



PUBLIC RELATIONS TEAM

COVID-19 and the City of Athens Social Media

An After-Action Report of the Athens' 60-day Information Campaign in response to the national health crisis.

4 SEPTEMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION:

The first half of 2020 here in the United States has seen weeping and gnashing of teeth at a near biblical scale as we have endured trials and tribulations that would shake the core of our national institutions and identity. From impeachment trials, foreign agent provocateurs, protests & riots, and to one of the topmost agenda-setting items of the year – the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19. The onslaught of this disease, a global pandemic that has swept us away towards a “new normal” is a continuing struggle.

The intent of this report is to chronicle how the City of Athens’ Public Relations Team came to its decision to act with a public information campaign, the results it produced, and how our action impacted the community. Afterwards, an analysis of human behavior pertinent to the public reaction to our campaign is provided through an economic lens.

BACKGROUND ON THE PRT

Vision/Mission & Goals

The City of Athens’ Public Relations Team (PRT) is comprised of city employees chosen from the city’s service departments with coordination conducted by the city’s Assistant to the City Manager (A2CM), who picked up the city’s social media outreach efforts. The A2CM sought to build out a bigger public information presence in the hopes of fostering a better relationship between the citizens and the government that serves them; to satisfy the American hallmarks of transparency and service to the community at-large by sharing the story of public service of this city.

The set vision of the PRT is to live up to the “American fundamental premise that government closest to the people governs best and through effective communication and engagement, citizens would be equipped with the knowledge necessary to address needs in their community.” Thereby, the PRT’s mission is “to effectively engage communities in order to inspire a more informed, empowered citizenry.” To accomplish this mission, the PRT’s priorities are to:

- a. Create an effective social media approach and strategy to engage and inform the public
- b. Promote transparency and accountability by responding to citizen inquiries and requests
- c. Empower citizens by fostering innovative methods to communicate with government.

The city’s current social media outreach effort first surrounded promoting our city-sponsored events before moving forward with live-streaming our City Council Meetings. It has since exploded into other promotional projects including supporting other agencies and partners around our local community, especially once we discovered that we could leverage our followership to promote civic events and reach a broader audience. Our arsenal of social media tools includes Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and now, NextDoor. This foundational groundwork helped establish a springboard to jumpstart a public information campaign regarding COVID-19 as it became the national conversation and the top-most agenda item of our region.

PANDEMIC TIMELINE

The following is a brief timeline of highlighted events as they occurred with the advent of COVID-19, its entry into the United States, when the novel coronavirus was first reported in Tennessee, and then McMinn County.

- **December 01** – First known onset of symptoms in China
- **December 29** – Local hospitals in Hubei, China report cases of a “pneumonia of unknown etiology”
- **January 03** – China officially notified the WHO of an outbreak
- **January 9** – WHO announces mysterious Coronavirus-related pneumonia in Wuhan, China.
- **January 20** – Chinese scientists confirms human transmission from person to person. CDC says 3 US airports to begin screening for Coronavirus.
- **January 21** – CDC confirms 1st Coronavirus case in Washington state - a man who had traveled to Wuhan
- **January 31** – WHO issues Global Health Emergency
- **February 03** – US Declares Public Health Emergency.
- **February 25** – CDC says COVID-19 is headed to Pandemic status – meets 2 of 3 criteria
- **March 05** – First Coronavirus Case detected in Tennessee – Patient quarantined in Williamson County
- **March 06** – TN State, Regional, and Local emergency preparedness coordination begins
- **March 08** – Tennessee Department of Health begins daily reporting of cases with a count of 3
- **March 11** – WHO declares COVID-19 a Pandemic; TN Dept of Health – Southeast Region and local authorities meet to discuss preparedness levels and coordinate potential response.
- **March 12** – TN Gov. Lee issues Executive Order 14 declaring State of Emergency in response to COVID-19
- **March 13** – President Trump Declares COVID-19 a National Emergency
- **March 16** – City Manager C. Seth Sumner’s first City of Athens Update on COVID-19 regarding state and local preparedness and response to novel coronavirus
- **March 17-18** – Rumors spread regarding positive cases at local Athens Walmart; social media blows up.
- **March 18** – City of Athens Daily Updates on COVID-19 in TN and the local area commences
- **March 20** – First COVID-19 positive case reported in McMinn County

