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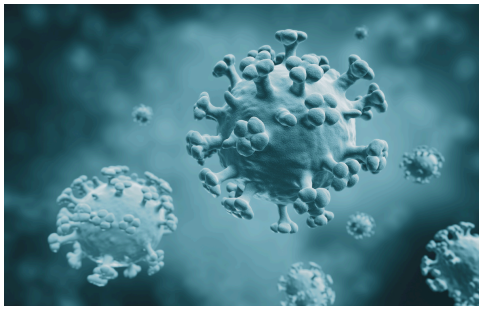
TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- TRUST IS CRITICAL
- AVOID DISTORTING RISK
- BE OPEN AND HONEST
- WORDS MATTER



WHAT HAPPENED?

December was a month filled with a lot of discussion about winter flu, the different strains, the impact it was having and the impact it could potentially have on people. This is nothing new and is a subject that is discussed annually, but this year the messaging created some concern and confusion. It started with warnings in early December that there was a sudden increase in hospitalisations due to influenza. This was followed by calls for people to get vaccinated as a matter of urgency which was a message linked by health bosses to the pressures on the NHS and possible strike action.

The messaging provided by the health service spokespeople and the media was of a 'super-flu'. The 'worst flu season in years' and an 'unprecedented' flu outbreak. In reality, scientists had identified a mutation of influenza in June 2025 named H3N2. In late October, there was a warning urging people to get vaccinated. But there was discussion about the vaccination not being designed for the new strain.

In addition, the British Medical Association suggested the flu situation was being used to 'scaremonger' when resident doctors were considering strike action. The confusion about whether it was the worst flu session or not continued with various experts and medical professionals questioning whether it really was out of the ordinary.

What can communication and business learn from the situations?

The use of terminology such as 'superflu' has been criticised by experts and it is clear the communication needed to be clearer, so the actions that people had to take was obvious. It starts with the understanding of risk and with the conflicting messaging, it was problematic for people to recognise whether the situation really was 'unprecedented' or whether the authorities were overplaying the problem.

With the UK Health Security Agency saying it was a 'broadly typical flu' season and the UK's top flu expert Professor Nicola Lewis, Director of the World Influenza Centre, saying the variant was 'not particularly unusual'.

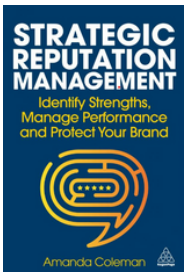
It created obvious mixed messaging which left the way open for people to share details that the vaccination was not effective against the strain and that the risk was no worse than previous years.

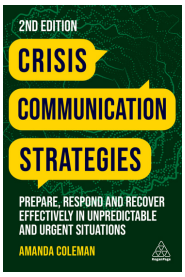
Creating an escalation in the messaging and having advice that was contradictory between experts, could harm trust that people had in health advice. Similar headlines have been seen in recent years claiming it is the worst flu season. Some have labelled this as an attempt to 'nudge' people by using communication to drive them to take the required action, which in this case is to get vaccinated. Research has shown that high-threat or loss-framed messages only work when people already perceive the risk as credible. When a threat feel exaggerated, the message may be rejected, or people can do the opposite of what is advised in a reaction known as reactance.

What do we need to remember in these situations?

- Understand the risk – before you can effectively frame and explain the risk to others, you must be clear what it means and the action that needs to be taken.
- Clear messaging – the messaging needs to be easy to understand with a logical link from issue to action and this should develop as more information becomes available. Being definitive in the early stages makes it difficult to update the messaging.
- Build the communication based on trust – the healthcare professions continue to top the Trust Veracity Index, and this is something that should be treated carefully so that it can support communication rather than damage it, due to the views the situation was being exaggerated.
- Recognise the importance of communication – getting the message right can mean the difference between people taking the necessary action or actively ignoring or discrediting the message. The approach to managing situations and issues has to have communication involved at a strategic level.
- Work with the media – the media can exaggerate or overplay the situation and while this is difficult to manage, having a conversation with them and explaining the situation clearly may help them to understand the nuances and report more accurately.
- Be ready to address misinformation and disinformation – confusion can leave the way open for people to share misinformation and disinformation. This will try to provide clarity where official sources can't or won't provide it.
- Take care with any attempt to nudge a reaction – behavioural communication needs to be used with great care. People are becoming more aware of the attempts to spark a response or push a course of action, and this can lead to reactance.
- Words really do matter – with words and phrases such as 'unprecedented', 'worst ever' and 'superflu' being used people can feel they are being manipulated with an exaggeration of the risks, and particularly when similar phrases are used each year.

Strategic Reputation Management available now.





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