



SHIFT/

OCTOBER 2020

# COMMUNICATIONS PIVOTS & LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT EVENTS

Experts Weigh in on How the Communications, Marketing & Public Relations Pendulums Have Swung as a Result of the Pandemic, Social Activism and the Presidential Race

This year's events have called for some of the biggest shifts to well-laid-out plans and strategies many of us have ever seen. While challenging, many have been net-positive for businesses — especially their communications, marketing and public relations efforts.

2.

The Pendulum  
Has Swung for  
Communications  
& Public Relations

3.

Experts Weigh  
in on Adapted  
Beliefs & Practices

10.

Communications  
& Public Relations  
for a New Era

# The Pendulum Has Swung for Communications

**At the start of 2020, the economy was booming<sup>1</sup> and research showed we'd moved from a civilization of stress (the word consumers most used to describe 2019) to one of hopefulness (the number one response when asked how they expected to feel in 2020)<sup>2</sup>.**

**Then the pandemic hit. Instead of hope, it set the world into unrest, tragedy and uncertainty.**

Not long after, protests and myriad forms of social activism over longstanding racial injustice began — and sustained. Then, a highly divisive presidential race swelled and, along with the pandemic and fight against racism, took over the mindshare of much of our country.

The events of 2020 have been tumultuous, to say the least. By mid-September of 2020, the word “unprecedented” had appeared in the news over 5.6 million times, up 166 percent compared to 2019<sup>3</sup> — and rightfully so.

However, we still believe there is hope — for this year and next. These events have called for some of the biggest shifts to well-laid out plans and strategies many of us have ever seen. Many have actually

been net-positive for businesses, especially in their communications, marketing, and public relations approaches.

There are two key behavioral changes SHIFT has observed amongst businesses and corporate leaders that we hope will continue in our new world: empathy as a core filter through which decisions are made; and the agility to think, react and respond to changing market conditions exponentially faster than the norm.

In our opinion, both dictate who thrives from here on out.

From a brand perspective, the pendulum has swung closer toward authenticity and standing for something — which have long been important, but more recently took a back seat to performance marketing for many companies. We believe the pendulum will continue to find balance, prioritizing the right brain with empathy, emotion and humanity, but without losing focus on performance and the necessary innovations around how we reach our audiences with those stories.

In the pages that follow, we've brought together perspectives from seasoned communications, marketing and PR leaders from across a spectrum of B2B, Consumer and Healthcare companies to share how they've pivoted their thinking and programs as a result of recent events and changed consumer behaviors.

# Experts Weigh in on Adapted Beliefs & Practices

Professionals and the brands they represent have been ushered into new approaches and thinking by this year's events. What does that look like in practice? From putting a human face on their brand to adopting new virtual engagement strategies and reimagining team culture, read on for the personal experiences and perspectives of marketers and communicators across a range of business sectors.

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events

# Experts Weigh in on

## Leveling Up Corporate Purpose, Accountability & Empathy



**Emma Johnson**  
CMO, Parsable

These past six months have demanded closer alignment and empathy to our customers and prospects. For many manufacturers, this time has shown that digital transformation — what we enable — is no longer optional. This has opened conversations with companies that historically weren't ready to engage. However, while enterprise buyer budgets are still out there, they are slower to release. It's forced us to be more thoughtful in our engagement strategies and content development. At the same time, more human. With technology controlling most aspects of our day and the events of the world feeling overwhelming, there's never been a more important time to connect at a personal level. Our BDRs often send custom videos; now they include cameos of children and pets. It's been freeing to acknowledge the personal side of who we are, all trying to get by as best we can. With that, it means not asking prospects for a meeting, but enabling the prospect to self-select when they are ready, on their terms. Despite the incredible challenges of 2020, it has driven us to adapt and innovate in ways that are improving outcomes for the company and our customers.



**Erica Morgenstern**  
CCO, Welltok, Inc.

Traditionally, B2B communications have been more formal and complex. Yet overnight, people's office spaces became kitchens, couches, or patios. Inspiration

posters became children's artwork and "body mullets" became a thing. Welcomed or not, we are now in clients' and prospects' personal lives. The least we can do is be more relatable and real when we engage with them. "Is it 2021 yet?!" is a subject line we successfully used in a lead generation email. The body copy continued "If you are already counting down the days to 2021, you are not alone. This year has asked more of you than any crisis communications plan could prepare for..." Rather than coming out the gate with the hard sell or COVID clichés, we showed empathy and set up the need for a solution. I find the more personable we are in our marketing, the more people are willing to engage and share their precious time to hear what you have to say.