To note, local authorities were proactive in reaching out to communicate and coordinate with state health officials. A meeting was held on March 11, the day before the governor declared a State of Emergency that was subsequently followed by the President’s declaration on Friday the 13th of March. That following Monday, Athens City Manager C. Seth Sumner along with the A2CM felt it would be appropriate and necessary to provide a video update to the citizens about the local response in anticipation of COVID-19 eventually reaching McMinn County. Between the 16th and 18th of March, rumors began spreading through the local social media channels that the Walmart of Athens had employees that had tested positive for COVID-19. Fear and confusion began to grip the local area and it appeared that panic was starting to set in based off the comments through those social media threads. The crux of the matter was that it was all based off mere rumors with no verification and it became glaringly obvious that people’s imaginations could be far worse than reality if allowed to continue. A consistent news source to relay verified and true information to mitigate rumors was necessary to keep people calm and informed.

Manager Sumner reached out to the local health department and it was discovered that the southeast region consisting of 10 counties was centrally governed and any announcements or updates would come only from their central office in Chattanooga. Therefore, by no fault of their own, it appeared that factual information to supplant erroneous, panic-inducing rumors would not be available nor presented by the local county health department.

THE DECISION

Therefore, in discussing the situation at hand regarding the rumors on social media, the need for a consistent source of information that was not just verifiably true but also relevant to the local area, caused us to pause. It dawned on us that these needs were in the parameters and scope of the City of Athens Public Relations Team. Certainly, there is risk in any course of action we could take, but the greater risk lied in doing nothing. If there was ever a question regarding the need for a Public Relations Team, it was in that sheer moment that we could give an answer. This was the moment we had been preparing for and as the scales began to tip, policy lightning hit its trigger point...

ACTION & RESULT

We decided to act. Using our entire social media arsenal, we produced daily video updates regarding reported numbers from the Tennessee Department of Health and explained the models from the University of Washington's Institute of Health Metrics & Evaluation (IHME). This campaign saw the production of daily updates for 60 days straight until it appeared that the nation had finally reached the peak of the dreaded surge and the nation began to "flatten the curve". Throughout the campaign, Manager Sumner invited guests to provide different aspects of how the rest of the city was responding to this national health crisis. These guests included directors of the local school districts, local food banks and charities, health professionals, public safety officials, elected officials, nonprofits, and more. All in an effort to provide a nexus of information to help citizens, businesses, and others following our social media the tools and knowledge to stay afloat in a time of uncertainty.

Feedback from Citizens

The city manager and the PRT understood on the front end what would entail as we began this public information campaign. Initial comments on our updates seemed to heavily reflect the fear and confusion caused by the health crisis and amplified even more so a mistrust of government and official numbers. Some would call our decision to produce daily video updates on COVID-19 a political risk, receiving the condemnation of those who were typically condescending of government in general. However, in the end, we figured as public servants that it was the right thing to do regardless of the emotional whims of public opinion.

Soon enough, the negativity of folks screaming hoax and government overreach subsided. We began to hear more and more from people that were grateful for our information campaign and folks that wanted to honestly inquire about programs available to help their situation.

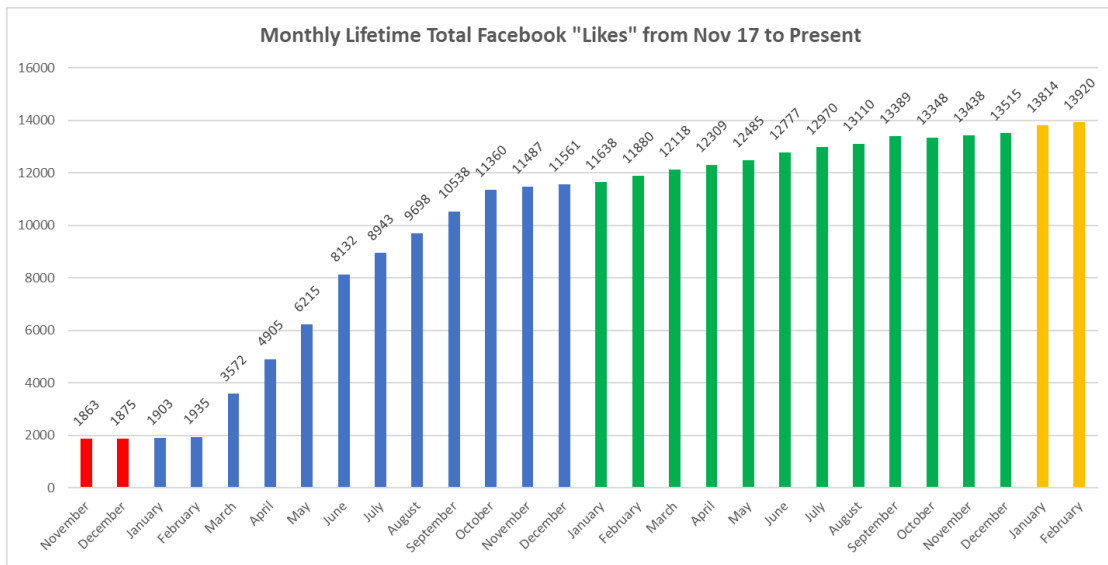
As we moved forward, our number of followers on Facebook increased at an exponential rate to a number that surpassed even our own local population. We received feedback from a few of our new followers that they would rather watch our daily updates than the news. That we spoke to matters that were more relevant and concerning to the local area without peddling out the doom and gloom of other news sources. Even more so, we received feedback from citizens that felt that they were more connected to

