COVID-19's Impact on Communications

Communicators report increased respect for their work and a heavier workload overall and cite their top tools for engaging employees and other audiences during the crisis.

SURVEY FINDINGS FROM RAGAN COMMUNICATIONS APRIL 2020

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The disruption that businesses face from COVID-19 is unprecedented in our lifetimes.

Even if you were to draw comparisons to the 1918 Spanish flu, the nature of crisis communications has drastically changed in the last 100 years. Business leaders are now expected to engage global audiences on digital platforms—instantaneously.

Transparency has become more important than ever, with social media driving a new era of two-way communication. However, the current challenge has shone a spotlight on communicators who can lead, using their specific skillsets to solve crucial business issues.

To get a better sense of how COVID-19 has transformed the communications role, we conducted a study from April 3 to April 15. We heard from more than 400 respondents, about 40% from internal communications, 20% from external communications and 40% a combination of the two.

Respondents primarily work for corporations (57%), nonprofits (11%), government entities (9%) and PR agencies (8%).

Regarding organizations' size, 23% of respondents say their organization has fewer than 100 employees, 15% employ between 100 and 500, and 22% have more than 10,000 employees.

Here's how respondents say the COVID-19 crisis has affected their professional lives:

1. Email is a top communications channel during the crisis.

More than 86% cite email as an effective channel for COVID-19 messages, and many of these messages are for employees and stakeholders affected by the pandemic.

Virtual meetings come in at No. 2 (59%). Several methods rank in close competition: intranet (40%), phone/teleconferences (38%) and messaging apps (33%) like Slack, Teams, etc.

Write-in choices include Yammer, Skype, FaceTime, SMS (text messaging), newsletter, a closed Facebook group, Facebook Messenger, and a staff-only page on the company website.

Q: What is the most effective way you are communicating with remote employees during this crisis? (Select all that apply)
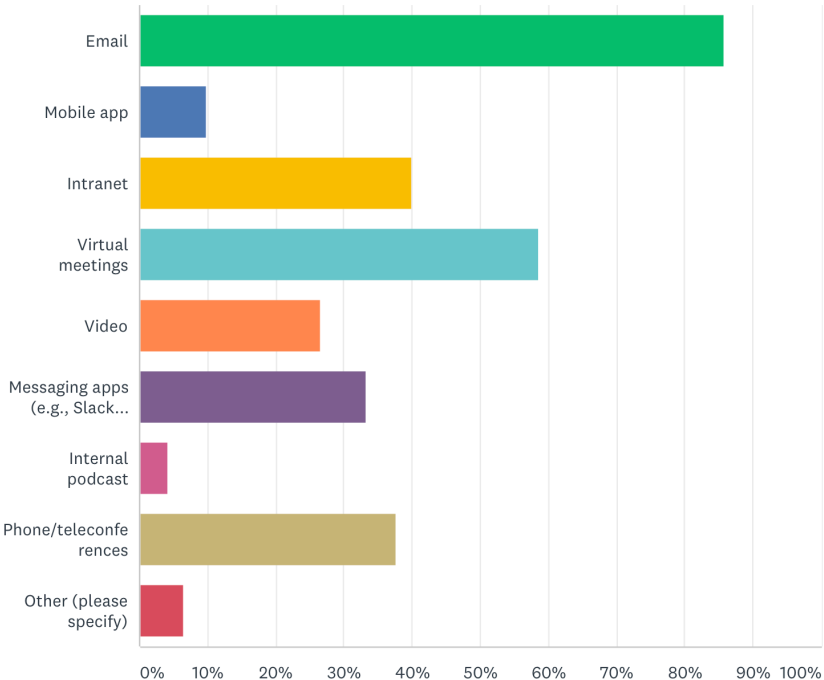
2. More than a third (38%) say they did not have a crisis communications plan in place prior to the outbreak.

A little over half (54%) say they had a crisis plan; about 9% say they don't know.

