Public Agency Guidance for a Post-COVID-19 Communications and Marketing Response

June 2020
Overview

Since COVID-19 shelter-in-place, public transportation agencies are experiencing unprecedented operational and funding challenges, while customers are facing extremely heightened health concerns about travel, transportation and mobility options. Transportation departments, municipalities, toll facilities, mobility providers and transit agencies are striving to provide services, recognizing that people will now make daily decisions based on health and safety considerations.

This white paper provides guidance for transportation agencies and organizations on how to assess public perception, adapt to new conditions, and transform communications and marketing to meet the new needs of customers, travelers, motorists and passengers. To build public confidence, transportation agencies are taking a systematic and operational approach to provide services with customer health at the forefront. Public touch points will include, but not be limited to, transit stations and vehicles, tolling facilities, motor vehicle services, park-and-ride lots, rest stops/areas, travel plazas, bicycle and pedestrian amenities, ferries and passenger piers.

COVID-19’s ease of transmission, the long asymptomatic exposure period, and the concern about a resurgence of the virus are issues that will factor into people’s daily decision-making. Personal choices will be made based on an individual’s level of perceived safety and the transportation option that poses the least potential risk. These decisions will be more important for customers who are vulnerable, elderly, disabled or have fewer mobility choices.

Public agencies will need to be flexible and nimble in defining their organization’s role in what may be a dramatically altered post-pandemic transportation system. For instance, people who have options to work from home may choose to continue doing so, possibly resulting in less reliance on transit. Public hesitancy of using transit may also mean more people driving personal vehicles.

For others, simply visiting a state motor vehicle office may be a health concern and they will want more online options. Additionally, use of rest stops or travel plazas could see a decline as freight-haulers, delivery services and motorists want to limit their exposure in public places.

Public agencies cannot assume what public perception will be. They must ask and listen to understand customers’ concerns, psyche and attitudes pre-COVID-19, during COVID-19 and post-COVID-19. Establishing a baseline understanding of pre- and post-pandemic attitudinal differences will enable public agencies to make reasoned and logical decisions in engaging their customers.

The Need for New Guidance

Broad behavior-change communications and marketing guidance, supported by and endorsed at the executive level, can help a transportation agency identify and begin to implement needed shifts in strategy and messaging at the appropriate time. Market research will be needed to understand how travelers and public transportation customers’ beliefs and attitudes about travel use have changed and continue to evolve.

In addition, beliefs and attitudes about travel modes/frequency and facilities should be studied regarding differences between populations with varying socio-economic status, with particular attention paid to diverse populations, disadvantaged populations, car-free families, people with special needs, elderly and others. Effective two-way dialogue must remain at the heart of a sound public engagement program, even when public agencies are pushing forward with quick-action active transportation projects that assume to benefit minorities and disadvantaged populations.

Importantly, organizational and staffing changes, such as appointing a health ombudsman or ambassador, may be part of this strategy for some agencies to further gain the public’s confidence that decisions are being made based on science and medical advice. Ensuring the team has the right skill sets and expertise to manage this shift in communications needs will be critical.
Timing

Guidance should be specific to the appropriate phase so that strategy and messaging matches the situation at hand:

— **Pre-COVID-19 Period**: The baseline for understanding strategic concerns and approaches, many of which may need to continue alongside new strategies. For example, public concerns about safety, service reliability, infrastructure maintenance, mobility options and bus service changes or cutbacks will not disappear simply because COVID-19 has moved to the forefront.

— **Acute COVID-19 Period**: The crisis period—how are agencies responding to feedback expressed by customers and evident in media stories? Best practices could be identified and disseminated, as is likely happening on an ad hoc peer-to-peer basis.

— **Waning COVID-19 Period**: The unpredictable period in which some employees return to work and discretionary trips increase, but the economy is still far from normal and health concerns are still top-of-mind when people use or consider using transportation options. This may be the appropriate time to launch new communications guidance.

— **Steady-State**: What some have called the “new normal”—a period when the economy reaches an equilibrium, and the level of service transportation providers can offer—and the public desires—bears more apparent. At this point, health concerns are likely to linger, but recede in importance. Market research, including focus groups and polling, will need to continue to understand changing beliefs and attitudes. Some of this market research could be done at a national level, supplemented by local research to test the most effective approaches and messages for individual services or projects.

---

**Health-Focused Communications Recommendations**

**AGENCY LEVEL**

— Permanent establishment of a health advisory panel consisting of medical/public health specialists.
  - This group of professionals could include internal staff and advise on transportation agency initiatives related to health.
  - Joint promotional and educational webinars, sessions and meetings could be held to educate customers and the public.

**FOUNDATIONS OF GOOD COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING**

Transportation agencies must strategize and plan for where they want to be and how they want to get there.

— Strategic communications, customer service and marketing plan
  - Establish a new plan or revise the current plan

— Crisis communications plan
  - Establish a new plan or revise the current plan

**COMMUNICATIONS/CUSTOMER SERVICE/MARKETING INITIATIVES**

— Consider a medical liaison/ombudsman service for customers to contact.
  - Consider this post to be available for all news media and public information interviews as well.
  - Contact information would be listed on collateral and promoted.
  - The contact could be someone outside of the transit agency. For instance, it could be from a public health organization or a new position.

