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The Government Pandemic Trust Bump

The Power of Trust

By Phil Hurcomb

Something unheard of happened in the spring of 2020.

Trust in government went up. Way up.

Small trust bumps do happen from time to time when new governments come in or there is a significant upturn in economic performance, but the 2020 phenomenon was unprecedented.

The Edelman Trust Barometer, a long-standing annual check on trust in institutions around the globe, identified the massive increase in Canadians' trust in "government" in May of 2020. Fully 70% of Canadians gave a positive response to the question "How much do you trust government to do what's right?" - an unheard-of rise of 20% in that positive response rate from January of the same year.

Ekos research found a similarly massive change in Canadian's' views specifically about "Trust in the government in Ottawa" during the same time period. In late 2019 a pretty standard 27% of Canadians indicated trust in the current federal government. By June 2020 that trust level had nearly doubled to just over 50%. Again, this is something rarely seen in an age when trust in most institutions continues to slowly erode.

The correlation with the emergence of Covid-19 and increasingly successful efforts to fight back the first wave of the pandemic are obvious.

Follow-up surveys by both Edelman and Ekos showed that trust soon began to "regress somewhat towards the mean," following retrenchment of the virus after the first wave. But the phenomenon was significant at the time, has had a lingering impact and is full of lessons for government communicators. Yes, it took a horrendous pandemic to alter appreciation of government in this country, and we all hope that never happens again. But it also served as a case study in relations between governments and the citizenry. What exactly were the elements of the government response and method of communicating that response that prompted this change of view?

Below is Harley House's take on some things that "went right" with the government trust profile during the first few months of the pandemic, and some lessons you can use in the future to create your own mini-trust bumps

for your organization and the important work you are doing for Canadians. As pointed out by Dale Harley, in his most recent book, *The 6 Relationships of Highly Effective Organizations*, trust is the cornerstone of all effective relationships.

Find Your Relevance

Normally, most federal departments and agencies have trouble establishing their actual direct relevance in the lives of average Canadians. And successful, personal services and relationships are where most trust comes from. Federal government departments don't run hospitals or schools, they don't build or maintain many roads, and they don't drive buses or run subways. But that direct service relationship with most Canadians really changed during the pandemic. Doing critical research, buying massive shipments of vaccine, providing life-saving advice, and controlling international travel have all been top of mind and top of conversation activities during the battle against the pandemic.

So where is your organization's ongoing relevance to Canadians? What is it that you do that demonstrates how you deliver real personal benefit to members of your core audience groups?

Your relevance and opportunity to create a trust relationship with Canadians won't be on a scale with the government pandemic response, so you will have to look harder to find those personal impacts that have the potential to create trust, support, and appreciation. Identify the key directly affected audiences, find the tools to reach them on a targeted basis, and tell your story about how you are supporting their needs in real and tangible ways.

Lead With Facts and Data

If someone isn't sure they trust you, they aren't going to believe "messaging", over-the-top predictions, or unsubstantiated claims. But if you have hard evidence, data, and transparent progress reports, they might just give you a chance to make your case.

Data, facts, and science have been front and centre in government response to the pandemic. And success could be tracked through daily reporting of a range of medical metrics. What data led to your policies, programs, and decisions? What metrics will indicate the success for failure of your initiatives? Lead with that and you might build some new relationships over time with your key stakeholder groups – relationships that, over time, can lead to improved trust.

Use Your Experts!

Evidence that experts and service providers – doctors, firefighters, pharmacists, pilots, scientists – are automatically more trusted by the public than politicians, corporate executives or senior bureaucrats is nothing new. Numerous public opinion firms have been tracking this kind of trust data for decades. But the pandemic trust bump drives that truth home more than any example in recent Canadian history. Chief medical officers, at all levels of government, scientists and medical service providers were effective communications leaders in this resurgence of trust in government, reaching out to Canadians in an authentic, unscripted manner on a daily and sometimes hourly basis.

Any jurisdiction that attempted to sublimate medical and scientific advice with political rhetoric or decision-making paid the price quickly with a drop in public trust during the pandemic.

Identify your experts. Coach them on making effective presentations and dealing with media. Get them out-front on all your major issues.

Tell the Truth – the Whole Truth

As a long-time communications manager in the federal government, I know public service communicators never lie. Publicly, anyway! In fact, you spend many a sleepless night worrying about even publishing a simple honest mistake. The Covid-19 response proved that Canadians don't expect their leaders to be perfect. But they do want complete honesty and transparency, and to know when things change or get off track. Throughout the Covid response, rules and recommendations were changed based on changes to the best current science; statistics turned out to be wrong and were regularly corrected; and changes to performance targets were explained and made in full public view.

Winning debates and arguments through public communications will always be a big part of the government communications game. But the response of key public institutions to the pandemic underlines that achieving trust and support is a more complex undertaking, often requiring a different set of communications assumptions and techniques. Learn your Covid-19 communications lessons and take them forward in the regular work of your department or agency. It isn't an easy road, but there is potential trust to be developed out there if you are willing to earn it with these simple changes in communications approach.

Let's keep the dialogue going on post-Covid comms in the federal government context.

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At Harley House we assist our clients improve their effectiveness. Our solution is to transfer knowledge and skills so that organizations like yours can more effectively manage their own communications, engagement, and change efforts. We help organizations build understanding and capacity. We don't swoop in, drop a thick presentation deck on your desk and leave. We arm you with customized tools, training, coaching, processes, and procedures.

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