Q: Did you have a crisis communications plan in place prior to the outbreak?
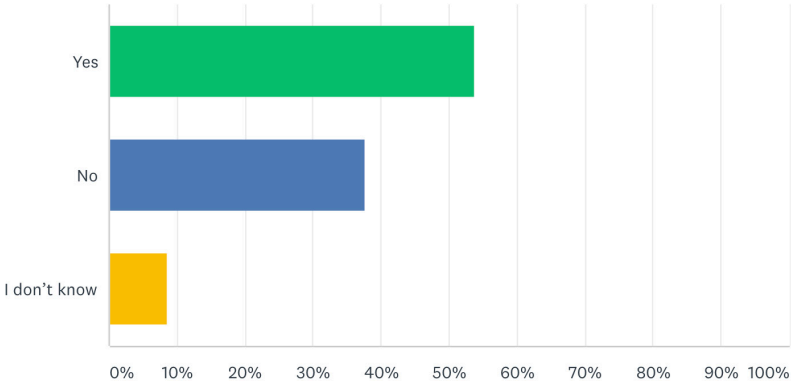
3. Those who did have a crisis plan were unlikely to have a specific pandemic response.

Of those who had a crisis plan, only 36% said it included a pandemic in its plan and 9% didn't know.
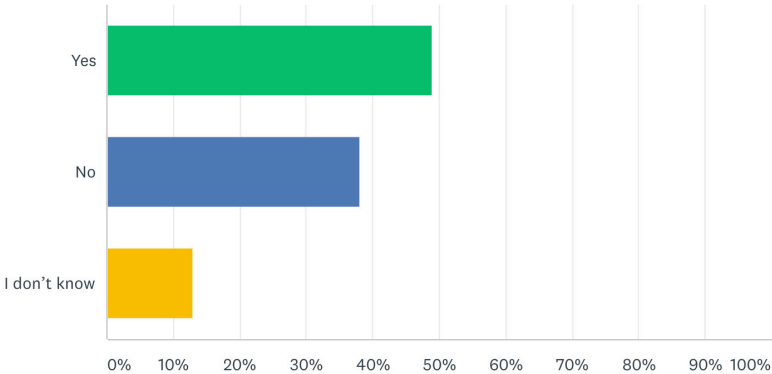
Q: Did your crisis plan include pandemic response?
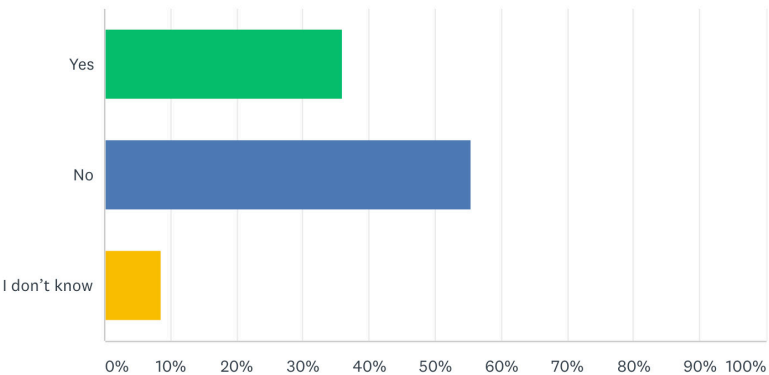
4. Of those that did not have a prior crisis plan, roughly half (49%) say they now have one.

More than a third say they still do not have a plan, and 13% say they don't know whether they have one.

**Q: Have you created a crisis communication plan following the outbreak?**

5. The C-suite is a top resource/partner for crisis communicators.

Roughly two-thirds (67%) say they are working with the CEO and other leaders on crisis messaging. Other top partners include HR (57%) and marketing (22%).

IT (14%) and legal departments (12%) are not seen as prominent partners for communicators.

**Q: Which colleagues in other departments are you partnering most closely with?**
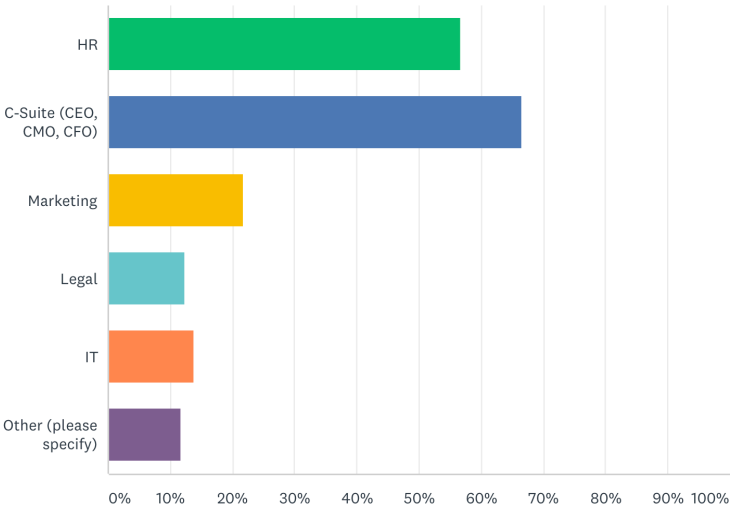
Write-in answers include emergency services, safety teams, a dedicated COVID-19 team, AV, and the business continuity team.

