

# Kith

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS & REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

# COVID-19 CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAYBOOK

MAY 2020

[www.kith.co](http://www.kith.co)

## Best Practices and Insights Following Week 8 of Kith's COVID-19 Communications Webinar Series

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### **Kith**

*/kiTH/ noun*

a cadre of peers who shape opinions and attitudes while instilling sophisticated habits of action.

# Introduction

Starting on March 23, 2020 Kith presented a series of weekly webinars designed to share best practices and insights to help leaders more effectively communicate with their public audiences in a time of unprecedented change, disruption, and turmoil.

I was asked in one of the sessions if I thought that the use of words like “unprecedented” were cliché and overused in describing the impacts of COVID-19 on society. To an extent that is true – every day new headlines and social media posts scream at us with the latest on a very serious situation that has impacted all of us.

However, as of May 14 - the facts remain: over 297,491 people around the world have lost their lives, with more than 84,136 of them in the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center. The World Bank estimates that 40-60 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty as a result of this pandemic. All of us have experienced a loss of some kind – both personal and professional. We also know far too many friends and colleagues who have experienced loss.

In situations as serious as the one we face today, effectively communicating with each other and with broader audiences – your team, investors, business partners, policymakers – is paramount. All of us want – and deserve – honest, factual, and timely information.

While responding to a pandemic is new for most of us, our team at Kith is experienced in helping leaders and communicators navigate the many challenges that come with a crisis. As we have done over the last eight weeks and through nearly 10 hours of webinars, we are committed to sharing our best insights, recommendations, and resources with you during this difficult time.

Thank you for your interest in improved strategic communications.

**Bill Coletti**  
CEO, Kith



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# MANY CHALLENGES AWAIT

Although the gradual loosening of some social restrictions may indicate that the worst is behind us, we at Kith believe the public environment for leaders of every kind will become even more challenging in the coming months. COVID-19 and the ensuing global recession will trigger a shakeup across all aspects of the economy. Investors will rebalance their portfolios, consumers will evaluate buying decisions, donors will reassess their giving, policymakers will create new laws, students and families will think through what constitutes a meaningful education, and talented team members will seek companies able to provide the best career opportunities.

More fundamental, the dynamic of how people view the role of organizations of all kinds in society is changing at an unprecedented pace. The private sector is under pressure to create value for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. NGOs are counted on to fulfill their mission in a way that solves a pressing societal issue. Educational institutions must adapt to a world where the structures for teaching are upended – yet the expectations for learning are at an all-time high. Organized institutions – governments, labor unions, and faith-based institutions – face high expectations from their constituencies to not only align with their values but actively advocate for them.

More than ever before, these complex and often overlapping desires are likely to be translated into concrete action by policymakers, funders, community activists, and voters.

In other words, the public is taking a fresh look at all institutions throughout society. Those able to show they act with purpose, do things the right way, and create long-term value will be sought after and rewarded. Those that don't will be shunned or regulated out of existence. The judgment imposed will be swift and decisive.

# Using the Playbook

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Kith's COVID-19 Communications Playbook is a collection of the five Best Practices and five actionable, "How Two" recommendations that have been shared and discussed in our COVID-19 Communications Webinar Series. Our hope is that by organizing this information into a single document it serves as a helpful resource to you in the coming weeks and months.

While much of what we have discussed in our webinars and shared in this Playbook is specific to COVID-19, the fundamentals can be applied in any situation. Most important – Always Be Communicating. A crisis is not a time to avoid engaging with or communicating with your audiences. Proactive communications in every crisis is paramount. Failure to do so puts your brand and reputation in serious jeopardy, the consequences of which will take years to overcome.

