COVERING COVID-19
Amid the pandemic, brand journalists step up their storytelling

As this strain of coronavirus disrupts business and everyday living, organizations’ newsrooms are providing vital information to their targeted audiences. Here’s what you need to know.

By Jim Ylisela

A key tenet of crisis communications: Get ahead of the story.

Move, as quickly as you can, from reacting to the news—and to those controlling the narrative—to telling your own story. Not spin, but facts. Not just following the news, but leading the conversation.

That’s what brand journalists do. They cover their organizations and their industries with news, analysis and a point of view. They’re informing employees, customers, their industries and the broader communities they serve. And yes, brand journalism is filling the gaps for overextended news outlets.

It’s easy to tell stories when times are good. It’s crucial to do so in a crisis.

There’s certainly enough to cover. The current coronavirus, officially known as COVID-19, has led to travel restrictions, business disruption and employee nervousness, among other issues.

It’s a lot for communicators to handle, and it seems to all be happening at once.

Many of our brand journalism clients are doing really impressive work covering this story. I’ve had the privilege of seeing much of this work up close, and in real time. Take a look:

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts: *Coverage*

The *Coverage* news site is barely six months old, and the small but mighty staff is all over this story: Writer Michael Buckley is staying on top of the news by filing regular updates on this unfolding story, pulling from federal, state and local health sources as well as the medical experts at Blue Cross.

*Coverage* shared “one physician’s view” in a video with Dr. Katherine Dallow, vice president of clinical programs and strategy at Blue Cross. Managing Editor Jenny Miller wrote the intro.
A third story warned of the dangers of stigmatizing certain populations. Writer Lindsay Kalter reported that Asian communities are feeling the effects of fear and bias driven by misinformation.

Pittsburgh International Airport: Blue Sky News
If aviation is your business, you can’t help but cover the outbreak—and the response to it. The PIT crew is on the job, covering this fast-moving topic as it affects airports, airlines and the travel industry.

In last week’s top story, writer Matt Neistein reported on what airport maintenance crews are doing to protect travelers and staff.
University of Alberta: Folio

U of A, in Edmonton, is one of the world’s top research universities, and that research produces a lot of news. Folio Editor Michel Proulx has used his brand journalism site to reach a broader audience beyond the university community.

One story, written by staffer Michael Brown, reports on a university researcher who is developing a point-of-care diagnostic tool for COVID-19. Brown deftly explains all the time and effort going into the test; the new diagnostic tool could perform the same procedure on a paper strip, similar to a pregnancy test.

Your role in reporting on the outbreak

Nick Lanyi, RCG’s resident crisis guy, tackled the coronavirus topic in his recent New York workshop. His advice was to focus on the three C’s:
• Coordination. Connect your audiences to the experts and the facts, and be consistent in your messaging.
• Clarity. Use clear language. Explain the science. Tell a good story.
• Compassion. Communicate your values. Tell stories about people, including your own employees, whose lives and work may be affected by this illness.

So, who’s in the best position to cover this important story for your organization and industry?

Right! That would be you.

Jim Ylisela is co-owner and senior partner of Ragan Consulting Group. He specializes in brand journalism and building news desks. If you want help with your own editorial approach to the coronavirus, or help in general with your brand journalism efforts, you should start by talking with Jim. To set up a call, contact Kristin Hart at Kristin.hart@raganconsulting.com.