6. A majority say leaders have an increased appreciation for communicators' value.

One clear upside to the crisis is the increased value of the communications role. Fifty-four percent say communication is valued by leadership. Other upsides include having a "seat at the table" (53%), increased teamwork and collaboration within the comms department (47%), increased inter-department collaboration (40%) and new ideas and creativity (34%).

Q: Which of the following have you experienced in the last month?
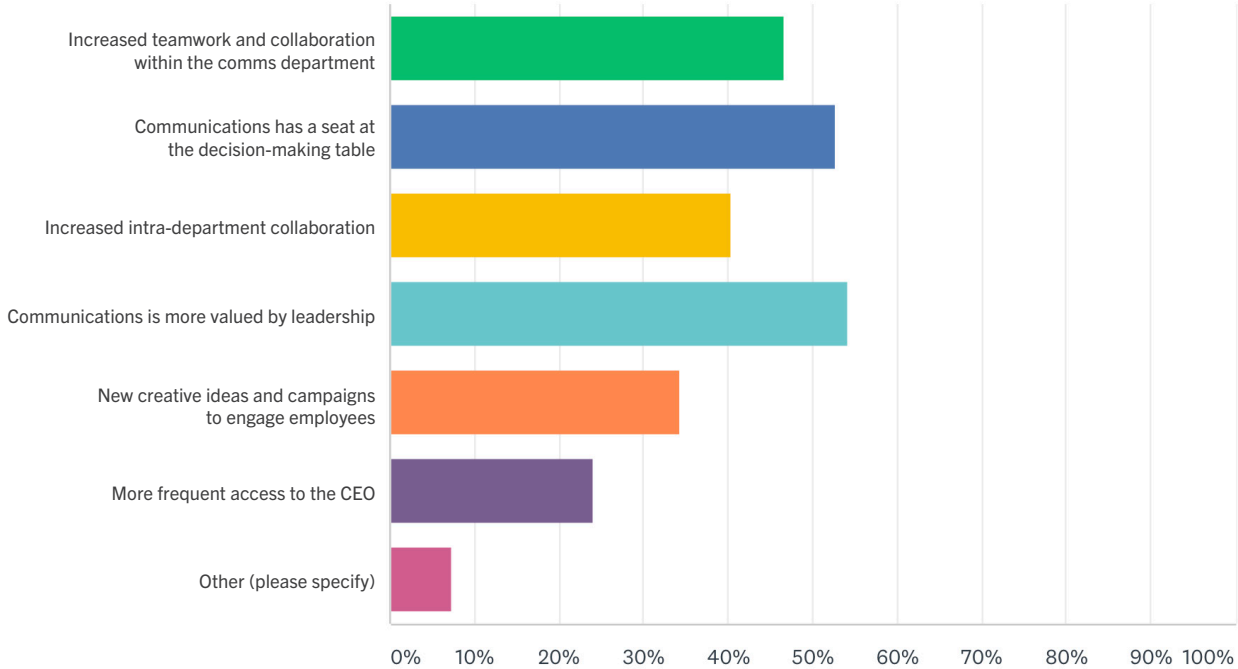
7. Top challenges are increased workload and strategy development.

More than two-thirds (69%) say increased workload and demand on the communications department is an issue, and 67% say developing a strategy around constantly changing world events is a top challenge.