**Kevin Mullins**  
VP, Corporate Social Responsibility  
& Partnerships, Workhuman

At Workhuman, we believe in the power of human connection and gratitude to help build more human workplaces and a better world. During the pandemic, we doubled down on humanity. The world was — and still is — seeking a level of compassion as we navigate this time together. As part of our CSR efforts, we donated laptops and iPads to help local people in need — including to hospitals near our headquarters in Ireland and Massachusetts — to help keep families connected during life's most important moments. In addition, we dedicated time and knowledge from our product and technology teams to develop and launch the Thank You Healthcare site. The site is designed to give the world one place to say thank you to hospitals and all the amazing healthcare workers for all they do and sacrifice every day. It's important to commemorate these moments so the healthcare community can see how much they are cared for.

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events



**Linda O'Conner**

**Sr. Communications Manager, Hims & Hers**

The issues we have faced this year call for more than just words of support, they call for action and change, and it takes a lot of work for a brand to do that. It has pushed me to be more thoughtful and inquisitive with everything I do. No longer am I living in my own little bubble working toward a goal. I'm thinking more outside of the box to ensure that I'm helping my company achieve what it believes in. For example, I recently worked on a blog series about hair care. If my company wasn't so passionate about diversity, equity and inclusion, I likely wouldn't have thought to do a post about hair care specifically for Black people. When working with conference organizers, I now tell them we do not feel comfortable participating on an all-white panel. Tiny tweaks like this in my day-to-day are adding up — I feel like I'm making a true difference by being more aggressive about my company's mission to help people.



**Paramita Bhattacharya**

**CMO, Blurb**

At Blurb, our focus has been to align ourselves with our customers as they — and we — have gone through unprecedented challenges. This has meant evolving our brand communication and customer engagement strategies since the early days of the pandemic along with revising promotional offers, pricing and other related elements. We provided customers with free upgrades and shipping to mitigate the fallout from the supply chain disruption worldwide. We also recognized

the need to bring new, relevant offerings, so we launched an entire new product line of Wall Art while, at the same time, rewarding our most loyal customers with a strong referral program. The summer of social unrest also made us revisit our corporate purpose and firm up our commitment to social justice and diversity & inclusion with matching employee donation programs to causes they support.



**Scott Neuman**

**VP, Corporate Marketing, Calix**

At its core, marketing needs to be authentic, empathetic and reflect the brand values it supports. In the past 9 months, this has been amplified. A good example was a newsletters series we published early on during the pandemic. As we began to see the strain on our broadband customers, we shifted from traditional articles focused on new portfolio enhancements to articulating how we could help. The customer stories we featured in press releases shifted from highlighting traditional ROI to focusing on extraordinary steps they were taking to keep communities connected, such as setting up free wi-fi near schools and churches and free service tier upgrades as families navigated learning from home. We doubled live “office hours,” tripled our “Circles of Success” sessions for best practices sharing among peers and extended a range of free services to our customers. Looking back at the open rates and CTRs, these newsletters were our highest performing of the year. These were important first steps as our marketing team began navigating this “new abnormal.”

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events

### Listening & Adapting for Agile, Reactive and Proactive Communications



#### **Anika Howard**

**VP, Brand & Digital Marketing, Foxwoods Resort Casino**

Like many marketing executives, COVID-19 required me and my team to adjust our message and approach. We focused on how to authentically connect with our guests while acknowledging the personal impact the pandemic was having on everyone. In March, Foxwoods Resort Casino closed its doors for the first time in 28 years. Our guests missed us. They reminisced about better days and good times. Social Media gave them a voice and we listened. We leaned into the conversation and filled the void. We focused on the positive message of being Safe at Home and developed programming on our social channels to keep guests entertained, informed and engaged. We reinforced messages with bi-weekly emails and press releases. We offered Moments of Zen on Mondays, Tasty Tuesdays with Quarantine Kitchen recipes from our chef and a cooking show with one of our VPs, and Wellness Wednesdays with our Chief Medical Officer. For Thirsty Thursdays our mixologists and partners mixed cocktails. Finally, Fridays were As Seen on Social, to walk guests through recreating some of the trending projects online.



