A strategic communication plan: Addressing the new information needs in the context of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The 2019 SARS-CoV-2 pandemic became one of the most unprecedented disruptors of effective healthcare delivery encountered in the 21st century. Innovative strategies had to be developed and communicated to our increasingly interconnected healthcare systems to ensure that public health safety was maintained across the globe. However, this had to be achieved using both established technologies and newer innovations.

Nevertheless various initially untested forms of innovation that could enable communication such as virtual/augmented reality, video conferencing systems like zoom etc., which had been available pre-pandemic, but had not gained ubiquity for healthcare needed to be refined, repurposed and deployed to support cross-border information dissemination and knowledge discovery aiding governments, policy-makers, institutions and scientist to understand the extent of COVID-19 and better tackle the crisis.

Strategic communication planning was necessary during SARS-CoV-2 to help effective local to cross-border communication of treatment strategies for patients suffering from the new severe acute respiratory distress syndrome of COVID-19.

A loco-regional case study presented by Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João describes an approach to crisis communication during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges to the health sector in several dimensions. Communication was one of the main areas and where more errors were pointed out to institutions with political and public responsibilities. [1]

Strategic communication planning became the best form of tackling the disease during SARS-CoV- 2 to prevent global panic about the disease and enable effective crises management to be instituted at scale. [1 2]

The Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João (Porto, Portugal) has been recognized on several occasions in the public and media scene for its communication with professionals, patients, society in general, and for its successful relationship with the media.

DESCRIPTION OF GOOD PRACTICE

The principles of crisis communication are identified and documented in various crisis manuals. They are transversal to the various crisis morphologies. The main rules are anticipation, informative quality, veracity/transparency and precision. To these elementary principles, the Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João added others that proved to be of great relevance:

Proximity

Proximity can be assessed at various levels: with professionals, patients, the media, partners and stakeholders and civil society. The Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João promoted a close relationship with everyone, through a dynamic, active and proactive interaction. In this regard, we highlight the good relationship with the media, favouring instant and enlightening contact through telephone calls, messages and WhatsApp. Note: the first patient cured of COVID- 19, the press officer exchanged more than 120 calls with journalists in less than two hours. The same happened when the first suspected case of COVID-19 was admitted to our institution.

Availability and openness

Over the last 20 months, hundreds of national and international reports were produced at the hospital. All the media showed interest in was understanding the emergency services, intensive care units, laboratories, and other areas of journalistic interest, and having access to the institution in a previously planned and agreed way. Access was never denied, all the media had opportunities to produce reports. However, it is strategically important not to confuse

openness and availability with a lack of control over communication and information. It was important, in each report, to define the areas, circuits, professionals and themes. Effective communication favoured this balance between control and openness.

Common sense

At a time when the line between responsible reporting and alarmism is very blurred, common sense is crucial. In this regard, we emphasize common sense added to the sense of responsibility and the spirit of mission. All measures communicated were strategically evaluated before entering the public and media agenda.

Solid communication culture

The Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João has a group of professionals, clinicians and other employees in fundamental areas, whose skills are recognized, not only for their credibility and scientific and technical competences, but also for excellent communication skills. This aspect was fundamental for the communication process. We quickly and naturally identified a set of spokespersons, in different areas, who were available to communicate with the media and, consequently, with the population in general.

Of all the strategic principles used during this period, the ability to anticipate was fundamental to the real perception of organization, planning and tranquillity. The Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João stood out as a trustworthy, reputable, credible and prepared hospital. This positive image of notoriety is only achieved when there is a perfect awareness of the importance of communication and that communication must be aligned with the decisions taken. Worse than a well communicated bad decision is a poorly communicated good decision. The University Hospital Centre of São João and its Board of Directors value communication as a key decision-making process. And only with positive and active communication, can the gap between the communicated image, the real image and the desired image be minimized.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The result of this strategic communication plan are the 14,038 mentions that the Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João obtained during the first twelve months of the pandemic (in Portugal, the first infected patient was identified on March 2, 2020), which correspond to 73% more than the Centro Hospitalar Universitário Lisboa Norte (Lisbon, Portugal) (8,129 news items) and 108% more than Centro Hospitalar Universitário de Coimbra (Coimbra, Portugal) (6,735 news items). However, more important than the quantity of news is its quality: 99.8% of the news articles are rated as positive. We also highlight that the Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João, in the twelve months of 2020, had 18,139 news items, 49% more than in 2019. Therefore, it is the Portuguese hospital with the greatest media impact, in the global and pandemic context. In 2020, the Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João received an award for its brand. For the first time, a hospital was the most relevant brand in social responsibility, which assesses the indicators of notoriety, admiration, relevance, trust, preference, and recommendation. This "On Strategy" study typically rewards commercial brands. The report by TVI, one of the main Portuguese television channels, 'Diagnosis: COVID-19', has already won several international awards, namely in Monte Carlo, Venice and South Africa. Finally, we highlight some international media that carried out reports or interviews at the *Centro Hospitalar Universitàrio de São João: CGTN (China), Agence France-Presse (France), Daily Mail (United Kingdom), Tele5 (Spain), BBC News (UK), Verdens Gang (Norway), Reuters (UK) and Helsingin Sanomat (Finland)*.

SUSTAINABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF GOOD PRACTICE

In conclusion, the Centro Hospitalar Universitário de São João adopted a disruptive communication policy in the health communication panorama in Portugal. The successful model sensitized other health institutions to become more open, dynamic and proactive. The requests from journalists were many, and only with a solid communication structure and culture we can achieve the goals of positive image, reputation and notoriety. We live in the era of 'what does not communicate does not exist' and there is no possibility of not communicating. Silence is itself a way of communicating.

This hospital was aware from day one that the best strategy would be to stand side by side with the media and public opinion. A disruptive innovation approach in communication here requires not only applying lessons and approaches used by other health systems for message dissemination but also importantly from other industries and societal streams. Only in this way can we be a credible and trustworthy hospital, recognized in Portugal and internationally.

Keywords: Crises communication, SARS-CoV-2, Social media management, international media coverage, public engagement, societal streams

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