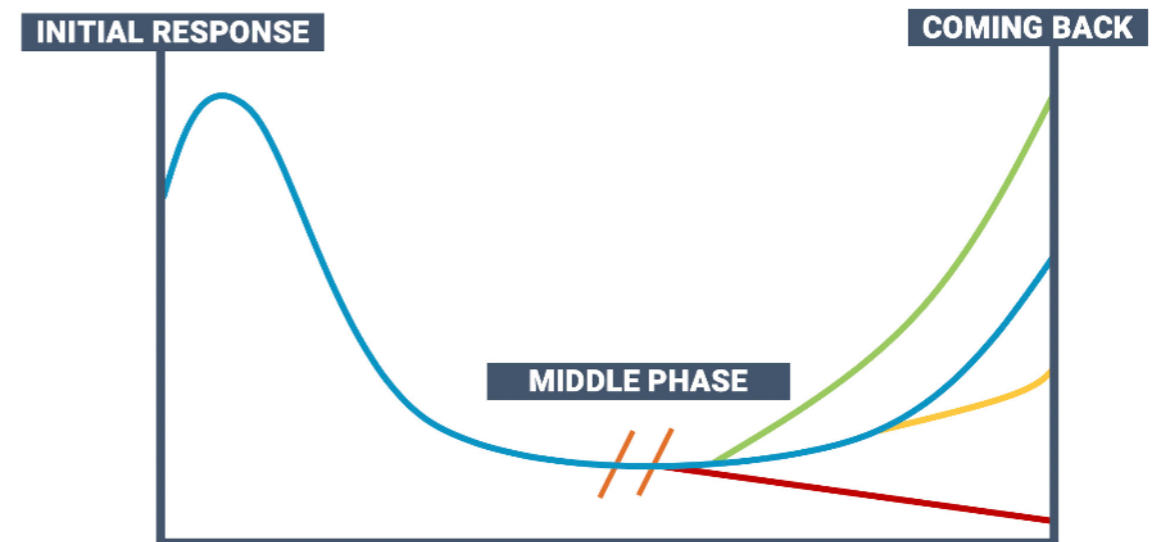
We encourage anyone who is struggling with either their response strategy to COVID-19 or their going-forward strategy to reach out and connect with us. We are in this together. We face one common crisis. Our goal is to be of service to our "kith" and generously help as many people and organizations as we can.

# The Trajectory of a Crisis

In Kith's COVID-19 Communication Webinar Series, we talked a lot about the communications trajectory in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the size and complexity of COVID-19 it must be looked at as a constantly evolving crisis at two levels:

- 1 "Macro" – the impact on society as a whole, countries, and the global economy
- 2 "Micro" – highly focused crises that directly impact the brand, reputation, and bottom line of companies and organizations



The road to "coming back" will look different for different companies.

This trajectory is applicable in both the Macro and Micro levels. As a society in early May 2020 we appear to be nearing the end of the Middle Phase. We have – hopefully – made it through the Initial Response and now have an eye towards Coming Back.

At the Micro level the trajectory varies from situation to situation. Organizations, especially those with global operations or a vast supply chain such as airlines or retailers, have been dealing with COVID-19 for months. Others are being pulled into it as the crisis unfolds. Institutions of higher learning are adapting to a new way to educate students, managing through the admissions process, and facing the reality of international students being able to return to campus. Another sector in an immediate crisis is the food industry with a rash of outbreaks at food production facilities. And, finally, there are others who are likely to experience a crisis in the coming months.

Regardless of where you or your organization is on the continuum of this trajectory, steps can be taken to best manage the crisis. While there is not a one size fits all approach for every crisis, Kith has identified five best practices and five recommendations that are applicable in every crisis situation.

# BEST PRACTICE #1:

## The 10 Principles to an Effective First Communication

The first, most important, step in responding to a crisis is an initial response to all audiences considered important – your team, partners, customers, investors, policymakers, etc.

The initial response sets the tone and tenor for every decision and action that follows. A successful first response builds a relationship of trust with the public. An unsuccessful one sows the seeds of doubt in the minds of the audiences. An organization in crisis that does not properly execute its initial response will constantly find itself reacting and on the defensive rather than being proactive and acting with purpose and clarity.

### 10 Principles to Creating an Effective First Communication

No matter the nature of a crisis, there are 10 Principles to follow when creating a first communication:

**1**

#### Always Be Communicating

Never assume a single response is enough – constant and ongoing communications is paramount

**2**

#### Communicate Through Multiple Channels

Email is not enough – people consume information through different channels & platforms (video, social media, news outlets, etc.)