the community and our local government than ever before. At least two followers requested that we keep up the updates even after the pandemic was over. Months later, another comment praising us for how transparent we were to our citizens – a priority of the PRT.

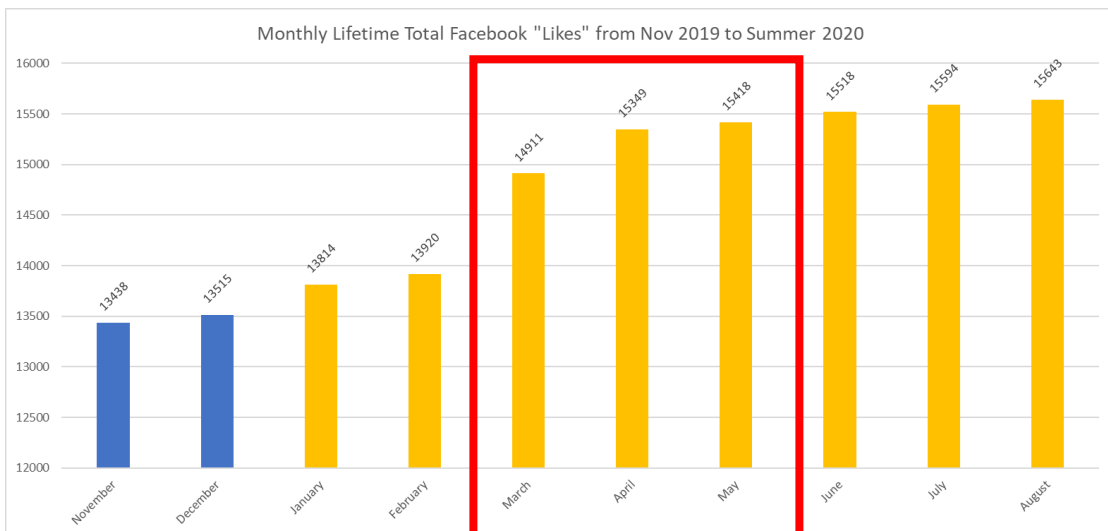
Followership Increase

The City of Athens began using Facebook Live and videos for outreach and communications upon the City Manager hiring a Public Management Fellow to oversee these efforts with the objective of creating a followership using available media tools back in November 2017.

Below is a graphical image of the number of total monthly likes from November 2017 to February 2020 before the pandemic hit the local area.



You can see the steady rise in followership through “Likes” from when the City of Athens’ social media presence first started. With continued attention to our efforts, we reached the 13,920 followers by the end of February 2020 prior to the advent of COVID-19 in our region. Below is a graphical image of the number of total monthly likes encompassing the advent of COVID-19 into the US and our local region.



The red box on the graphic above delineates the time period of our 60-day daily information campaign. Comparing the month after the daily campaign in June to the month prior to the pandemic in February, the number of likes had increased by 1,598 likes on our Facebook page. This huge increase in “Likes” which translates to followership was most assuredly due to our information campaign. Now to explore what caused human behavior to gravitate towards a small rural micropolitan city’s Facebook page.

MARKET FOR INFORMATION MANAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to understand the response of massive growth in followership and citizen feedback, we can take queues from one of the main behavioral sciences – economics; and approach the source of this problem as market failure. Basic economics teaches us that the world is limited in resources and therefore individuals will rationally seek to act in their own self interests. However, individuals acting in their self-interests will create inefficiencies in a free market where there is no government intervention. These inefficiencies can lead to market failure, or as Jim Chappelow explains on Investopedia:

“Market failure is the economic situation defined by an inefficient distribution of goods and services in the free market. In market failure, the individual incentives for rational behavior do not lead to rational outcomes for the group.

