

# Practical Marketing Communications Techniques for SMEs in Crisis

A Handbook for Small and Medium Scale Enterprises to Thrive in Crisis

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# INTRODUCTION

The Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) fall under business categories that are susceptible to being heavily affected when there is a crisis. This is due to their nature; being limited in different ways which may not be favourable in hard times.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic for example, affected many SMEs who are still trying to find their feet out of the crisis.

*Marketing Communication, also referred to as Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) uses elements strategically such as digital marketing, public relations, business development, direct marketing, advertising, sales promotion and market research to communicate the products and services of a business in order to convince potential customers to patronize them. This can be done directly or indirectly.*

This book was written with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind, and how it affected several SMEs negatively. The purpose is to provide techniques for businesses owners, managers and key stakeholders on how to use Marketing Communications as a tool to bounce back in the post crisis era and beyond by turning their losses into gains.





# INTRODUCTION

Crisis can hit unawares, at a time when most businesses are not prepared. The contents of this book will be beneficial when used as a transformational tool to help an ailing business in crisis. With the right Marketing Communications strategies, businesses would be able to:

- *Communicate properly to key stakeholders in a way that gives them confidence, and empowers them to continue to be part of business operations.*
- *Manage expectations and changes that may occur as a result of restructuring.*
- *Acquire strategies that will help the business remain competitive in the market.*
- *Retain employees, clients and other partners.*
- *Manage internal and external Reputation/Brand management.*
- *Set the business on the right track to be profitable through the appropriate sustainability practices.*

Eventually, the lessons learnt in crisis must be used to transform the business to come out stronger and more resilient, by producing solutions that would be beneficial in the long term.



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# ACKNOWLEDGING THERE IS A CRISIS - ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Crisis in a business can be as a result of many factors internally or externally such as loss of key staff and decision makers, financial crisis, reputation damage, recessions, and global pandemics. Any of these or at worse a combination of them can be enough to drive a business into crisis, because they would have a direct bearing on the operations of the business. The first step to finding a lasting solution and turnaround for a crisis is to admit there is one. Honesty is key. This is where the role of leadership comes in, and to be able to handle this step successfully, they should do the following:

- **Adopt a transparent approach in engaging with key stakeholders such as employees, clients and business partners.**
- **Be proactive and show leadership.**
- **Take responsibility of handling the crisis successfully, even if it was caused by external factors. It shouldn't be a time to apportion blame, but rather to view the crisis as an opportunity to bounce back better.**
- **Allow feedback from stakeholders.**



# ACKNOWLEDGING THERE IS A CRISIS - ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

- **Navigate effectively through the crisis with a strategic Marketing Communications Plan.**
- **Prepare for a new, and possibly disruptive journey ahead. Adapt to the new normal and be flexible towards change.**
- **Master prioritization. Learn to put important things first. Avoid distractions. Lean from other business turnaround stories for inspiration.**
- **Get moving.**

Research to find out the root cause of why this crisis has hit the business.

Was it avoidable or not?

Has it happened before?

If so, how did other SMEs come out of it successfully?

The approach to their success stories may be different, as factors such as technology change over time.

However, it is likely the principle to overcome will remain the same; and so, your business can learn from this.

# COMMUNICATING CRISIS TO STAKEHOLDERS

It is important for leadership to officially communicate the crisis situation to key stakeholder as early as possible, whether they are already aware or sense it.

In communicating crisis, the following techniques would produce results:

- Set up a crisis response team immediately made of leadership and representatives from each department to assist in steering affairs of the team.
- Develop clear, concise and consistent goals that are measurable and timebound.
- Communication flow in every area of the business whether internally or externally must be given priority.
- Psyche up the team to prepare to adapt to possible changes; allocate roles, be receptive to change and to work together to achieve its successful implementation.
- Be willing to embrace digital technology as a transformational and turnaround tool for the business.



# OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

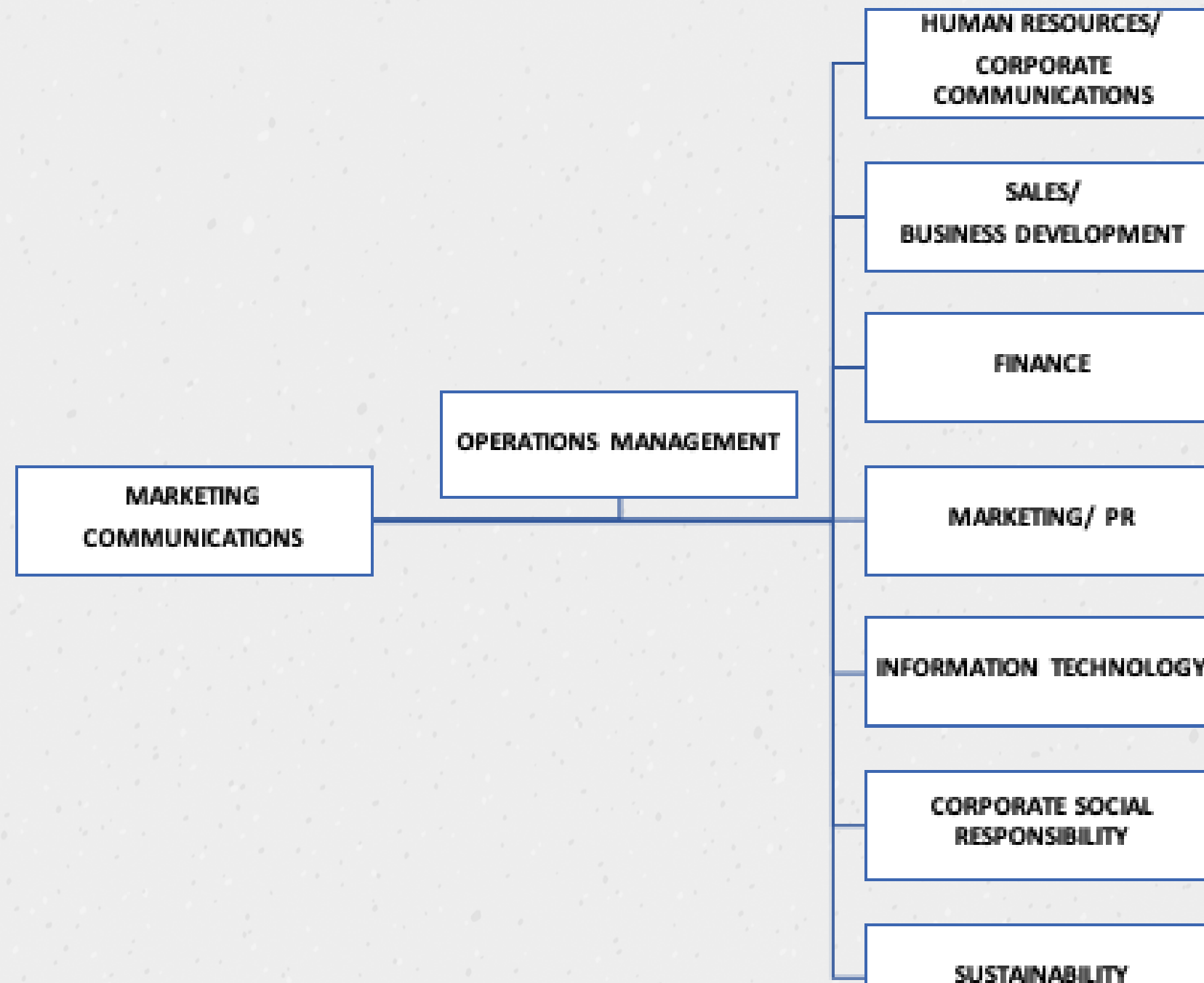
Operations Management takes into account the whole set-up of how various departments of the business interact strategically to produce the desired outcome needed to remain profitable and sustainable.

The main aim here will be to use Marketing Communications to achieve the following:

- Manage resource inflows and outflows, in a timely and cost-effective way using the appropriate communications approach.
- Ensure quality product or service delivery internally and externally.
- Reduce waste and errors.
- Manage profitability, and ensure sustainability.



# OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT



**\*Channeling Marketing Communications to Business Teams through Operations Management**

# OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

## Action Plan

An effective Marketing Communications strategy, when integrated properly will be a turnaround factor for the operations of any business in crisis, and can be adapted in the following ways:

- Integrate technology/digital solutions into your operations. Crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic would require an increased shift to remote working, depending on the nature of business. Working arrangements should be properly communicated internally, and schedules given to external partners. All these will be done in a cost-effective way, with education for stakeholders to prevent a possible resistance of change.
- If the change in operations will affect customer experience, it should be in a positive way. They should first hear about the expected changes through the omni communication channels provided by the business, instead of from other sources.
- Focus will be how to maintain and increase market share even in crisis. This is possible, and should be communicated as a goal to all stakeholders through the crisis response team.
- Lack of proper communication is a big factor in a malfunctional supply chain management system. This can be rectified and at best prevented by understanding your business and coming out with an inclusive, clear and concise communications strategy.



# OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

The biggest challenge for the Operations Management team will be how to find opportunity, and capitalize on it during the crisis for long term gains. They would have to include all key stakeholders in this process using action and persuasive communication, to bring everyone onboard onto the new transformation.

# HUMAN RESOURCE & CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Where welfare of employees is involved, the Human Resource department will have a lot of work to do to improve things from the inside out during the period of crisis and beyond. There may be unavoidable decisions to be made such as layoffs, furloughs, reshuffling and transfers. How does Marketing Communications help in managing changes that are needed to transform a business in crisis? The focus will be on:

- **Employee wellbeing during the crisis. Employees are a brand's best advocates and mouthpiece. During such periods, there are bound to be psychological feelings of uncertainty, fear and anxiety. Communicating with them should be with empathy using emotional intelligence.**
- **Engaging employees by creating a two-way dialogue and building capacity in order to clearly understand their needs and concerns during the period of crisis. Use this medium to communicate the plans and actions taken by management in the interest of the employees.**



# HUMAN RESOURCE & CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

- **How to go about change management. Communication will include preparing employees for change and assisting them to improve their skillsets, especially those that are transferable. Products and services that businesses offer can become obsolete. However, skillsets should not. This is because once the business decides to introduce a new product or service, the skills of the employee should still be relevant.**
- **A clear communication plan on the hiring process, as well as exit policies.**

Modern HR practices also focus on customer experience, which need appropriate communication guidelines.

# HUMAN RESOURCE & CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

## Action Plan

- Develop a Corporate Communication Crisis Plan which would include regular communication of current events to employees; hence preventing suspicion, fear, and anxiety.
- For those who have to work remotely, there should be easy flow of information amongst them through clear communication channels.
- It would be a good idea to include in the strategy content that appreciates the efforts of your employees publicly through videos, posters and stories. Allow them to share their positive experiences for example, by blogging for the business.
- Show the world that you care about the welfare of your employees, and doing it genuinely is one of the best boosters for branding your business.



# SALES & BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Every properly managed business thrives when sales are high. During a crisis, this may not be so especially when the source is external affecting everyone else including customers and clients.

The strategies that a business puts in place towards Sales and Business Development will be vital in overcoming the crisis. It is important to use Marketing to drive sales in order to gain new clients, and strategies to retain them along with existing ones.

Customer retention is important here because during that period, sales may not be coming in. Marketing Communications will help businesses to:

- Communicate products and services to its target audience through best content management practices.
- Use Market Research to provide data on the market situation, competitor analysis, and preferences of customers at that time.
- Promote engagement between the business and its customers, as well as improve brand and reputation management.

# SALES & BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

## Action Plan

The Sales and Business Development team should work closely with Marketing Communications during this period to:

- Generate new leads and build business database.
- Establish new business relationships and work on retaining existing ones.
- Improve service delivery, and communicate with customers on the same through emails and other digital platforms. Aim to get their feedback through engagement techniques such as surveys.
- Communicate to customers and business partners that you care about them and the society as a whole. This is not the period to appear as though you are only interested in driving sales to help the business in crisis. Neither should you communicate greed as a motivation by increasing prices, as these are bad practices for the image of the business.

At this stage, sales should be strategic.

