprecedented time. Never before has our industry had to tackle a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, and so the challenges it has caused Business Schools are not only new, but they are also wide-ranging. It is a testing time for communications teams in Business Schools globally. With respondents based across continents, from Europe to Africa, the survey confirmed this.

The most worrying aspect of this is clear. Many Schools have only recently formalised their plans for the present academic year and have been facing the prospect of making them public. Perhaps – given how late many plans have become concrete and that, even then, they remain subject to change in response to government lockdowns and regulations – it's not surprising that the majority of people polled believed that sharing long-term plans was their main concern. Given

that this virus isn't likely to disappear anytime soon, and that a vaccine is not seemingly imminent, the industry will not be returning to pre-Covid normality. Communicating how institutions are going to operate in the long term will be vital.

Yet, whether plans now include the likes of blended learning and smaller class sizes, it's communicating them effectively that's important. It's ensuring that the institution remains attractive to target audiences, especially prospective students, and ultimately having the wider goals drive the communications strategy. Fortunately, there are a number of ways in which messages can be bolstered in order to give them the best chance of success.

A clear message is the basic foundation

Going fully online? Delaying programme start dates? Making changes to the campus?

It all needs to be clear and there need to be reasons why, as well as an explanation that makes the changes not just acceptable, but also attractive. Is the School particularly adept at online learning, or even an edtech pioneer perhaps? How do the plans benefit those a School wants to influence?

Preparation is key here because sharing plans is a strategic matter. Sharing the news internally, with staff and faculty, will most likely be the first step. Then, sharing the plans with engaged prospects – those who were already signed up to start a programme, those who have paid deposits, and so on. These prospects should be offered the chance to ask questions and understand what the plans mean for them, whether that's via

email or offering telephone, or even Zoom, consultations. Many Schools have already overcome this hurdle. The next step is sharing the long-term plans with the wider community, including alumni and the media.

Choosing a spokesperson

Who is communicating these plans? The Business School's dean is a good place to start. Messages from a dean carry weight as they come from an institution's figurehead.

'It's true that the dean is key to providing a top-level, long-term strategic view of how, when, and in what manner the School will reopen the campus,' says Kerry Parke, Associate Director of Communications at IE Business School. 'However, academic institutions are hardly lacking in expertise and applied knowledge, so there's no need for the dean to serve as the sole spokesperson and, in fact, having a variety of voices speak to the topic can help get a more complete message out to a wider audience.'

Parke says that, at IE Business School, they're preparing for this next, rather fluid, stage in higher education and that there are many who can speak to the media, including the vice deans, programme directors, and staff who are updating course content, classroom facilities, and health protocols, as well as the professors teaching face-to-face and online students simultaneously, and the students joining on campus in Madrid or online from around the world.

'Each one is an ambassador for IE Business School and can deepen the School's message through their individual experience. This layering of perspectives – so long as the foundation is clear and set by the dean – provides a complete view of a complex and constantly evolving global situation, and this is the type of honest messaging that resonates with stakeholders,' Parke explains.

Ultimately, institutions are addressing those already committed to the brand, ensuring its pipeline of students remains dedicated to studying despite necessary adaptations due to the pandemic.

Indeed, Dean of Lancaster University Management School and former chair of the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), Angus Laing, suspects that student numbers might not be as bad as some fear.

For Laing, the simple reality facing prospective students is that options to entice them away from further education

'It all needs to be clear and there need to be reasons why, as well as an explanation that makes the changes not just acceptable, but also attractive'

‘The simple reality facing prospective students is that options to entice them away from further education are limited’

are limited. For those interested in postgraduate programmes in particular, other options that these people might consider – such as travelling or getting a job – aren’t easy avenues to pursue. For most, they aren’t options at all. ‘While initial sentiment analysis was suggesting they’d rather not come this year and rather not have blended delivery, the brutal reality is... what are the alternatives?’ Laing says.

But institutions have to set their sights further afield. They also have to attract the next generation of participants at every level – from undergraduate business degrees to executive education programmes – who are well aware of the pandemic’s ongoing impact on delivery and student experience. Communications initiatives must address this.

Picking the media

Where, exactly, are messages being shared? This includes social media – for, research shows that personal posts on LinkedIn and Twitter are often well-received – and in the sector-specific, national and international press. Understanding what the target demographic is reading is crucial. Strategic communications professionals look to share their messages in outlets that will be read and respected, that includes top-tier business media like *Forbes* and the *Financial Times*, as well as education-specific press, such as *Business Because*, *QS TopMBA.com* and *Times Higher Education*.

Many institutions have been sharing their plans, and successfully validating them, in target media. A number of UK Business Schools, including London Business School, UCL School of Management, Imperial College Business School, Durham University Business School and Alliance Manchester Business School, were some of the first to effectively do this effectively, in an article for *Poets&Quants* – one of the world’s most influential specialist outlets for business education.

Many long-term plans that have been shaped and shared by Schools in the industry have involved an aspect of online learning that is inevitable in a world where health and safety is paramount and government regulations must be observed, so it’s easy to see why many institutions want to highlight their abilities in the realm of education technology. Yet almost a third of respondents to the survey indicated that their biggest challenge, due to the current pandemic, was showing the value of online learning.

One effective way to demonstrate prowess in virtual teaching is to reiterate credentials by sharing stories, for example, that secure the School as totally capable in this area

in the minds of potential students. Take Imperial College Business School, which continues to share helpful messages that position its faculty as technological leaders. It has, for instance, offered advice on how to host a successful virtual conference and how businesses can use AI to cope during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consistent press coverage like this reinforces the School as leaders in technology, alongside student stories that advocate the worth of the programmes and other targeted media opportunities that highlight the School’s value.

Regardless of the challenges a School may be facing, it will ultimately be judged on the strength of its communications. Good communications will see Schools through this period safely and help to secure a successful future – but a single interview is not enough. Schools must make sure that their messages are consistently visible. They must be timely, clear, transparent and frequent.

Stephanie Mullins is Associate Director at BlueSky Education, a specialist public relations consultancy for business and higher education.