#### **Christopher Carfi**

**VP Content & Product Marketing, Duda**

Many of Duda's customers are agencies that support small businesses with their web design and digital marketing efforts. When the pandemic ramped up, we

started immediately getting questions about particular capabilities that were instantly in high demand, such as online booking for services businesses and online ordering and "click-and-collect" capabilities for restaurant and eCommerce websites, respectively. We listened to our agency customers and rapidly adjusted our roadmap to provide them with the technology, education and white-label resources they needed to successfully communicate and sell these capabilities to their small business customers. We helped them help their customers by highlighting the features, examples and stories they needed in order to navigate this sea change that occurred in 2020.



#### **Jason Boyer**

**CMO, Deloitte Canada**

As a result of the pandemic and surrounding economic conditions, we needed to reassess our priorities and ensure we were focusing our marketing efforts on the things that mattered most to our clients. We organized our go-to-market programs into three distinct phases: Respond – helping businesses manage continuity through the unpredictability of the early days of the crisis; Recover – a period defined by a mindset shift from today to tomorrow, helping businesses return to a market-facing posture; and Thrive – a deliberate and longer-term shift to helping companies prepare for the new normal and thrive in the long-term

Like many other organizations, we also converted our experiential programming from in-person to virtual formats. But the core purpose of our marketing organization remained unchanged — helping build and deepen relationships with our clients by providing them with right information and ideas at the right time to help them solve business challenges.

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events



### **Kathy O'Reilly**

#### **Sr. Global Press Officer, Philips**

At the beginning of 2020, we had PR plans to support key marketing priorities for the year and into 2021. In February, all of that changed. At the onset of the pandemic, we had to immediately pivot to a reactive strategy. As a global leader in health technology, Philips was thrust into the spotlight in 24/7 news cycle. We had to walk a delicate balance of responding to all COVID related inquiries without appearing opportunistic and had to halt all non-COVID related media and social campaigns. At the forefront, our CEO determined we would follow a Triple Duty of care: ensuring the health and safety of our employees; continuing to fulfill critical customer needs; and ensuring business continuity. One crisis team was established to be the voice of the company. We created a COVID handbook with employee messaging, customer messaging and company statements. We created an external hub where media, customers and others could read how Philips was responding. None of these changes were planned and everything had to be executed within a matter of days. We learned to collaborate across teams in the most agile ways.



### **Keely Spillane**

#### **Sr. Director, Head of Communications at NerdWallet**

This year's incredibly heavy events elicit a very human desire to respond, help, voice your opinion. As a person, it's so tempting to act like a human and comment on everything; as a Communicator, though, doing so on behalf of your company isn't always the right call. Deciding what to respond to and how, both internally and externally, has never been more crucial. This has made bringing intentionality, authenticity and focus to

our Communications critical. We've consistently asked ourselves two questions: "are we adding real value?" and "can we back up our words?" When COVID hit, for example, I think everyone felt pressure to be out there commenting immediately. We took a step back to determine our approach. By evaluating traffic patterns on our site, we saw a huge surge of interest in certain financial topics brought about by the pandemic. Thanks to our Content team, we had best-in-class financial content to answer these questions. That's where we focused PR and syndication efforts. We didn't try to ram business-as-usual communications down people's throats or comment on topics we weren't experts on. We pivoted to provide value in a way that was authentic.



### **Rick Murray**

#### **Manager Partner, SHIFT Communications**

2020 has required a level of responsiveness in PR and general business that many of us have just never seen before. At SHIFT, we quickly pivoted counsel and programs to not just push messaging, but rather to lean into national discourse and conversations that were percolating. That also included adjusting operations to mimic current sentiment, fears and realities. We did this by producing timely content and analysis, by thinking outside of the box on what client relationships, value-adds and contracts looked like, and by launching a Diversity & Inclusion Committee to build a foundation for awareness and change. It also meant ensuring we were producing the best work of our lives, as competition in our industry skyrocketed as marketing budgets were pulled back. If we weren't performing above average, it meant we were vulnerable. I believe practicing this agility is a forever change. The ability to retool efforts and plans, be proactive in communications and focus on short-term responsiveness to issues instead of relying only on long-term planning that has predictability attached to it is a requirement of every company moving forward.