In other words, each individual makes the correct decision for him or herself, but those prove to be the wrong decisions for the group. In traditional microeconomics, this can sometimes be shown as a steady-state disequilibrium in which the quantity supplied does not equal quantity demanded.”

As a government entity, we see this play out within our own philosophical construct of a social contract explaining why governments exist – balancing security for all with the sanctity of individual liberties. Take the wearing of masks issue, for example. Individuals against mask wearing argue it is government encroachment to be asked to wear a mask. These individuals make rational decisions for their own self-interest, as opposed to the collective argument that the rest of the people wear masks to keep each other safe from the virus, and to mitigate a larger spread thereby “flattening the curve”. Another example to describe this behavior can be adopted by Garrett Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” where he explains:

“As James Madison said in 1788, “If men were angels, no Government would be necessary” (Federalist, no. 51). That is, if all men were angels. But in a world in which all resources are limited, a single nonangel in the commons spoils the environment for all.

The spoilage process comes in two stages. First, the non-angel gains from his “competitive advantage” (pursuing his own interest at the expense of others) over the angels. Then, as the once noble angels realize that they are losing out, some of them renounce their angelic behavior. They try to get their share out of the commons before competitors do. In other words, every workable distribution system must meet the challenge of human self-interest. An unmanaged commons in a world of limited material wealth and unlimited desires inevitably ends in ruin.”

In other words, pursuing needs of just the one while sacrificing the many, could end in the demise of all. Hardin further argues that “whenever a distribution system malfunctions, we should be on the lookout for some sort of commons.” In our case, we can arguably identify that our ‘commons’ is the information distribution that had malfunctioned. Furthermore, in terms of market failure, we identify both a missing information market and information asymmetries. A missing market is “a situation where the good in

question is not exchanged through market transactions”, we shall nuance this, for our purposes, to define a missing information market – citizens were not be able to obtain the information they needed as the pandemic expanded into the local area. Id Est, when people do not receive the information when they want it, they will look for it by any other means, ergo, an “informational black market” where rumors and hearsays would continue to foment. Information asymmetries “occur when two sides of a transaction have different amounts of information.” Again, we relate this to our situation where there was an enormous plethora of information out there regarding COVID-19 but no agent to discern the truth data from the chaff and translate it in a meaningful manner that did not overwhelm people with information overload.

The typical policy response for a missing market is to create the market. The typical response to information asymmetries is to provide an incentive for the more informed party to reveal the information to the less informed party. These policy responses are referred to as the efficiency rationale for government intervention. The City of Athens response and efficiency rationale for stepping into the fray was our 60-day daily information campaign. We used our social media arsenal to create the nexus of factual information (the market) to provide information from the experts in the medical field (informed party) to translate its impact to the less informed party (the public).

What’s Next?

Up until recently, our country believed that we had flattened the curve to an acceptable level to effectively prevent overwhelming our medical facilities and ICUs. To a certain extent, we did succeed and we are in a position now with hopefully enough hospital beds, tests, and research that we can prepare for future waves. However, the threat appeared to be a feigned withdrawal. Federal and State governments felt the pressure of economic decline and began to relax the safety measures in order to restart industry and reopen businesses. Our fellow Americans, yearning to once more live life as it was before, relaxed on their social distancing and mask-wearing vigilance, with some even pursuing differing measures of civil disobedience in the face of new research. Where at once, our country was united in an effort to defeat an invisible enemy, our nation began to digress once more into politicizing the whole matter and continue sowing discord and mistrust among the ranks of our body politic.

Despite this, our role is not to “suffer the slings and arrows of an outrageous fortune” and become complicit in a “tragedy of the commons” but, in the words of the famed credo of Adolph S. Ochs of the New York Times, we will provide the public information “in concise and attractive form, in language that is parliamentary in good society, and give it as early, if not earlier, than it can be learned through any other reliable medium; to give the news impartially, **without fear or favor**, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved...a forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance, and to that end to invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion.” Therefore, we will keep calm, carry on, continue to provide the information that self-proclaimed critics of government do not necessarily want, but need, and we shall continue to “strive unceasingly to quicken the public’s sense of civic duty.”

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