**3**

#### Be Congruent

Your actions must match your words

**4**

#### Weigh Stakeholder Expectations

Know what your stakeholders expect from you – you may need to balance competing demands

**5**

#### Have CEO Share Initial Message

A CEO-led response shows this matter is being taken very seriously, and video is a powerful tool to demonstrate a CEO's leadership & commitment

**6**

#### Write Usable Talking Points

Talking points that are simple, concise, and factual – with no speculation – will keep everyone “on message” and focused on the task at hand

**7**

#### Write Good FAQ's

Developing good FAQ's forces communicators and leaders to think through all relevant scenarios and distill a lot of information into something actionable

**8**

#### Create a Guide for Managers

Provide those on the front line with a guide of what to do and what to say helps them respond and helps you stay on message

**9**

#### Make Sure Updates are Dated

Use date and time stamps to ensure effective management in the flow materials (statements, talking points, FAQ's, etc.) as they are developed

**10**

#### Utilize Intranet & Website

Place relevant materials that have been created for the initial response on internal and external facing platforms so people can easily find them

# RESOURCE #1:

## How to Create an Effective Statement Through “6+2”

At Kith we use a 6+2 approach in creating effective statements that convey facts, expertise, and purpose. An effective statement resonates with audiences that matter and leaves them convinced that the company, institution or organization is acting rationally, thoughtfully and respectfully.

1

### Empathy

Express sincere, genuine care for anyone affected

2

### Authority

Demonstrate that an executive has ownership of an issue (such as a CEO video)

3

### Transparency

Be real about what is happening & how it is impacting people & your organization.

4

### Decisiveness

Define what specific steps are being taken to address the situation

5

### Reassurance

Think about who is hurt, angry, or scared – and what can be done to help them

6

### Consistency

Explain how, when, and where future updates will be provided

### And Two “Pluses”:

#### +1 Make a Hero

Especially during COVID-19 give shout outs to your team, business partners, first responders, health care professionals, and educators who have stepped up and made a difference

#### +2 Give Back

If possible, find a way to give back to the community, either through time or money

For more information, click [here](#) to visit the blog post we recently wrote on this topic.



# BEST PRACTICE #2:

## Start Preparing Now

# 5 QUESTIONS TO ASK

The potential for crises coming from COVID-19 is endless. Just because your organization has not experienced a crisis in the last few months does not mean you are out of the woods.

Instead, now is the time to redouble efforts to anticipate and plan for a crisis.



### Downloadable tools from Kith:

- [SPE Risk Framework](#)
- [SPE Risk Mapping Worksheet](#)
- [Impact vs Likelihood Worksheet](#)

- 1 What are my high impact risks?**  
Those with the potential to have the most consequential outcome on the brand, reputation and bottom line
- 2 What are my high likelihood risks?**  
Those with the greatest chance of occurring

- 3 What is the best- and worst-case scenario for each risk?**  
It is helpful to get diverse opinions as you do not want to be Pollyannaish or overly cynical – an honest, fair assessment is most needed
- 4 Who are the audiences most impacted by each risk?**  
Prioritizing audiences goes hand-in-hand with executing the response strategy – and don't forget those audiences closest and most important to you (such as your team and customers)
- 5 What would a reasonable person expect a responsible organization to do in addressing each risk?**  
Same as the scenario planning – best honest and fair about what is reasonably expected from an organization such as yours

# RESOURCE #2:

## How to Know When to Go Back in the Water

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As communities and businesses begin the slow process of re-opening after the initial COVID-19 impacts, now is not the time to assume the worst is over. You face more work than ever, and your normal will be different. Assume you will engage in both proactive and reactive communications strategies from now on.

There will come a time when the work managing the crisis peaks and the focus returns to “running the business”.

The COVID-19 crisis happened with extraordinary speed. Resuming our lives will take much longer, be very complicated, and require a lot of communicating.

Get comfortable with knowing there will never be a universal “all clear” signal. Confirmed cases and deaths, unfortunately, will increase. The mixed messages from federal, state, and local regulators will go on. Scientists and politicians will continue to disagree. There will be more protests.

### Knowing When to Go Back in the Water

Much of the uncertainty is far beyond your control. But you can solicit advice from people you trust, take their opinions to heart, and execute on a thoughtful, proactive communications strategy. Taking advice from a range of people you trust will help you balance the reputational risks of re-opening too soon versus the financial risks of re-opening too late.

# Before you jump in, here is a checklist of actions to take:



## Anticipate Questions

- People will ask you a lot of questions involving “How, What, When, and Why?” – be prepared to answer them in a forthright manner.