Q: What has been the most challenging?
(Select the top three.)
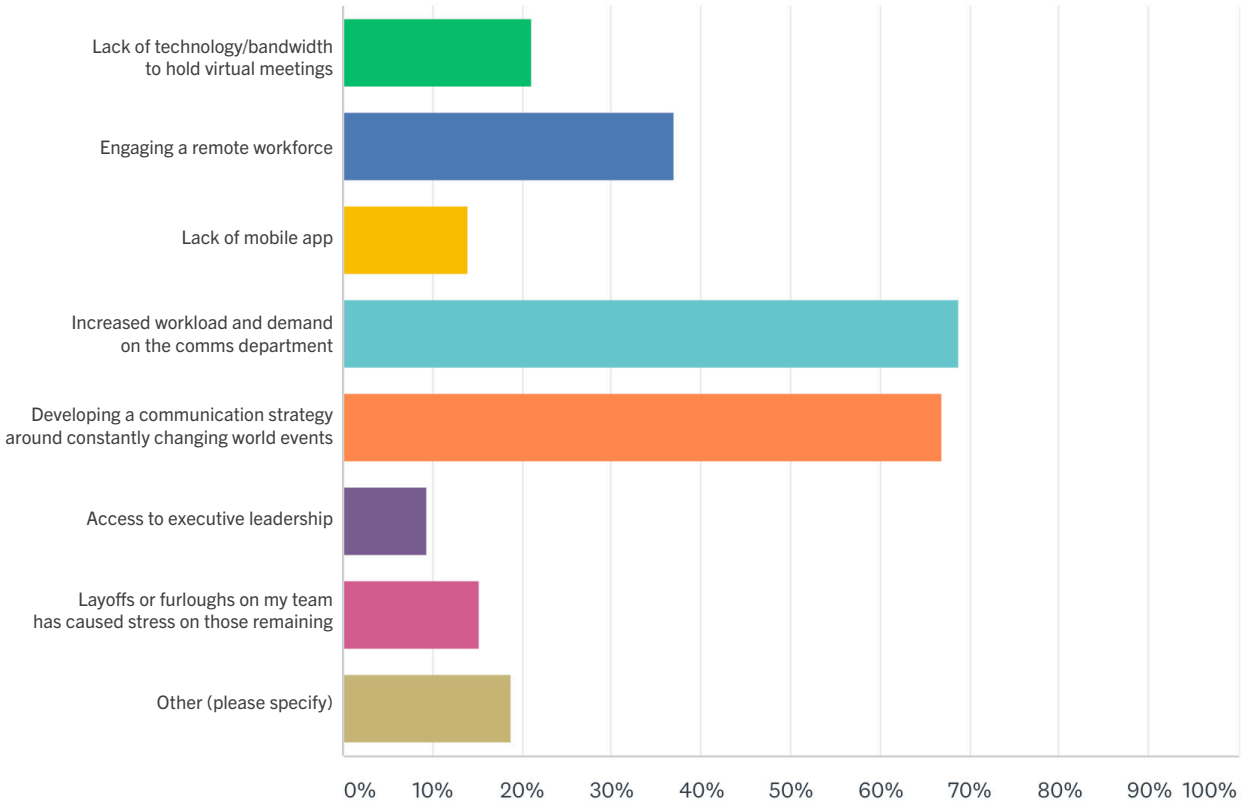
About one-fifth (21%) say technology poses a challenge, and more than two-thirds (37%) say engaging a remote workforce is an issue.

Fewer than 10% say access to leaders has been challenge during this crisis.

Other challenges mentioned by respondents include ramping up employee communications from a weekly to a daily newsletter, approval processes for comms, institutional silos, working at home with kids, other team responsibilities like social media, and figuring out what to say to target audiences.

Some also cite IT issues—along with a lack of positive news to share with stakeholders.

8. Email is the top channel for employees.

Almost two-thirds (65%) cite email as an effective channel for engaging employees on COVID-19 issues.

Half (50%) say video messages from senior leaders are effective, and 46% find it helpful to share positive news and feel-good stories. Photos/videos/other contests as well as virtual happy hours or other online meetings tied at 32%.

