

Engagement in the Age of the Coronavirus

Americans continue to engage on issues they care about. Be sensitive and smart but don't stop communicating with supporters.

Many Americans suddenly have time on their sanitized hands.

As America works to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, citizens in more than half the states are dealing with stay-at-home orders and residents in other states are voluntarily isolating. People are spending even more time online, not only to stay informed but also to pass the time. Facebook [reports](#) that online usage is soaring, especially in areas hardest hit by the virus. For example, Facebook app use is up in China 70 percent from a mere month ago. But the move online is not restricted to Facebook. Teachers are moving their entire curricula online, while many churches have begun streaming Sunday services. And forget driving to the gym for your aerobics class, you go to Zoom for Zumba.

It is no different with advocacy. While advocacy has long been making the transition to the digital world, the sudden need to social distance ourselves from neighbors and coworkers has boosted the transition to social media at warp speed.

“Much of the work of politics was already being done digitally,” Alan Greenblatt writes in [Governing.com](#). “All of that – the texting and the videos and the tele-town halls – will accelerate this year.”

As people go online, they are also engaging politically. We have seen social engagement increase across a range of platforms as more people are sheltering in place. Facebook and highly targeted digital advertising are working well to recruit supporters for issues they care about as they look for a break from the 24-7 news about the spread and consequences of the virus.

While online engagement is increasing, it's important to know that the traditional communications methods are also resurging in effectiveness. We've found that it is suddenly easier to get people to answer the phone and engage in a conversation about issues important to them. As Greenblatt notes, “if they're stuck at home, they might even look at mail pieces.” Suddenly, telemarketing and direct mail are back in vogue.

So, with people isolated and looking for ways to interact, (as long as they don't have to be within spitting distance from someone else), here are a few tips that we think can help effective advocacy in the age of coronavirus.

1. **Be Aware of (Rapidly Changing) Facts on the Ground:** Be sensitive to local impacts of the virus in the areas you seek engagement. Monitor the situation and sentiment closely, as things may change rapidly.
2. **Be careful not to connect coronavirus directly with your issue:** With the backdrop of the issue and local sentiment in mind but without directly discussing the virus, tell people what you want them to know about your issue and give them something they can do (which right now is probably *not* asking them to contact government officials).
3. **Step up your digital game:** Americans are increasing their social media engagement and you should answer the call. While being careful not to be overly aggressive, now is not the time to stop your efforts. Executed carefully, now may be the time to increase the tempo of relevant social media content. Video is especially in demand.
4. **Blend old and new tactics:** People's sudden desire to connect makes them more willing to answer the phone or open your mail. As older voters – those most likely to attend political events – are confined to their homes, they may need a combination of off-line and online tactics to keep them engaged. Phone calls that help encourage online participation may help. And while it may be counter-intuitive to think that digital natives like millennials read mail, the research shows that they will read mail that is interesting, genuine and appears important.
5. **Set reasonable goals:** Attempting to influence government officials overwhelmed with literal life and death decision-making will be counterproductive. Be careful with calls to action. Consider activities such as engaging voters to sign petitions (which can be released at a later date) rather than communicating directly with officials now.

6. **Reward Engagement:** Where possible, acknowledge and reward advocate involvement. With more people paying attention, make sure they feel their investment was worth it. Find ways to show appreciation. Express that people made a difference by getting involved – so when things return to “normal” they will be more likely to stay involved.
7. **Overcome Concerns of Older voters:** Older voters – those most likely to attend the local meet and greet who will likely be stuck at home the longest – will have a harder time adapting to participation online. Yes – grandma uses Facebook, but she is less likely to entrust her email to a website she doesn’t know. Make it easy – and provide reassurance that their privacy and online safety is respected and protected.

While it may be true that many Americans are sitting at home eager for distraction, the underlying factor is that Americans, in times of crisis, want to come together to make a difference. For the coronavirus, that means social distancing and staying home. Using a combination of online and traditional engagement tactics, we can help them make a difference in other issues they care about while they are there.