## Listen to Your People

(such as your team, business partners, members of the community)

- Check in with them and get a sense of how they feel about where your organization stands – their feedback will tell you if it is time to move on or if you have more work to do



## Meet Face to Face

- Listening to people is a lot more productive when done face to face – even over a video screen



## Communications Planning

• Treat the communications around decisions to open with the same care and consideration as a First Communication outlined in Recommendation #1, specifically:

- What audiences matter most?
- Are you being consistent and congruent with previous communications and commitments?
- Who are your best spokespeople (don't forget the CEO)?
- What are the best channels by which to share the message?
- What is the appropriate cadence of communications?



## Closely Coordinate with HR, Legal, and IR

• Issues to address will include:

- Changes to benefits (health insurance, sick leave, access to mental health counseling, retirement plans, etc.)
- Benefits that are covered / not covered by insurance (such as testing for the virus by your team and/or family members)
- Team members that are sick or think they are sick
- Team members that are scared about getting sick
- New protocols (and related trainings) needed to adapt to changed working conditions
- Demands for increased transparency around working conditions and health of the workforce
- Impact on earnings and profitability
- Changes to the risk projects of the organization and the immediate and long- term impact on its financial performance



## Scenario Planning

- Use the feedback received from your meetings and conversations to create a scenario plan for all reasonable contingencies

# 5 Steps to Help Make a Hard Decision

Nothing about communicating in this environment is easy. Here are 5 steps developed by Kith to help communicate hard decisions, be it when to re-open, reduce a workforce, or revamp an established way of doing business.



# BEST PRACTICE #3:

## Show Humanity

Any crisis – especially COVID-19 – has a human element to it. If the crisis did not impact the everyday lives of people, it would not be a crisis. And, a crisis always involves communicating difficult decisions – a moment at which showing humanity is paramount.

As Chris Gidez, our colleague at Kith, said that the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, “You need to communicate with impact, not just share information.”

We are all human – especially in a time of crisis. We want to see and hear information that acknowledges the stress and anxiety we all are facing. We want the facts and the truth. We even want to know how we can help.

Research by Kith shows that those companies that engaged with audiences in the early stages of COVID-19 in a genuine, humble and authentic manner had the most effective responses. However, these messages were a rarity rather than the norm. Rather than communicating with impact, too many companies just shared information.

### Fortune 25 COVID-19 Communications Lacking

Strategic reputation and communications advisor, Chris Gidez published an [article on LinkedIn](#) where he examined the COVID-19 related communications of the Fortune top 25 companies, and rated them on a 1-4 scale:

#### Great:

Communications that spoke to the audience in human terms, acknowledging the stress, anxiety of the reader, and also offered helpful information.

4 COMPANIES

#### Meh:

Communications provided helpful information but lacked humanity. (“Meh” = unimpressive, indifferent.)

12 COMPANIES

#### Poor:

Communications lacked any humanity, was dated (more than two weeks old), and was not terribly helpful.

