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The COVID Crisis Gives Public Diplomacy Teams the Chance to Experiment ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *Neil Simon is vice president of Portland-based Bighorn Communications. He has held public diplomacy leadership roles for the U.S. government and international organizations. He is currently managing a six-year public diplomacy project funded by the EU aimed at strengthening EU-U.S. relations. This blog post does not express the official views of the European Union.*

If necessity is the mother of invention, the current health crisis certainly gives public diplomacy teams a chance to reinvent. Those who seize this moment will not only stay on track with pre-COVID-19 public outreach, but they may create new pathways for engagement they otherwise may not have explored.

As weeks of stay-at-home orders have become months of an economic lockdown, I recommend three actions for organizations to reinvent their public diplomacy during this crisis:

1. Remain engaged with your target audience, regardless the platform.
2. Plan long-term, but build in flexibility.
3. Use the time to test your creativity.

The European Union Delegation to the United States has showcased flexibility with these three approaches, furthering US relationships while working from home. The prime example from the EU has been the wholesale digitalization of their annual in-person open house timed with the EU's founding Schuman Declaration, 70 years ago this year.

Remain engaged with your target audience.

The days of quarantine are proving lonely for many. People crave connection and are now going stir-crazy seeking experiences to help them do anything to even digitally go beyond their four walls.

The EU answered the call May 9 creating one of their most complex and versatile digital diplomacy engagements, boldly reminding their US audience the EU was still here for them. In line with social-distancing, the EU converted their typical one day event into a month of activities, kicked off by a 90-minute broadcast special hosted by Ambassador Stavros Lambrinidis, featuring seven Members of Congress, two mayors, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, former mayor Pete Buttigieg, NBA players from Latvia, chef José Andrés from Spain, an astronaut from Denmark, and CEOs from EU-based companies who have transformed their US operations to produce personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer.

Beyond the broadcast ("Stronger Together: Aiding the Recovery" garnered 23,000+ views),

the EU rolled out a suite of digital events, including a virtual tour of an Italian art exhibition, cooking demos from embassy chefs and custom playlists. The #HomeWithEU campaign reached 1.6 million people through May 13.

Beyond entertaining and building community, diplomatic connections are also needed more than ever on the policy front. Those who received early spikes of coronavirus cases (Italy, for example), can be a guide to those who came after.

The EU has not only convened donors worldwide to help hasten the development of a vaccine (raising \$8 billion), but they are also exercising their multilateral leadership to build a greener economic recovery, and help city leaders worldwide compare notes on how they transitioned from various phases of the pandemic. The EU's International Urban Cooperation has arranged a series of webinars focused on mobility and public health, for example, including leaders from Boston, Bogota, and Brussels contemplating the future of urban transportation post-Covid-19.

Plan like this will last forever, but be flexible hoping it won't.

I'm hopeful for a safe and swift economic re-opening, but there's mounting evidence that at least a degree of social distancing will last longer. The hiatus for larger in-person events – a fixture of public diplomacy activities – will likely last into 2021. That's why I recommend organizations plan long-term under the current scenario. This means being agile to adjust programs. Just as the EU pivoted their major open house from in-person to online, organizations who grow during quarantine will be the ones who show similar flexibility – able to re-activate in-person events as quickly as they down-shifted to virtual ones this spring.

Don't sit in neutral waiting for the global situation to change around you, change the dynamic yourself. Fill up the calendar. If you don't, months will pass you by and your organization will have little to show for it.

Use video.

Once a nice to have, video is more essential than ever. Invest in training. Give principal speakers the tools to succeed in this new climate. Think about the most effective communicators, and emulate them. Network news shows and late night comedians have converted basements and spare rooms into full broadcast studios. Use funds saved from venue rentals and catering and invest in the tools to help you produce the content experiences to match your brand in this moment.

Seize the moment.

A silver lining to the current crisis is a somewhat leveling effect of time and access. Hard-to-get big name partners have far fewer competing travels and the ask for them to be with you in-person is suddenly a much lower-level commitment on their part. It just may be easier to get a "yes." The Embassy of Spain held a Q and A on Twitter with a Charlotte Hornet NBA player who otherwise would be winding down an NBA season or possibly tied up in a playoff run.

Get creative.

The pandemic also provides license for experimentation. We are still in a grace period, where lower-quality video and lighting is forgiven in the name of “everyone’s adjusting.” This period won’t last though. Audiences will differentiate and soon enough low-quality content will look like what it is lower quality. So, try out that new iPad camera set up while you can, play with that new app to work out your work flow, and by summer you’ll have kinks smoothed out.

Looking to showcase your country’s companies? Do a series of product demos. Lean into how you and your partners are problem-solving at a time of immense problems, as Israel is doing with their digital Hackathon launch and the United Kingdom is doing with the role of AI in fighting the coronavirus. Show what you *can* do in this time of so much “can’t.” Germany, for example, is giving tours of its currently inaccessible embassy.

When it comes to creativity, the EU’s curation of digital experiences is right on the money here, made possible by such a high level of cooperation among its member states.

By staying engaged with your target audience—continuing to ask them questions and host dialogues, planning long-term despite uncertainty, and testing creative limits—public diplomacy teams can follow the example the EU showed this May and ultimately help people feel more connected in a time of isolation.
