

Why Business Leaders Should Pay Attention To How Hospitals Rollout The Covid-19 Vaccination Campaign

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AURORA, CO - DECEMBER 15: (Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center warehouse material handlers Chico Martinez (R) and William Hager (C) transport a box containing a shipment of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to the hospital's pharmacy on December 15, 2020 in Aurora, Colorado. The Eastern Colorado VA Health Care System was chosen as one of 37 VA centers around the country to receive the vaccine because of their ability to store the vaccine at extremely cold temperatures and vaccinate a large number of people. (Photo by Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images)

As hospitals across the country receive their shipments of the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine, how they rollout and administer the vaccination campaign will provide important lessons about managing and communicating about a crisis. By paying close attention to how the campaign unfolds in their area—and how any problems or issues are addressed—business leaders can learn important lessons for when they are confronted with crisis situations at their companies or organizations.

Communication is going to play a huge part in the success (or failure) of the vaccine rollout, said public relations consultant [Beth Collier](#). “Medical experts (and politicians) have shown business leaders why effective communication is so crucial to success, and there will certainly be lessons they can learn from how the vaccine rollout is managed.”

A “Whatever It Takes” Mentality

The [Virginia Hospital Center](#) (VHC) is a 437-bed not-for-profit teaching facility in Arlington, Virginia that will begin administering the vaccines today. President and CEO [James B. Cole](#) said hospital officials “...decided very early on in the planning process to adopt a ‘whatever it takes’ mentality in response to the pandemic. When faced with a ‘crisis’ or challenge of this magnitude, any business leader has to decide their commitment and just how far they are willing to go to see a positive outcome.”

Cole said, “clear, open communication is a key component of VHC’s coronavirus response, one that has proved especially critical as we begin to administer the first round of vaccines. Keeping our staff informed about changes to procedures and the current state of the hospital has allowed us to pivot and make rapid adjustments as conditions shift each day. More importantly, it has created a true team mentality across our entire organization – something that would prove incredibly valuable for any business tackling a crisis.”

What To Look For

“Hospital administrators are experts at answering questions before they're asked,” said [Lane Kasselmann](#), managing partner of crisis management firm Greenbrier Partners. “Knowing your audience and meeting them where they are is critical for any communicator. This is especially true during a crisis or when introducing the audience to something completely new like a life saving vaccine rollout,” he said.

There are several important strategies and tactics that are often used in crisis situations that can be expected to be employed by hospitals and medical centers as they rollout the vaccination campaign.

- Communicate clearly, early, and often
- Manage expectations
- Establish priorities and deadlines
- Use every available communication channel—social media, mainstream media, websites, etc.
- Obtain all the resources that are required to address the crisis
- Keep people updated about the progress in addressing the situation
- Move quickly to address unexpected problems or issues

[Simon Elkjær](#), the chief marketing officer of [avXperten](#), an electronics retailer in Denmark, said, “One of the best lessons people in business can learn from observing hospitals and centers preparing to administer the vaccine is how they disseminate information and cater to a large group of people.”

The observations, he said, “will let business leaders see how to properly handle a large-scale crisis. Through this, they can learn what tone to take, what information strategies to implement, and what tools come in handy when dealing with such a huge problem.”

Start Conversations Early

Matt Dickson is vice president of product and strategy and general manager of Stericycle Communication Solutions where he works with hospitals and health systems including the [Greater Baltimore Medical Center HealthCare](#) to help them communicate with patients. He said medical facilities that have not yet received their supply of vaccines, should “Start Covid-19 vaccine conversations early—even if [they] don’t have all the answers yet. Engage patients by sharing what to expect and what you recommend, then begin gathering their questions and concerns.” This will help strengthen their communication plans and relationships with patients, Dickson noted.

Collier said, “people will be looking for answers to questions such as: How will [the vaccine] be administered? Who gets it first? Can I trust that it is safe? What do I need to do to stay safe after getting the vaccine? Why do I still have to wear a mask when I have the vaccine?”

But not everyone will be eager to get their shots and those who administer the vaccine program on the local level should be prepared accordingly. “Health systems and hospitals will likely encounter those who are hesitant about receiving the vaccine. Providing trustworthy and consistent information helps patients feel more comfortable and knowledgeable when making vaccination decisions,” Dickson observed.

The Right Strategy

A successful strategy for the local rollout of the vaccination campaign depends on how well organizations incorporate the needs and views of stakeholders (patients, the community, government agencies and officials, and other hospitals) into their communications plan, according to [Katarina Matic](#), director of public affairs at [Montieth & Company](#).

But “the strategy must go beyond what we know today, and consider what we do not know, and effectively communicate a response to the uncertainties associated with the logistics of distributing the vaccine,” she said.

“Hospitals and medical centers [will] play an important role in building confidence in the vaccine rollout and [should] have a communications plan that is flexible enough to accommodate a variety of needs by different communities.”

The Devil Is In The Details

In tackling a crisis, the details of how it will be addressed and resolved are just as important as the strategy and tactics. “But what’s being overlooked by many in this initial stage is the monumental administrative work associated with the deployment of vaccinations,” according to Lori Jones, president of provider market and chief revenue officer of Olive, which makes hospital software programs.

This admin work will include scheduling hundreds of millions of initial and follow-up doses; tracking patient engagement, side effects and outcomes; and reporting enormous amounts of data to state and government agencies, Jones said. “Properly administering this vaccine at a fast pace requires strong alignment across humans and technology.”

Preparing For Success

Based on [recent news coverage](#) about the rollout of the campaign, it appears many hospitals and medical centers are starting off on the right foot and were prepared before they received their supplies of vaccines.

Those preparations likely followed basic crisis management practices such as those below by [Robert Kelley](#), professor of management at Carnegie Mellon University's [Tepper School of Business](#). They are the same guidelines any company or organization should follow before they are confronted by a crisis.

- Be crisis ready. Have a crisis plan in place before a crisis hits. Do "fire alarm drills" yearly as if you were in a crisis.
- Know the ingoing and outgoing logistics of your company inside and out. Know its vulnerabilities to different kinds of external and internal stressors. Know what it can do and how much it can ramp up before it reaches its breaking point.
- Know how fast you can ramp up or down your workforce.
- Know your customers and how a crisis might affect them. Think about what you can do to help them in a crisis.

We’ll find out in the coming months how successful the rollout of the coronavirus vaccine campaign was—and the lessons members of the business community may have learned from it.