If it is a crisis affecting everyone such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people will be reluctant to spend on what they consider as non-essentials and are typically afraid to commit.

Therefore, communication is key here.



# FINANCE

What can Marketing Communications do for the Finance and Accounting Team during crisis?

A lot!

Sales may not be coming in like before, depending on the nature of the crisis.

Partners and clients are likely to focus on cutting cost, yet your business also has fixed costs to pay.

There may be additional expenditure associated with operational changes such as remote working (buying new laptops, technology and so on).

Through effective Marketing Communications, the finance team will receive support on:

- How to get the right data on customer behavior and trends, and this will be a deciding factor in pricing.
- Deciding on the appropriate budget, if any to promote Marketing Communications activities of the business. There is likely to be a hard discussion whether to cut marketing and advertising costs but this is tricky, and should be approached cautiously.

# FINANCE

- Creating a proper communication pipeline that will bring out critical information needed to deploy solutions to manage direct spends and expenditures. Outflows might exceed inflows in these times, so one of the important aims of the Finance Team will be to cut costs.
- Taking advantage of exemptions that may be made available during the period of crisis. This information and requirements can be made possible through market research. The COVID-19 pandemic has for example seen governments giving out tax holidays and stimulus packages that businesses can take advantage of.



# MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR)

All Marketing Communications strategies, will be coming from this department hence making it a central point of contact for the business in crisis.

One topic that is of interest is whether or not this department should be allocated a budget, especially during a financial crisis.

The choice ultimately rests on the business' management, however in making a case for allocating a budget, the following should be considered:

- **The worst time to go silent on your partners and clients is during a period when your business is going through a crisis. This is because doing so will only leave room for speculation; leading to negative perceptions which may come back to hurt a business making efforts to thrive.**
- **Every functional business works to gain, maintain and increase their market share. Being mute with no Marketing or PR activity will give your competitors the better part of capitalizing on your silence to outpace you, by having a better market voice and reputation.**

# MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR)

- **Marketing experts can help boost online presence of the business with the use of simple strategies such as Search Engine Optimization. This will help in brand awareness and drive in sales.**
- **Online activity sees an increase in usage on a daily basis, and every business must take advantage of the digital drive to transform, grow and thrive. This is why allocating a budget must include salaries for Marketing and Public Relations staff who will in addition to other things manage your online brand and reputation. In other words, they should not be necessarily laid off during a crisis, unless their roles are outsourced.**



# MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR)

A proactive Marketing Communications team can drive an ailing business to recovery through the right strategies and best practices.

- There are many activities a business with low Marketing or Advertising budget can engage in at little or no cost: Make use of Digital Media; and the goal should be to educate, inform and engage effectively.
- Update the business website regularly. Add features that would help inform and engage your audience such as Live Chat, FAQs and frequent blogs. This can be done at minimal costs by Marketing Communications experts internally or externally.
- Social Media content is king when it comes to relevant and cost-effective Digital Marketing, depending on how you use it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms such as Facebook lowered their rates for ads. SMEs in crisis ought to take advantage of such offers. For those with zero budget, making use of videos, posters and infographics to communicate details about their products or services is ideal, and should be done consistently with relevant content. Be sure to add call to action buttons.

## MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR)

- Live streaming, vlogs, organizing webinars and online conferences about industry related topics of interest will project the Company as an expert and do a lot of good for its brand, to the extent of driving in more sales. Doing this will also encourage audience engagement.
- Share your failure and success stories with the public. Businesses who do that are perceived to be honest and transparent. Aside that, your first-hand experience may also help other businesses that are in a similar situation.
- Provide regular updates to your customers and stakeholders. It Is better they hear things first from you rather than on Social Media or Press. Information travels very fast in the digital age, and having reputation/brand problems is not something a business already in crisis will be happy to deal with. Post relevant content that will reassure stakeholders. Most Marketers have graphic design and editing skills that will allow for consistency in branding.



# MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR)

- Information must be communicated through the chosen channels consistently. Preferably, the same spokesperson should do that on behalf of the business. Communicating well helps the business to connect properly.
- For PR, the focus should be on brand and reputation building. The team or spokesperson should be ready to engage media enquiries with the appropriate responses which will reassure stakeholders that you are still in business. PR is all about networking, and you may get press opportunities for free if you are well connected.
- Use live chat, instant reply messages on Social Media accounts, and emails to respond to enquiries in real time.
- Through market research and use of analytic metrics, data can be retrieved and gathered to understand consumer behavior. It can also be used to analyze competitors and formulate strategies to bring in more business.

# INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT)

Information Technology and Communications go hand in hand in digital transformation for businesses.

The Marketing Communications and IT Teams can liaise to ensure:

- Effective internal communications via technology. Whether staff are working remotely or on location, they should be able to access free flow of information on their devices wherever they are. This is an investment a business in crisis should make to ensure communication flow at all times.
- Through Market Research, information will be provided to understand customer data and analytics. This will help in strategic planning within the operations of the business.
- The use of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software is very helpful in information management for businesses, and so investments should be made to acquire them. Using such technologies will help in business continuity strategies. It is the responsibility of management to ensure that everyone is in the business loop, and properly networked. Conferencing technology is increasingly in demand due to remote working and the preferred new normal of engaging online.



# CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Businesses can still demonstrate purpose in crisis; however, it needs to be communicated well to avoid misinformation.

People do not forget what you do during crisis, especially in a case where the whole society is affected.

Whatever you do will always stay in the minds of people whether for good or bad.

A clear example is when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Vendors who increased the price of hand sanitizers astronomically got very negative press especially on Social Media. People expressed their intentions not to buy from these brands even after the pandemic was over.

You can be opportunistic in business without being greedy.

The following will help when communicating Corporate Social Responsibility of a business during crisis:

- If the business does not already have one, then it needs to draft a Corporate Social Responsibility Policy. If it already has one, then it should be tailored to meet current demands.
- A business's Corporate Social Responsibility must be genuine, and though it is included in Marketing Communications it should be for the purpose of honestly giving back to society and communicated as such.

# CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Even if a business has financial challenges, it should be able to give something out. It can launch drives that will rally support for several initiatives for the environment, human rights or philanthropy. It can also link this support to purchases without increasing prices. For example, by buying their product a certain percentage of the total amount will be dedicated to supporting an initiative. Another example is launching a book donation drive, with the business serving as the rallying point for people who wish to be part of the initiative.
- Whichever initiative the business chooses to be associated with, it should be in line with its vision and objectives. It must also be engaging to promote enough awareness.
- After a successful CSR campaign, the business should be able to embrace the media, and provide an honest account of the project details.
- This shouldn't be a one-off. The business must make efforts to be committed to the initiative it chooses and it will become part of its positive brand.



# SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability for businesses that want to thrive is built around economic, societal and environmental factors. In creating strategies that will enable a turnaround, these three factors must work together and blend perfectly with business objectives.

A good example for a business in crisis is to use recycling disposables in its day to day operations.

This would help improve the environment, minimize costs and save society tons of waste.

All these can be communicated well in a transparent and honest manner that would serve as a point of education to the public to do same or similar.

Proper communication can also attract investments and partnerships that may be interested in aligning with the chosen initiative.

This will provide a positive image for the business brand; an essential for turnaround from crisis to thriving.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theresa R. Fianko is a Marketing Communications Consultant who has worked with a number of SMEs worldwide for over a decade.

Her entry into the corporate world has taken her into various sectors such as Aviation, Media, Finance, E-commerce and Architecture.

Apart from Marketing Communications, Theresa has overseen several roles working in these organisations; giving her an in-depth understanding and first-hand experience on how departments and channels work together to achieve business goals successfully.

When the COVID-19 pandemic stuck globally, she was working as a Manager and Editorial Director for a Digital Media firm categorized under an SME. With the possibility of being affected adversely by the crisis, she resolved to find opportunity instead. This successfully turned around an otherwise plight for the good of the business, and by extension herself.

Motivated by her experience, she decided to write this e-book for free to help other SMEs who may be in crisis at this point in time.





To download this e-book for free, please visit: <http://diasporadigitalnews.com/resources/>

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