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events

### Prioritizing Digital Channels & Personalization



**Holly Pavlika**  
SVP, Corporate Marketing, Inmar

Our 2020 Marketing Plan basically went out the window when the pandemic hit. Scheduled campaigns were put on hold while we pivoted to partnering with Product Marketing to address sudden shifts in the marketplace. Faced with serious disruption, we made it a priority to push out “what’s next” thought leadership through a variety of webinars, videos, white papers and a content hub focused on helping clients and prospects understand how to deal with myriad pandemic-driven challenges and what the future might look like. We actively leveraged our data to drive press mentions and, as a result, surpassed all of 2019’s coverage by July 2020. We prioritized video thought leadership and during H1 put out close to 50 videos — a dramatic increase and even more than we had originally planned. In a quarantined world, putting a human face on your company is critical for building the trust that so many are seeking. And while it’s instinctive for companies to pull back spending during difficult times (we put our scrappy hat on as well), we put more paid media behind different campaigns and the positive results were almost immediate.



**Ian Ferguson**  
VP, Sales & Marketing, Lynx Software Technologies

Pre-COVID, most of our lead generation came from live events. With the events industry’s implosion, we quickly had to adjust to make up for the leads we expected from tradeshows. We don’t feel virtual tradeshows are a fit for us or our audience so are investing more in webinars and account-based marketing. We have had to focus significantly more on repurposing content, converting anything non confidential in a customer proposal into blogs, FAQs, market-facing PowerPoints, etc. Our approach can be thought of as bringing a customized event experience to customers. We are curating content for key customers with customized webpages, technology demos and webinars. We have started using video much more and are likely to replace traditional FAQs with video “how to’s.” One side benefit has been that news sites will host some of these videos if they are about industry trends. The other adjustment has been investing in partnerships with influential companies that provide compelling, complementary technology. Engaging with large companies is incredibly time consuming (and sometimes frustrating!) but we feel the credibility and the increased market outreach we receive are worth the effort.

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events



### Jenn Davis

#### Director of Corporate Marketing, Grand Rounds

Events are a key channel in our Marketing strategy. The first half of the year is what we lovingly refer to as “conference season” where we sponsor marquee employee healthcare events to build awareness and generate leads. When COVID-19 hit, we were days away from flying cross-country for our largest sponsored event of 2020. We had to quickly pivot into a virtual-only strategy and get really creative in translating our usual in-person branded experiences via Zoom, On24, etc. While COVID-19 unraveled much of our existing plans, it also presented an opportunity to do what we exist to do: democratize healthcare and be a trusted information source for healthcare issues. We decided to bring Grand Rounds “to the world” by exploring new-to-us channels and content, including a mini video series on return to work strategy, weekly Facebook Live “ask me anything” with our Chief Medical Officer and contributed bylines by our medical director. This has led to unprecedented inbound media inquiries for our clinical expertise — we secured the most broadcast coverage in company history all within Q1 2020, including two TODAY Show segments.



### Zack Grossman

#### VP, Marketing, North America, FIGR Inc.

The pandemic has impacted human behavior in a way that we would have only seen progress over decades or perhaps as fast as a few years in the cases of some technological shocks to our societies. Operating in the blossoming legal recreational cannabis category, which had only just begun its journey in developing and understanding consumer wants/needs/desires, many of us marketers were just beginning to get a reliable glimpse of behavior and data on how this category would work. The pandemic both interrupted and accelerated our learnings; with brick and mortar retail disruption we saw consumers flock online, accelerating the need for robust information both on owned properties and partners sites to support the purchase decision. With no or little face-to-face interaction along the purchase journey, our content and distribution of that content needed to adapt. As the pandemic will inevitably continue to shock the way we do business, we have needed to be prepared to reach our consumers at new and different points along their purchase journeys in different mediums.