6 COMPANIES

#### “Horrawful”:

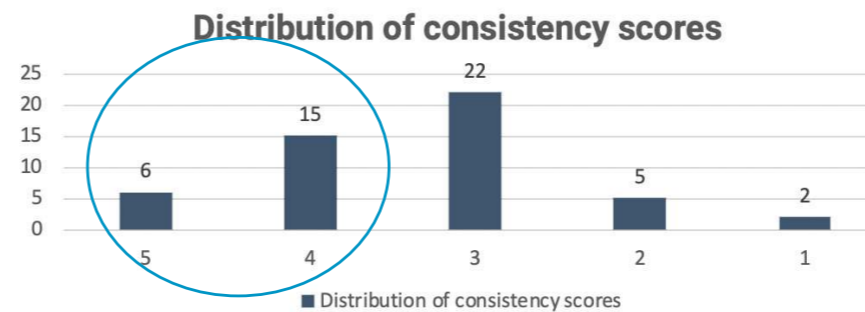
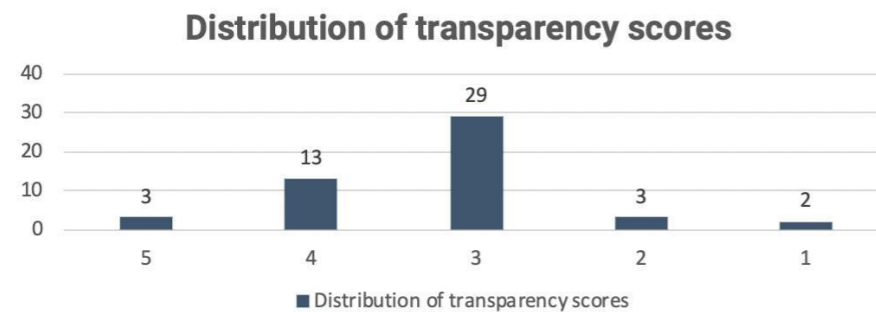
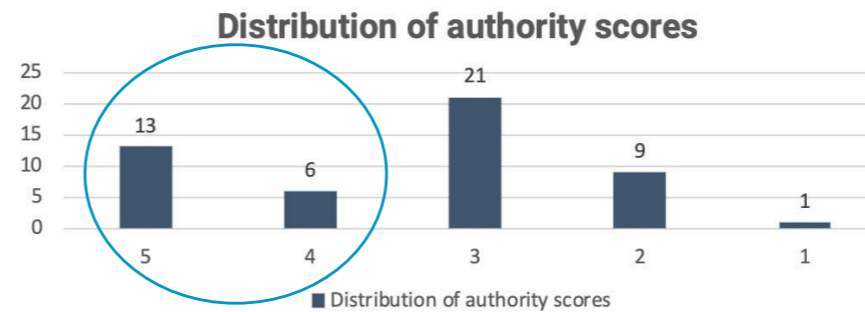
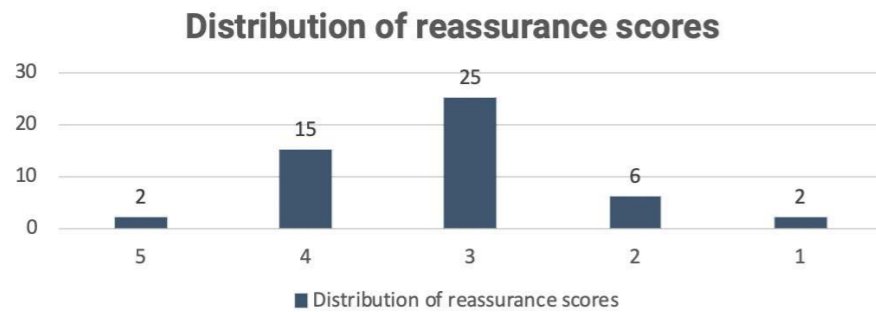
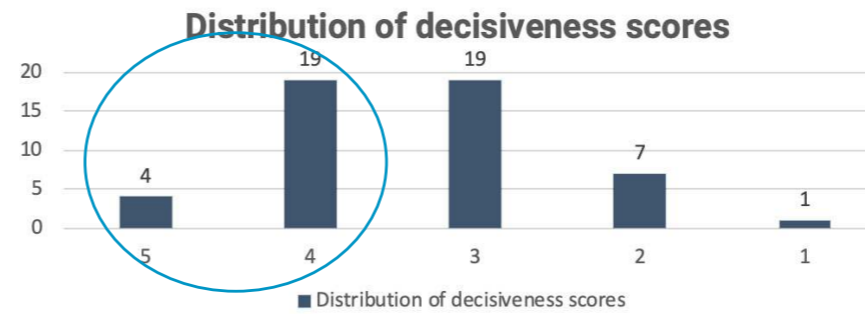
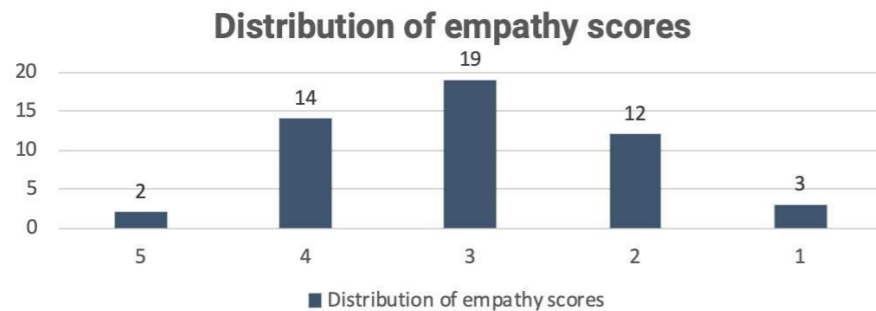
Either the company had nothing on its home page or the content was so terrible as to be embarrassing. Reputation malpractice.

