

THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

COMMUNICATIONS ON LOCK: HOW TO DEVELOP MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATIONS
DURING LOCKDOWN AND FUTURE PLAN FOR A NEW TRAVELLER MINDSET

Bashar Wali



PRESIDENT & CEO, PROVENANCE HOTELS

Amar Lalvani



CEO, STANDARD INTERNATIONAL

With almost half-a-century of industry experience between them, hotel veterans Bashar Wali and Amar Lalvani know a thing or two about effective stakeholder communication. But with the COVID-19 crisis making even the most bulletproof of strategies redundant, it's critical to reassess the current landscape and tailor your messaging accordingly. "I've seen a lot of tone-deaf comms (during this time) – people trying to sell you something," warns Bashar during Episode 1 of the L.E/Digital series. "Your North Star should be honesty and transparency – only say what you know, and devise a forward-thinking strategy." Here are the new rules of engagement.

01.

Tailor Your Messaging to Each Audience.

Think of your stakeholders – guests, corporate clients, vendors – as constituents, each with nuances and specific communication needs. Every constituency needs to be communicated with (and nurtured) differently, but across the board, “nothing is better than 1-on-1, especially for corporate clients,” advises Bashar. “A hand-written note; a personal email rather than a mass-blast – (now is the time to prove) that you are true friends, that you don’t just call when you need them, but when they need you, too.” Whatever you do, don’t disappear. Stay engaged, stay present and actively communicate with your B2B stakeholders as often as you can.



03.

Walk the Walk.

Both discussion leaders issued a call-to-action to the hotel industry: now is the time to band together as a community, lending a helping hand to those in less fortunate positions. For communities like the L.E/Miami collective, this might involve advising smaller independent hotels who are potentially struggling, collaborating tangibly to help them pull through. And while we’re all safeguarding our cash flow right now, it doesn’t have to cost you. In the long-term, creating new affiliations or partnerships is a good option, but the most valuable tool at your disposal is free – picking up the phone and sharing valuable advice. “Now is the time to start calling upon each other,” says Bashar.

02.

Just Be You.

Every piece of comms you send, each decisive action you take, the way you serve your local communities – all will ring hollow if they don’t truly reflect the ethos of your brand. “What we’re saying (at Standard International) may change, but how we’re dealing with it remains the same,” summarises Amar. Instead, consider the reasons why people stay at your property or engage with your brand. Is it for your F&B, your spa offerings, or something else? For B2C communications, see if you can continue to provide these unique value propositions to your customers at home, while simultaneously strengthening your brand equity. “There are so many facets of what we do that are unrelated to the current crisis – there’s so much robust content (still) to be delivered,” Amar told us. And this is reflected in Standard International’s current offering: sharing recipes; at-home spa tips; and selling limited-edition T-shirts with proceeds going to the Standard Stands Together Relief Fund.

04.

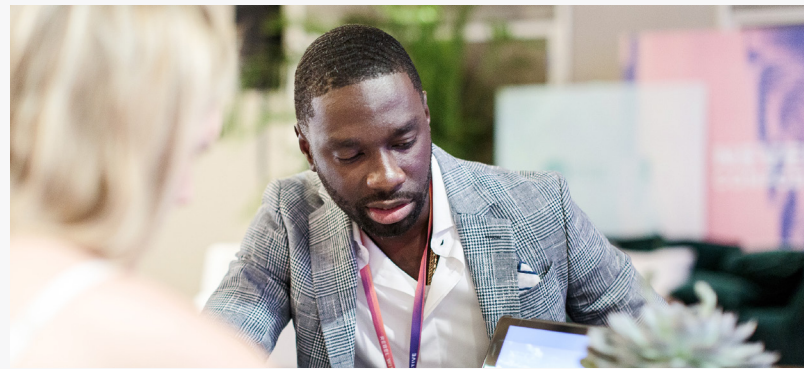
Look Around You.

It may sound obvious, but the current crisis isn't taking place in a travel vacuum: there's not an industry on earth untouched by COVID-19, so be sure to take your comms cues from other sectors, too. What matters right now is the truth – "collecting the data points that matter," says Bashar – and staying attuned to what other businesses are doing is the best way to future plan. Being based in Portland, Bashar is keeping a close eye on Nike: "we're using them as a global economic barometer, and to gauge when to start communicating a more sales-focused message again." Similarly, Amar stresses the importance of taking cues from governments and cities further ahead in the crisis lifecycle – Hong Kong, for example – and looking for both geopolitical and psychological signs that things are getting back to normal.

05.

Press Reset.

You'll have heard the falsehood that 'crisis' in Chinese means both 'danger' and 'opportunity' – but for both Amar and Bashar, COVID-19 is indeed "a fantastic opportunity to push the reset button" on the hotel industry. For too long, hotels have been preoccupied with one-upmanship and capitalising on the next big trend, losing sight of what customers actually want in the process. We may have forgotten our 'why', and the reasons we got into this industry in the first place, so this is an opportunity for us to truly understand what our customers want, how to respond to them, and most of all, inspire them to travel when this is over. COVID has made us all see who and what are truly important, providing the opportunity to create new travel fans and ignite wanderlust in new customers. "We all have an innate desire to travel – this is an opportunity to ignite it, creating new travel fans," Bashar says of the change to the contemporary traveller mindset.



06.

Get Back to Basics.

Predicting that we'll see a 'back to basics' approach – an antidote to the "extreme and overheated" mentality of the past few years – both discussion leaders feel that travellers will seek comfort and familiarity, rather than opulence, as the world recovers from the pandemic. What does this look like? Simpler (but still high-quality) food, design and aesthetics, with consumers becoming more discerning than ever before, carefully prioritising each experience they invest in. And this goes for the high-end luxury market, too: "Simple doesn't mean unsophisticated," Amar urges. "I think it's incumbent upon us to watch how people's behaviour is changing. It doesn't matter what I want; it truly is all about our customers. If we don't respond to them, we will lose them."