## Communications Pivots & Lessons Learned from Recent Events

### Reimagining Team & Company Culture



#### Alex Grant

**SVP, Revenue & Business Development  
at LIVEKINDLY**

We have not only had to pivot our selling strategy but had to alter our approach to team communication and connection when we moved to working remotely. One of the things I am most proud of is the culture we built internally on all my sales teams during COVID-19 while at Overtime. I wanted to maintain the support we shared so I created a daily 30-minute check in and themed the days for an opportunity to be together — apart. My wife, a trained yoga teacher, led us in a guided class to kick off the week with “Mediation Mondays.” We gathered for Zoom “Workout Wednesdays.” Fridays were “Brand Fam — Cribs Edition” with tours of our teammates home offices, introductions to family and pets. I also encouraged my team to entertain clients virtually, sending coffee or lunch ahead of meetings and this was a creative way to not only meet, but connect with clients. The strange thing is, we not only looked forward to this time, we actually got to know each other better. We definitely found the silver lining in an otherwise challenging and isolating time.



#### Brendan P. Lewis

**VP, Communications & Corporate Affairs, Away**

2020 has seen such a surreal confluence of external events that caused so many to throw communications away and start over. A global pandemic, rightful attention on social inequity and violence — on top of the sideshow that is the 2020 Presidential Election — is just the start. Many brands were forced to pause, look at their place in the world and know when to keep quiet and when to speak up. We’re no different. Authenticity is more important than ever now that social issues are at the forefront. Brands need to decide what they truly stand for — not just what they sell. These causes all must be ingrained in the company DNA, not just reactionary. Anyone can make a simple donation and to treat it as being socially aware invites further scrutiny. In fact, the first group to call you out might very well be your employees, which could invite additional negative attention with other audiences. Don’t take our current environment as a time to think about how to weather the storm. Think about it as a way to recast the inner workings of your business.

# Communications & Public Relations for a New Era

While some of the social, economic and political issues of 2020 are simple ethics and easily supported by a clear majority, many are extremely complicated and multi-layered. Despite that, many businesses and brands have stepped up and taken a stand. At a minimum, they have revised their narratives, outreach tactics and how they engage with their multiple stakeholders. They are considering what their customers are going through and what they want to hear, not just what the business wants them to hear.

The events of this year have also ushered in more personalized, human-forward Marketing and Communications efforts — video, Account-Based Marketing, curated content. These are engagement strategies many companies have been contemplating but were finally compelled into adopting due to buyer situations and sentiment, not to mention increased global competition and noise.

To thrive in a continuing landscape of uncertainty, companies cannot just sell a product. They cannot just create content and tell stories. The pendulum between brand storytelling and performance-focused Marketing, must balance out. Companies must tell emotive stories that connect them to their multiple audiences through channels and mediums that reach their target where they are (physically and psychologically).

Data shows that people want to buy from companies their values align with; those with amazing stories about where they've come from and what good they're doing. At its core, this is what PR and Communications is all about: building trust and audience through engagement strategies that resonate because they match a brand with what its audiences genuinely care about.

Businesses who thrive going forward are the ones who talk and act in harmony with and in the context of their customers' concerns, values and priorities. This is how our disciplines will help businesses win — by tying organizations to things their audience truly cares about and reaching them in highly targeted ways.

## Ready to break through?

We'd love to hear from you at [shiftcomm.com/contact](https://shiftcomm.com/contact) or [contact@shiftcomm.com](mailto:contact@shiftcomm.com)

# SHIFT/

## About SHIFT Communications

SHIFT is an integrated communications firm that operates at the nexus of art and science to help brands break through and thrive. We leverage data and analytics to engineer the who, what, when, where and how behind programs. We harness deep human insights, empathy and expertise to craft compelling narratives and campaigns that connect on a personal level, and then use advanced targeting to get them in front of the people who matter most. Established in 2003, SHIFT is an AVENIR GLOBAL company representing global brands and emerging category disruptors in the technology, b2b, healthcare and consumer sectors. Learn more at [shiftcomm.com](https://shiftcomm.com)

1. American companies spent years in an economic boom. Then the coronavirus hit, May 2020, CNBC <https://cnb.cx/2ZA9xn9>
2. Padilla Spotlight Study [Omnibus survey], December 2019.
3. Meltwater Explore Keyword Search [computer software], September 15, 2020
4. Report: 83% of millennials want brands to align with them on values, 2020, PR Daily <https://bit.ly/3hsobUv>