2 COMPANIES

# “MIDDLE MARKET” COMPANIES ALSO HAVE ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENTS

We then went deeper and looked at 50 “Middle Market” companies in states most impacted by COVID-19 (California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas) to see how they communicated in the early stages of COVID-19. We analyzed each response by filtering it through our 6+2 Framework outlined on page 8.

We found these companies did well in showing decisiveness, authority, and consistency in their communications. However, the traits critical to showing humanity – empathy, reassurance, and transparency – were not as strong. As a result, companies missed an opportunity to engage with audiences in a genuine manner and in a way that builds trust and confidence the company is committed “to doing the right thing.”



Each company was given a score of 1-5 across each criteria based on their COVID-19 messaging

Under this ranking, 5 is the top score a company could receive in a category.

The three traits most companies excelled in are circled in the graphs to the left.

A best in class crisis communications strategy incorporates each of these six traits at all times. Failure to do so increases the risk of audiences having doubt, probing for more information, or writing off the company as untrustworthy.

# RESOURCE #3:

## How to Act With Humanity

Acting with humanity is about creating value that transcends your business and, in the process, engaging in an authentic dialogue with audiences. A one-way communications strategy of facts and figures will not display humanity, and it certainly will not build trust and credibility.

Consider those companies that failed to act with humanity and those that did:

Missed Opportunity	Seized Opportunity
Bird – E-scooter company laid off over 400 team members in a 2-minute Zoom call. The CEO was not present for any part of the call.	Valencia College – Administrators made direct calls to 40,000 students to check in on them. It turned its website into a resource for students new to online learning.
Hobby Lobby – Attempted to rebrand as an essential vendor of medical supplies in an effort to stay open. It then closed and furloughed most of its staff after being in violation of stay-at-home orders.	Bank of America – Pauses financial advisor training for 650 people and reassigned them to handle calls from customers and small businesses.
Subway – One of its stores offered free masks to customers that bought two or more sandwiches when medical personnel were facing a severe shortage of masks.	University of Florida Health – Its anesthesiology team devised respiratory masks made from existing hospital materials. The masks are more effective than the N-95 masks.



## Additional Ways to Show Humanity

- Find a celebrity or public figure to send message of goodwill to your team
  - \* It does not need to be an A-List actress or an NBA star – there are plenty of respected teachers, leaders, and entrepreneurs in every community
- Create a “How To” video or video series for your customers and/or your team
- Create a sense of community with your teams
  - \* @home video #fortheteam
- Have a team member / ambassador (someone well known but not in leadership) share a message to highlight something really compelling in the organization



# BEST PRACTICE #4:

## Communicating to Create Value

In a crisis as dramatic as COVID-19, society goes through a once-in-a-generation assessment of what matters, and what does not. Those organizations that are creating value in ways small and big – Bank of America, Valencia College, University of Florida Health – stand to gain. Those that see the crisis as a marketing opportunity or an event to be disregarded are at serious risk of losing brand value, reputation, and money for decades to come.

### Value has three elements:



#### Leadership

The ability to see opportunities and act upon them



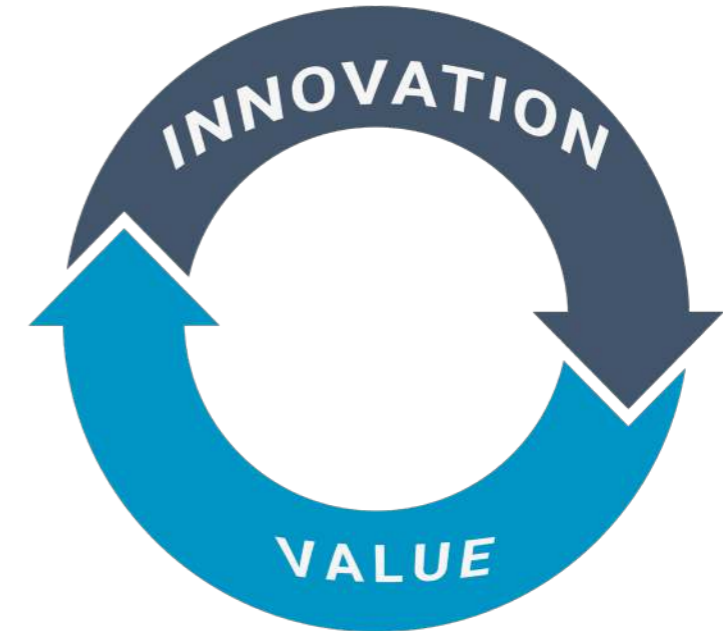
#### Relationships

Collaborating with your audiences to create value in ways that can scale to something transformative for the greater good



#### Creativity

Thinking “outside the box” and implementing new and improved ways of communicating, innovating, and building



The challenge of creating value is maintaining a balance between Consistency and Innovation. An organization must stay true to its purpose. But it must innovate to adapt to a world undergoing radical change.