Q: What has been effective in engaging employees?
**(Select all that apply.)**
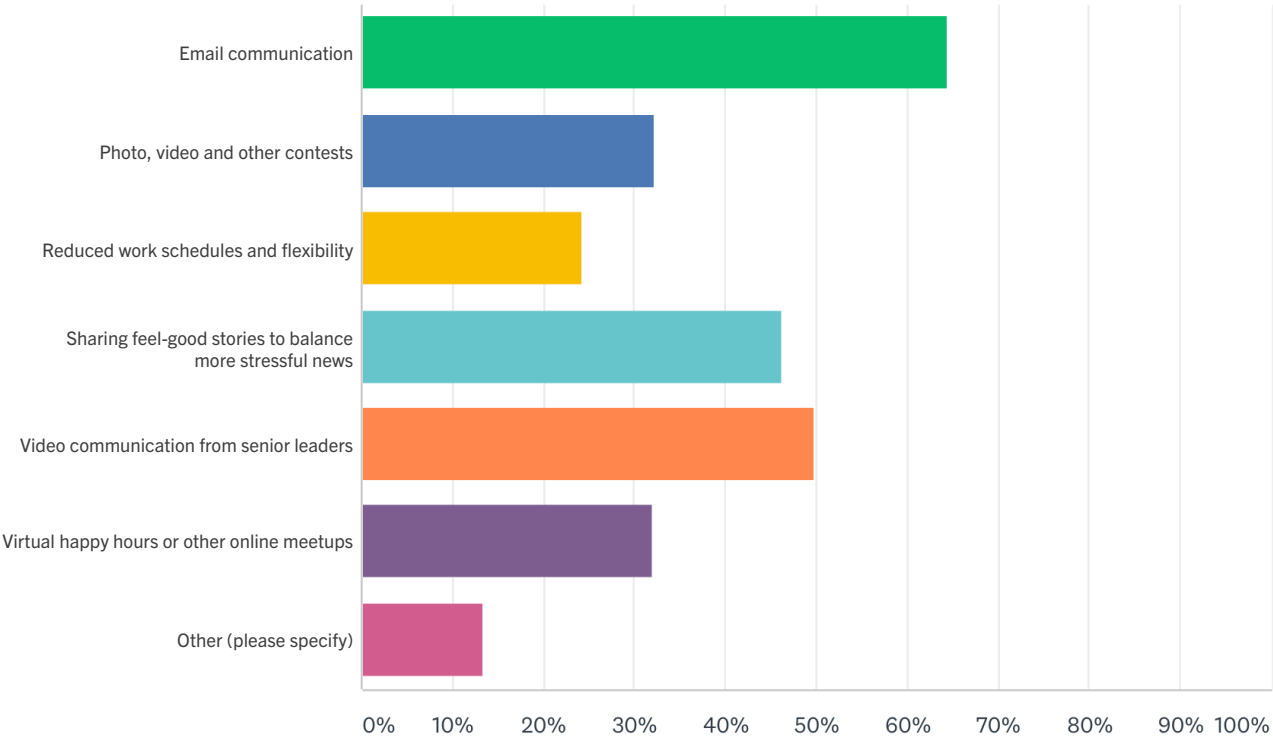
Other tactics include daily Zoom meetings, virtual town halls, apps like Slack and Teams, specific COVID-19 sites where employees can submit questions, and, in the case of one essential business, in-person visits from the CEO.

9. Permanent changes are anticipated, including less travel and bigger investments in technology.

About 45% anticipate a decrease in travel in the future, and 37% say their organization will use more technology. Thirty-six expect increased involvement from leadership and 41% more communication with remote employees.

Only 15% believe there will be bigger budgets for communicators.

Q: What permanent changes to your department do you anticipate as a result of the quarantine? (Select all that apply.)
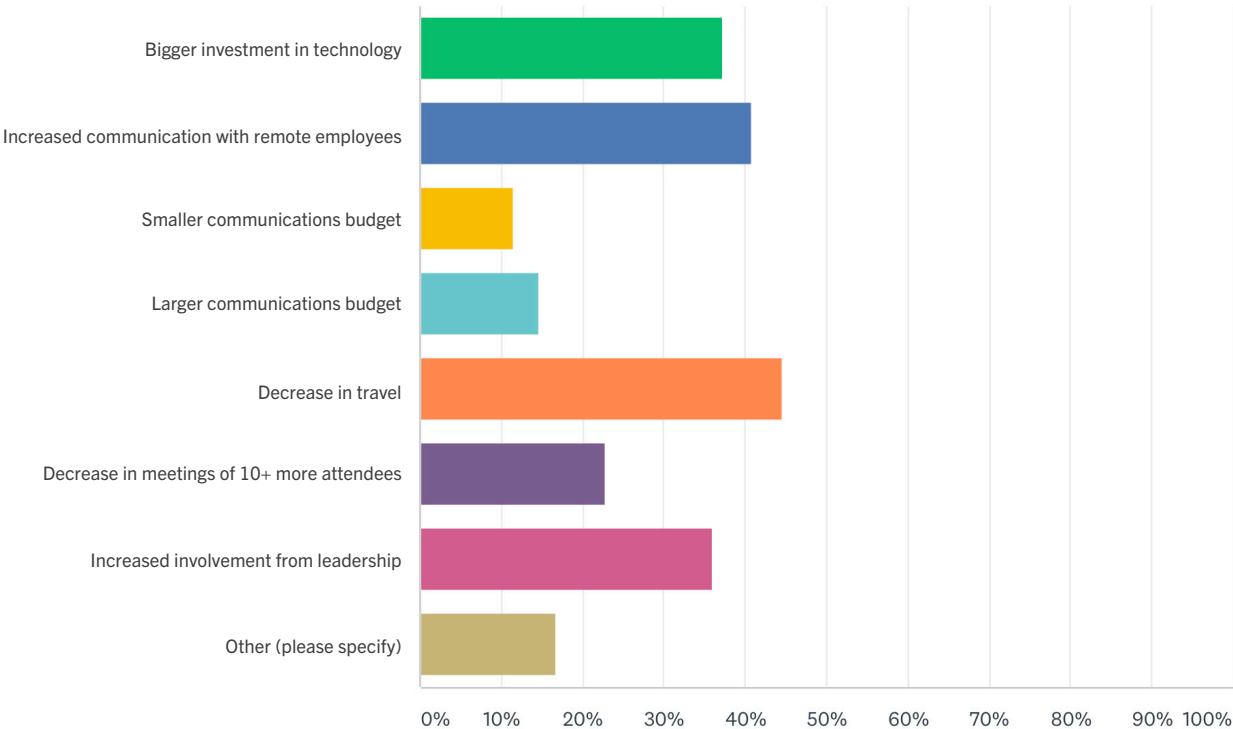
Other anticipated permanent changes include increased agility and greater increased respect for remote workers.

