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## In a Time of Crisis, Sexy and Flashy Doesn't Count

### Ten Things Marketers Can Learn From the CDC's Response to the Swine Flu Epidemic

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Marketers consistently pick up their best lessons in times of crisis. We think differently about ROI. We act more intuitively. We become more agile and flexible. We "sense and respond." We really don't have much of a choice but to act and not allow yesterday's rules to justify complacency.

Two weeks ago, for example, many in the marketing community got their first exposure to the massive power of online video via the disgusting Domino's video by (former) Domino's employees on YouTube and, later, the pizza chain's president's highly effective video apology. There's no question that hundreds of C-level memos crying out "we need a social media strategy" flowed from that crisis.

Now we have a [crisis that touches virtually everyone's anxiety](#) and fear and cuts across multiple brands and categories: the "swine flu" outbreak. At the center of this crisis is the U.S. government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The communication work it is leading is neither sexy nor flashy, but it's highly effective -- and critically timely. Moreover, the approach is building credibility. The agency has added nearly 15,000 Twitter followers in the past two days, bringing the total to 40,000. Data from my employer, Nielsen Online, also suggest the CDC website is generating unprecedented links and references, including from Wikipedia, across all dimensions of this issue.

In many respects, the CDC is building on the marketing and social-media momentum established by the Department of Health and Human Services during the peanut recall and salmonella outbreak, an

issue I documented in [Ad Age's first Twitterinterview](#). But this issue is much more complex, and it brings a halo of mystique and unpredictability that feeds conversation -- and even viral paranoia. Managing the conversational airwaves effectively is important, if not critical.

So let's put aside our snobbery about our perceptions of the "fat, slow, and happy" government agencies, swallow some humility and reflect upon 10 tips marketers can learn from the CDC.

**Empower Those Who Want to Help Others:** Like a growing number of newspapers and blogs, CDC does a really good job empowering site visitors to subscribe to and share its content, especially the real-time information. This is critically important for a number of reasons. One, it nurtures loyalty because the site is working hard to fulfill obvious needs. Second, it's empowering every site visitor to carry forth the right and correct information. Last weekend, for instance, there was a ton of bad information being shared about the swine flu and sources like Wikipedia and CDC.gov played a key role in responding.

**Make Search Really, Really Simple and Accessible:** This is front and center of the CDC page. Trust me, a large percentage of brands still don't have basic functioning search on their websites. When folks are worried, and need information, don't ignore the web's most sticky application. The principles of quick search apply wherever you are. It's not enough to simply build a search capability into your site. Repeatedly test it with important queries and make sure it works on timely topics.

**Syndicate the Message:** At the end of the day, communities are popping up all over the social-media landscape around the swine flu issue, which means CDC needs a presence, or some level of representation everywhere. The CDC has made its swine flu information easy to share and pass-on virally through social networks. Whether through widgets, Twitter links or embeddable mobile apps, they did precisely this. When marketers bury their products and key messaging in over-produced, flash-heavy sites with un-sharable video, we hurt our customer's ability to share what they love about our brand. We can even learn from how the CDC set up a [Twitter.com/CDCEmergency](#) account specific to crisis situations.

**Communicate in Multiple Languages:** While marketers tend to have non-stop ROI debates over the value of multiple languages, the CDC appears to take a very simple view: Everyone needs to know, period. Even though CDC is a U.S. agency, you can learn about swine flu in German, French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese or even Tagalog. Spanish is especially accessible and you don't need to take Math 101 to understand why.

**Push Mobile as a Service Extension, and Don't Make it Complicated:** CDC appears to be working really hard to make its data available to consumers via mobile devices, services or widgets. Twitter also naturally figures into this opportunity. Importantly, they are making the process simple and accessible.

**Be Simple and Selective on Twitter, Don't Over Complicate:** Unlike many of us (myself included) who congest Twitter's airwaves with excessive banter, the CDC exercised impressive restraint in

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sharing only the most essential content. In a weird way, its Twitter account @CDCemergency felt more authoritative precisely because it didn't spray unnecessary junk our way. Everything it shares is important, timely and actionable. When it arrives, you know it's important.

**Prime the Messaging:** As part of educating consumers about the dangers and risks associated with swine flu, the CDC created Health eCards on topics like "Teach Hand Washing" or "Immunization." And by tweeting early, the CDC is helping to frame the public's perception of this event by providing rational and fact-based messaging. Much of this was wisely thought through long before the crisis.

**Update the Scorecard 24/7:** Not unlike the pet-enthusiast blogs during the pet-food recall three years ago, CDC has done a really good job refreshing and updating the swine flu "scorecard" on the front page. This builds confidence and authority. It keeps people coming back. It doesn't need to be sexy or flashy; it just needs to be reliable and consistent. The CDC's swine flu page is being updated several times daily (even on the weekend) and there is a history page not unlike Wikipedia where you can easily see what has been added most recently. Timeliness boosts relevance and credibility.

**Exploit Sight, Sound and Motion:** I still marvel at how many major brands don't use the power of "sight, sound and motion" to explain or demonstrate how to use products. It's like the obvious solutions never makes the payout analysis. The CDC is clearly making an effort to provide site visitors with multiple ways and formats to consume this serious content, from video explanations to podcasts featuring health domain experts. It looks a bit clunky at times, but the functionality is all there.

**Proactively Ask for Feedback:** This also really impressed me with HHS. On the front page of the CDC page there's a prominent "Tell us what you think" button and the ensuing process for providing feedback is simple and obvious. Even after the podcasts, they feature a "How are we doing?" button. Marketers tend to narrow their definition of feedback and "conversation" to the social media landscape, not in their own brand backyard. Consequently, our feedback forms are either hidden or have the words "Don't talk to me" emblazoned across them. That's a huge missed opportunity and the CDC knows that in times of crisis you can't afford not to know.

So yes, swallow your pride. We can learn from the "big, fat, impenetrably slow and bureaucratic" agencies out there. Suck it up and take action.