Consider just a few of the changes to our daily routine that were unthinkable on January 1, 2020 yet are here to stay for the foreseeable future: teleworking, designated shopping hours, and sanitation measures such as facemasks in public spaces.

For more information, click [here](#) to visit the blog post we recently wrote on this topic.



# The Imperative of Conducting a Policy Inventory

There are five reasons why you should use COVID-19 as an opportunity to conduct a thorough policy inventory:

-  Get ahead with messaging and mitigate risks of negative reaction to keeping a “changed” policy, or reverting to an older policy
-  Manage disappointment (e.g., your team may be able to work from home only under specific conditions, eliminating “thank you” pay incentives)
-  Apply lessons of what worked and what didn’t
-  Utilize “changed” inventory to update business continuity and crisis plans
-  Capture the historical record

## Before You Do This, Take a Moment to Consider Your Audiences

The most important question to ask you and your team is the same as the scenario planning done in preparing COVID-19 communications efforts: **“What would a reasonable person expect a responsible organization to do in this situation?”**

Think about how people will react to a change (or a continuance) in a policy:

- If it is something that they will be excited about, then it is an opportunity to build reputational goodwill – and now is a great time to do that
- If it is unclear that they will understand, then it is an opportunity to educate and demonstrate the value to them
- If you are disappointing them, then it is necessary to explain the decision even though it will be hard to hear

# RESOURCE #4:

## Questions to Ask During a Policy Inventory That Create Value

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When conducting a policy inventory, the work must be done through the prism of building value across the organization – the brand, the reputation, and the bottom line.

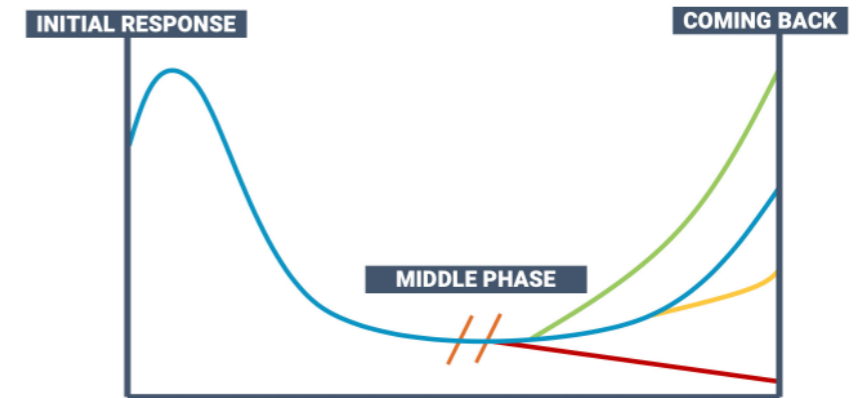
There are five important considerations to determine if changing a policy will create value:

1. Will it improve our customers' opinion of the organization?
2. Will it add value to our organization?
3. Will it open up new growth opportunities?
4. Will it help our team members do their jobs?
5. Will it differentiate us as an employer of choice?

# REMEMBER: What Got You Here, Won't Keep You Here

When organizations respond to a crisis, the actions and attitudes of their people follow the trajectory of the crisis.

- Initial Phase: People and teams give each other the “benefit of the doubt” – people are collaborating, setting aside internal bureaucracies and getting things done efficiently
- Middle Phase: The pace of work settles into a routine and people start to default to their old “turf” culture
- Coming Back: The decision to “get back in the water” and returning to how the organization operated pre-crisis



The desire to return to the “good old days” of pre-crisis life is understandable. However, that default mindset will stifle innovation and value creation. Use COVID-19 as a moment to take a hard look at what has – and has not – worked in your organization as you create value. Do away with what is not working and build on what is.

## Impact vs Doability Mapping

To help in determining what does, and does not, create value, the Kith team has developed a helpful worksheet to guide our clients in this decision-making process.

Click [here](#) to download the Impact vs Doability Worksheet.

