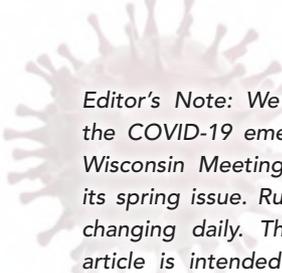


LESSONS LEARNED

How good communication protects people and saves events and relationships during a crisis.

By Ronnie Wendt





Editor's Note: We are in the height of the COVID-19 emergency in the U.S. as Wisconsin Meetings goes to press with its spring issue. Rules and guidelines are changing daily. The information in this article is intended to offer suggestions to help you through this crisis and as we recover in the coming months.

The coronavirus scare took everyone by surprise. No one foresaw event venues across the country closing their doors; restaurants offering take out only; waterpark resorts closing. No one imagined the President of the United States recommending gathering sizes of no more than 10 people.

In Wisconsin, as we go to press with this issue, Gov. Tony Evers has prohibited gatherings of more than 10 people, temporarily shutting down the meetings and event industry, in addition to countless hospitality businesses for weeks, if not months.

"The coronavirus caught us all off guard and we have had to learn as we go," says Terri Lynn Yanke, founder and CEO of Eventful Advantage in Madison.

Yanke experienced a flurry of cancellations amid coronavirus fears and restrictions. Though she describes the situation as less than ideal, she also says she views it as an opportunity to grow.

An event organizer since early 2000, Yanke is no stranger to crises. As a planner in New York City after 9/11, she remembers the struggle to keep events alive. "No one wanted to go to New York City after that," she recalls. "It was scary, and times were uncertain."

Later, she stretched her planner know-how again after the mass shooting in Las Vegas, where 58 people lost their lives, 413 people suffered gunshot wounds, and the ensuing panic injured another 398 people. "The Las Vegas shooting brought greater awareness about the need for security and security plans at meetings and events," she says.

Yanke sees the coronavirus as another lesson to learn. "The coronavirus is my third new territory," she says. "It will teach me new ways to handle the unexpected. We will know how to handle a future outbreak and will have planned for it."

PLAN AHEAD

As Wisconsin Center District (WCD) officials released plans on the proposed expansion of the downtown Milwaukee convention center, cancellations began rolling in amid coronavirus fears. The cancellation of the "Catholics for Trump" campaign rally, which the president planned to attend, quickly overshadowed news about the \$425 million expansion.

But WCD leaders stood ready as the coronavirus took over and tested their crisis communications plans.

"We had just spent the last three months updating and refining our crisis plan," says Sarah Maio, vice president of marketing and communications, WCD. "The crisis plan guided us in what we said and to whom and reminded us that our words really matter."

In "Crisis Communications for Events: Does Your Show Have a Plan?," Lindsay Krause, senior meeting and event manager at Special D Events, stresses planning crisis communication before it's needed. She recommends that crisis communications plans answer:

- Who needs to know the information?
- Who communicates to these specific audiences?
- Does each team member responsible for communications have all the facts and understand the situation?
- What is the best way to communicate the message to an audience?
- What is the timeline to communicate that message?

SET THE SCRIPT

As owner of Cheri Denise Events, Cheri Davis has planned events and weddings in Wisconsin and Chicago for over 10 years. She thought she'd seen it all but navigating mass cancellations over the spread of a novel virus was a first.

"I had to undo, prepare and reschedule at the same time," she says, noting everyone was in the same boat, which made things easier. "The virus didn't just impact events," she explains. "It affected everyone involved in those events, from the caterers to the entertainers to the venues."

She quickly saw how open communication worked to keep everyone informed during

a widespread crisis. In one case, Davis observed as corporate headquarters in another state cancelled a local Milwaukee event. The leadership announced the cancellation in the company newsletter, on social media and on its website. "That's how local employees found out corporate leaders had cancelled their event; the leadership didn't tell them directly," she says.

Davis recommends a more direct approach where leaders craft a message then share it with affected parties and other managers. "This ensures communication is consistent. People know what's been decided, why it was decided and the plan for the future," she says.

Consistent messaging became very important for WCD as the media storm raged over COVID-19. Maio recommends developing talking points and limiting who handles media communications.

"The Wisconsin Center District restricts who speaks to the media. It always starts with the CEO or the vice president of marketing communications, and only if they are unavailable, are others engaged," she says. "That has been helpful in making sure our message to the media stays consistent."

WCD leadership distributed information to staff so that employees knew what to say to clients about COVID-19. "They could change their name and the client's name on the memo, but the message needed to stay the same," she says. "It's also important to keep [emergency] correspondence concise. Send as much information as you can but don't overload people."