— Provide hygiene/health monitors.
  - These would be trained staff placed randomly, possibly anonymously, on transit vehicles or at facilities to monitor for staff and customer adherence to physical distancing or other requirements.

— Communications and marketing teams could develop a medical task force of specialists to confer with (local hospital, medical professional, etc.) on a regular basis to fact check content, and provide quality assurance/quality control.
  - Identify other necessary skillsets to prepare for more public engagement through online and digital means, such as:
    — enhanced social media presence on more platforms producing more robust engagement,
    — online meetings tools, options and systems, and
    — enhanced visual and digital tools and capabilities.
Sustained Efforts

— Market Research: Conduct a situational analysis to determine how the public and customers are feeling about mobility options, services and facilities in light of COVID-19.

  ▪ Focus on specific areas of interest to the public agency. For example, transit agencies would look at areas with ridership lows, and city-level agencies would look at increases in micro-mobility alternatives.
  ▪ Understand the equitable differences in the audience. Determine rider/public characteristics (segmentation) that may be influencing certain areas (ex: socio-economic, race, education, geography).
  ▪ Conduct focus groups to gather insight on beliefs and perceived risks:
    — Customers
    — General public
    — Advocacy groups
    — Community councils/municipalities
    — Area businesses
    — Neighborhood organizations
  ▪ Disseminate surveys to gather insight on beliefs and perceived risks:
    — Customers
    — General public
    — Neighborhood organizations
    — Businesses
    — Para-transit and disabled advocates
  — Focus Groups (online) and surveys to establish initial baseline, then check the pulse over time.
  ▪ Potential questions:
    — What was your primary transportation option prior to COVID-19?
    — What will your option be after COVID-19?
    — Did you have an option for a different transportation choice prior to COVID-19?
    — What was your biggest concern about your transportation choice prior to COVID-19?
    — What will your biggest concern be after COVID-19?
      — Becoming ill
      — Family becoming ill
      — Being unable to work
    — When some restrictions are lifted, what mode will you choose for transportation?
    — When all restrictions are lifted, what mode will you choose for transportation?
    — When a vaccine is approved, what mode will you choose for transportation?
    — When treatments are successful, what mode will you choose for transportation?
  — Would your level of trust and confidence in our agency increase if we had a formal relationship with a medical/health care provider to help us with the health aspects related to disease and cleanliness? (rank between 1-5, with 5 being highest).
  — Rank the cleanliness of our facilities/stations/vehicles/buildings/offices before COVID-19? (rank between 1-5 with 5 being highest).
  — If you ranked this item between 1 and 3, would that prevent you from visiting or using those facilities/buildings/offices when restrictions are lifted?

Tools, Tactics and Initiatives

— Invest in and enhance the agency’s online presence and online meeting options and tools.
— Re-evaluate all agency promotions, media and collateral, including websites, to determine the appropriateness of images depicting physical distancing and emphasis on small gatherings.
— Increase and augment social media content, engagement and online presence.
— Enhance direct mailings and other home/business targeted strategies to reach people where they are (and now more than ever they are at home).
— Sponsor more health-related events with local health care partners, including joint messaging, public presentations and sponsorships.
— Highlight health professionals as passengers for use in collateral and visuals.
— Highlight and honor front-line transit workers for use in collateral and visuals.
— In educational materials and campaigns, review the end goal and expected results, then measure it.
— Rethink and refine the agency mission, goals and objectives to include a personal health component, which is different than a safety component.
— Emphasize cleaning and sanitization programs and frequency.
WSP USA's communications and public involvement practice includes nearly 50 communications professionals in 23 offices throughout the U.S. Our staff works on all types of infrastructure and planning projects, including some of the largest transportation programs in the world. This team has expertise in everything from executive communications and management structure to environmental justice outreach and social media. We have extensive experience in authoring national research on best practices for communications strategy, social media and online engagement, effective messaging and stakeholder outreach. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our staff have helped clients and project teams transition more than 70 public meetings to online/digital options, advanced communications efforts for accelerated construction initiatives, and organized several remote strategic/crisis communications multi-day workshops.

ABOUT WSP USA
WSP USA is the U.S. operating company of WSP, one of the world’s leading engineering and professional services firms. Dedicated to serving local communities, we are engineers, planners, technical experts, strategic advisors and construction management professionals. WSP designs lasting solutions in the buildings, transportation, energy, water and environment markets. With almost 10,000 employees in over 160 offices across the U.S., we partner with our clients to help communities prosper.

KEY CONTACTS
For more information on inclusive public engagement during COVID-19, please contact:

Darrel Cole  
Managing Director,  
Communications and Public Involvement  
WSP USA  
+1 225-678-1076  
darrel.cole@wsp.com

Shane Peck  
Deputy Managing Director,  
Communications and Public Involvement  
WSP USA  
+1 517-823-8291  
shane.peck@wsp.com

CONTACT US
WSP USA  
ONE PENN PLAZA  
NEW YORK, NY 10119  
+1 212-465-9600  
wsp.com/usa