# BEST PRACTICE #5:

## Always Be Communicating

The ABC – **Always Be Communicating** – framework is not just about pushing information to audiences. Rather is a strategic approach to all facets of a communications and reputation management strategy that effectively engages audiences in a dialogue. Doing so allows organizations to build a relationship of trust, actively listen, and gather valuable information that helps identify future risks and opportunities.

This approach to communications is more important than ever. More than any other recent crisis – 9/11, the Great Recession, or the Ebola pandemic to name a few – COVID-19 is forcing a complete and total reckoning across society. Our entire value system is being questioned and will transform significantly in the coming months and years.

The public perception of companies is on display more than ever before – and the good ones will rise to the challenge.

Consider the findings by Edelman from its research of public trust during COVID-19:

**78%** find that businesses have a responsibility to ensure their team members are protected from the virus in the workplace and do not spread the virus into the community.

**66%** say that hearing from brands they use about what they are doing to respond to the pandemic is comforting and reassuring

**90%** say brands should partner with the government and relief agencies to address the crisis\*\*



In other words, the public has placed a high burden of expectation on the private sector to do the right thing. People expect their employers to keep them safe, they want to hear more about innovative ways in which companies create value, and they want the private sector to be leading the public sector in responding to the crisis.

\*\* Taken from Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report on COVID-19 and Sara Fischer, “Most believe employers over government on coronavirus,” [Axios.com](https://www.axios.com/2020/03/16/edelman-trust-barometer-covid-19/), March 16, 2020.

# RESOURCE #5:

## How to Always Be Communicating

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# A-B-C

Always Be Communicating is a mindset that instills in communicators and leaders the paramount importance of staying engaged with the people that matter most to you and your organization.

Communicating is not a one-way street. Rather communicating is entering into a dialogue with others to understand their thoughts and ideas so you and your organization can be better and make better decisions.

# THE ONE QUESTION TO ASK



## Who would you rather be?

You can be like the leaders of Valencia College who, in a moment of crisis and disruptive change in how universities educate, took the time to call their students and see how they are doing.

Or, you can be like the leaders of Bird who, in a similar moment of crisis and disruption, held a two-minute video where hundreds of people were laid off.

# You May Want to Survey Your Audiences

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“ You don’t have to guess when it comes to crafting your next message.

Given the complexity of a crisis like COVID-19 and the disruption it is forcing on every aspect of society, now is an opportune time to consider using survey research to gain a detailed understanding of what is top of mind for your audiences.

## 5 reasons to conduct audience research:



Does your planned internal or external communication hit the mark?

How have consumers changed their usage or purchase plans due to the pandemic?



Is your product an appropriate one to be marketing during COVID-19?

Do you have an objective measure of how your team members are doing?




What groups “get” your messages – which may be missing them?

# The Traits of a Leader Who Is Always Communicating

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In advising communications leaders, CEOs, board members, public officials, and people with a genuine commitment to improving how they engage with others, Kith has identified the following traits of a leader who is always communicating:

<b>HUMBLE</b> Be willing to listen and take input from others	<b>GENEROUS</b> Be willing to share information	<b>AWARE</b> Know the situation in which you are operating
<b>ENGAGED</b> Get to know people and learn from their perspectives	<b>MOUNTAINTOP VIEW</b> Take the time to see the big picture	

## Most important: Wrong is Never Right.

It is common in a crisis for a communicator or leader to be pressured to spin a story or embellish the facts. At times, they may be told to lie.

Regardless of the situation, the truth is never wrong, and when the truth is the truth, we have an obligation to be vigilant and ruthless in our advocacy for that truth. Wrong is never right, and the best communicators and CEOs recognize this fact and put it into practice.

# “ GOING FORWARD

COVID-19 will pass. Despite the very real human tragedy of COVID-19, the belief at Kith is that thoughtful companies will communicate better to those that matter for having gone through this. But the next crisis is never far away. The world is becoming more complex and disruptive, not less.

If you and your organization have escaped relatively unscathed from COVID-19, now is not the time to relax. Now is the time to Always Be Communicating. Doing so allows you to identify, plan, and prepare for the challenges yet to come.



The image features a solid blue background with a subtle pattern of small white dots. A large white wave-like shape is at the bottom. In the center, a dotted white circle contains the text 'Kith' in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Below it, the website address 'www.kith.co' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

**Kith**

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