The organization also took big steps to protect people attending its events, but Maio shares their efforts meant little if managers failed to communicate them.

She explains WCD prepared for weeks as the virus made its way to Wisconsin. Crews rigorously disinfected facilities before, during and after events to lessen health risks for guests and employees. They doubled the number of hand sanitizing stations and posted guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). They then shared information about their efforts with everyone.

"We were very forthcoming with our staff

[and the public] that COVID-19 is serious, and we are not joking around," Maio says. "Their health and wellbeing, and that of their families, is our No. 1 priority. As the situation developed, we were extremely fluid and able to respond to their needs. We had lots of communication and made sure the leadership team responded quickly and appropriately."

When concerns are serious, clients get scared. It's essential that planners be the calm within the storm. This means gathering facts and communicating them, adds Yanke. She helped clients navigate the unknowns by reaching out to venues, hotels and caterers and asking questions as concerns escalated.

"Long before the government set limits, I called every vendor and asked about their response to the virus," she says. "I asked, 'What are you doing that I can share with attendees?'" When a health scare is the concern, she recommends asking:

- What are you doing to sanitize the space?
- Do you have hand sanitizer available?
- How have you trained employees about best practices for hand washing and safety?
- How are you screening employee health?
- What are you asking of guests if they are ill?

She shared vendor responses with clients — in writing. "You may not raise their comfort levels — everyone has a different risk tolerance," she says. "But you do need to talk about it."

If clients decide the show must go on, Yanke recommends communicating best health practices to everyone, from event organizers to volunteers to attendees. "It should start at registration where workers share best practices," she says. "We will elbow touch instead of shaking hands. If you are feeling ill, we ask that you stay home. Here are the CDC guidelines. And it should continue throughout the event."

KNOW THE CONTRACT

"Event organizers may decide to cancel, then it becomes our job to do so in a way that doesn't cost our clients a lot of money," Yanke stresses.

Many contracts include a force majeure clause to protect event organizers when unforeseeable circumstances prevent fulfilling a contract. But not all contracts include these clauses, reports Davis. The first step before canceling, thus, is a thorough contract review to determine what is legally possible.

Contract review for force majeure clauses begins in the planning stages; it's too late after the unexpected happens, Davis adds. "I don't feel comfortable with contracts where if the venue closes, or the caterer cancels, you lose your deposit and there is nothing else you can do," she says. "That is not how I do business."

DEVELOP A PLAN B

Before every event, Davis reviews event plans and brainstorms adverse outcomes, then develops solutions for each one. "I think, well in this situation, we can do this, or we can do that. If we cancel, maybe we can hold the event on this day instead," she says. "There is always something you can do. Vendors have been very flexible with this [coronavirus] situation. I don't think it's a total loss for anyone."

The right contract always includes a Plan B, even during forced cancellations. "We had to break contracts [because of the virus], and there are always some losses with that," says Yanke, adding planners can really shine during these situations.

"We can negotiate so it's not a total loss," she explains. "We need to look at how can we negotiate this situation so it's a future win-win, and we don't burn any bridges."

She suggests looking for future dates then talking to clients about moving the event, instead of an outright cancellation. Planners must look at every affected vendor and ask for open dates. "Then you can facilitate the move," she says. "It's not the ideal because you had to cancel but it's still more of a win-win than if you cancel with money on the table, and everyone's left mad at each other."

Get creative. Planners might save the event, for example, by hosting it virtually. "While it's harder to create an experience when holding a virtual event, it can be done," Yanke says. "A situation like this opens up opportunities to get creative. You can

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—Cheri Davis, Owner,
Cheri Denise Events

implement a gaming app, for example, in a virtual meeting to create an experience."

During the COVID-19 scare, event insurance protected some event organizers. Many times, only large events buy this insurance, but Davis recommends purchasing it for all events. "I've stressed the importance of insurance to clients long before this situation arose," she says. "If it gets to where you cannot reschedule, insurance guarantees at least a partial refund."

IF THE SHOW CANNOT GO ON

The best way to communicate cancellations is through the same channels organizers communicated the event to begin with, notes Yanke. She had some clients use Eventbrite for registration, so they communicated their cancellations through that medium. Others used social media channels, emails and websites.

Yanke recommends putting a person — or at least some signage — at the venue the day of the cancelled event. "Some people may not see your cancellation notices, and will show up anyway," she says. "There should be someone there to inform them of the change."

The coronavirus reminds planners that a crisis can occur without warning. Planners who know how to communicate, what to communicate, and how to save an event protect existing relationships and build new ones for the future. [WM](#)