Many respondents also cite uncertainty about what changes might become permanent, reflecting the unsettled nature of the workplace as the crisis rolls on.

Key takeaways

This is a crucial time for communicators to be essential resources for leaders—offering an excellent opportunity to prove the value of your role in the organization.

If you did not have a crisis response plan, you might have been caught flatfooted, but in recent weeks many organizations have been making up for lost time. If you haven't made or reevaluated your crisis communications plan, you should do so immediately and develop a system to regularly update your plan.

Many expect to remote work to increase, and email is a top channel for engaging employees, but it's a good idea to diversify your outreach. Messaging platforms like Slack and Teams have grown in popularity, and videoconferencing has been a huge hit with employees.

Speaking of video, your CEO should consider recording a video message for stakeholders. The tactic was a top option for many respondents, and the C-suite/leadership team was a key resource for crisis communicators. If your CEO and other top execs are going to be effective, they need media training and preparation. When a crisis strikes, a leader who isn't camera-shy can be a great asset for your organization.

Finally, be thoughtful about the workload of your various team members and colleagues. An increased workload, coupled with a disrupted work environment, was a top challenge for respondents. That means leaders should consider doing triage to distinguish crucial assignments from back-burner endeavors.

Overworked teams won't deliver their best work—and you will need workers who aren't burnt out when the crisis subsides, and your organization starts its push for a bold, robust recovery.

About Us

For more than five decades, Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc., has been a leader in training for professionals in corporate communications, public relations, social media and management. Ever since the launch of "The Ragan Report" in 1970, Ragan has provided communicators and executives with timely, practical and relevant information that few others can match. Ragan is rooted in helping the communications professional advance in their careers while also improving the voice of the organizations they serve. The Ragan brand includes highly curated live and virtual events, two leadership Councils, multiple websites, an awards division, a consulting arm and targeted newsletters. Ragan live events draw more than 3,000 professionals annually and provide attendees with access to leading communicators, best practices and rich networking opportunities.

Ragan's Divisions:

Through our world-renowned newsletters, conferences, research reports and guides, Ragan Communications, Inc., delivers practical advice, real-world solutions and field-tested strategies for today's corporate communicator.

PR Daily is a news site that delivers news, advice, and opinions on the public relations, marketing, social media, and media worlds.

Ragan's Communications Leadership Council is an exclusive membership organization for senior-level corporate and internal communicators. Comprised of the most innovative companies in the world, the membership provides benefits for both senior leaders and their teams, including premier networking, extensive industry training and benchmarking reports.

Ragan's Social Media Leadership Council is an exclusive membership organization for senior-level social media leaders. The membership offers benefits for both senior leaders and their teams that are tailored to companies' social media needs, including monthly webinars, networking opportunities and in-person training.

Ragan's Crisis Leadership Board is the resource you need before, during and post-crisis. As a Board member, you have access to an online members-only portal, all-access pass to the annual Crisis Management Conference, subscription to the Crisis Communications Daily, access to research, data, case studies, checklists, tipsheets, articles and other resources, plus a peer to peer discussion board to interact with other members. You and your team will also have unlimited use of online training via webinars and virtual conferences on crisis management topics.

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The Ragan Team

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