

# One year on. What we learned in the pandemic



Reflections and predictions from the front line of communication, content and culture

## Introducing JW Squared

JW Squared sits at the crossroads of communication and content strategy

We apply our expertise in communication, public relations and digital content to revolutionise not only how our clients communicate but how they work in a digital world.

We identify the most influential voices that are shaping your reputation and influencing your sector.

We create content rich campaigns that ensure you are part of the conversations that matter - inside and outside your organisation.

We help you build the right teams,, resources and culture to make your digital strategy a success.

And we do all this to help our clients prepare for and navigate change - from product and platform launches to business transformation and regulatory change. JW Squared will be with you every step of the way.



## Forward

Jane Wilson, Co-founder & Strategic Comms Director



There's a memorable scene in *Apollo 13* where NASA engineers must fit a square filter into a circular hole, using only what the astronauts would have to hand in the Apollo module. For many working in comms throughout the pandemic, 'squaring the circle' became an everyday challenge as they sought to keep passengers moving, patients seen, customers engaged and students educated.

And just as huge advances in technology and innovation were made during the space race, so too COVID has taught us a new way of creating, collaborating, and communicating. Many of the lessons learned during the pandemic will shape the way we work throughout 2021 and beyond.

In our 'Communicating in the time of COVID' guide, we bring together stories from communication and

marketing leaders at the UK's busiest rail operator, the first UK hospital to hit the COVID headlines with passengers returning from Wuhan and the Diamond Princess, a global charity, the 2019 Guardian University of the Year and a national arts organisation. They describe not only the challenges they faced but how their response to those challenges is shaping how they work now and how they plan to work in future.

I would like to thank our contributors not only for their time in contributing to this guide but for their continued efforts throughout the pandemic. I extend special thanks to contributor Sally Sykes and all of her NHS colleagues for the amazing work they have done in the most challenging of circumstances to get the UK through this pandemic

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## Keeping key workers moving on the SWR network

Peter Williams, Commercial Director, South Western Railway

As a rail operator, our most important role was to make sure other key workers got to their places of work safely and on time. This meant that whilst office-based colleagues switched to working from home, those working in stations and train maintenance depots and, of course, on board our trains went about their duties as 'normal'.

### More tailored content

Our focus was on keeping our colleagues safe, informed and motivated – and having colleagues both in the work-place and working from home made this more challenging. To help address this we upped our employee communication activity with a series of webinars and

Q&As, tailored to different audiences across our business. These were led by our Managing Director and, to make them more engaging and relevant, often included high-profile external guests, including the Rail Minister, the Chief Executive of Guy's and St Thomas' National Foundation Trust and the Chairman of Network Rail.

### Adapted our operations

Given the near complete drop-off in passengers travelling (reaching at one point, only 5% of pre-COVID volumes) we scaled back our services to match the reduced levels of demand. This enabled us to take account of the effect of the pandemic on the availability of our own colleagues and provide a

reliable service that key worker customers could depend upon.

### A rapidly changing environment

Our external communication priority was to keep customers and stakeholders informed about changes to our train service and to government policy in what was, at least in the early weeks, a rapidly changing environment. We made sure we were plugged in to the latest developments, and able to quickly identify the implications for our customers and business. We did this through representation on industry forums and working collaboratively with our partner Network Rail.

## Keeping key workers on the move (con'td)

We considered how best to organise ourselves to make rapid decisions and implement them quickly. We did this by establishing teams with very specific remits that met on a daily basis. The Exec team initially met twice weekly to review plans and provide guidance. The wider business was kept informed through virtual meetings and a variety of channels including intranet, email and Yammer.

### Listening and responding to our customers

As an operationally focussed business, the need to respond quickly to a fast-moving situation came relatively naturally. Our approach was typified by many incremental adjustments to the way we work rather than a few major changes. One of the most important things we did was to establish a programme of customer research. This gave us important insights into current needs, such as reassurance around safety, as

well as future travel intentions. On the basis of this insight we are developing flexible tickets that will better meet customer needs.

In rail we're never short of stakeholder feedback, and fortunately much of it throughout the pandemic has been very positive. And crucially, it helped us to identify where changes were required, and to make those changes quickly. We've been able to make adjustments to train services and fine tune customer messaging based on what our research told us.

At South Western Railway, as we start to look forward to the easing of restrictions, we're getting ready to welcome our customers back. In time we'll revert to our 'business as usual' ways of working, but one thing I hope is that the camaraderie and can-do attitude we've created in our business becomes an enduring legacy.





## How Opera North played on during lockdown

Julia O'Sullivan, Head of Communications

In March 2020, as the COVID pandemic hit the UK, Opera North was in the middle of a tour of large theatres in the North of England. The impact of theatres shutting overnight - for us and for the wider arts and entertainment industry - was absolute.

### Adapting quickly

Our immediate communications responses were largely focused on the practicalities of customer service and emphasising business continuity and resilience. At the same time we were adjusting to the new world of remote working and assessing the wider and longer-term operational implications. Which shows had to be cancelled and how best to communicate cancellation and refund information to ticket buyers? How could we maintain our relationships with audiences and stakeholders without live events? What could we do to still create and share music with people even during lockdown? Could we, in some small way, help people to cope; to find escape and release through music?

### An appetite for digital content

An early success, in the very first week of lockdown 1.0, was to highlight some of our existing digital content, including a mammoth 15-hour film series of Wagner's epic Ring cycle. Theatres were shut, but arts editors were hungry for alternatives for their pages; the resulting media coverage coupled with an integrated push via social and digital marketing channels led to a spike in views and traffic to our website; early proof of an increasing audience appetite for digital performance content.

Over the next few weeks, our communications and marketing efforts focused on generating new creative content for social media and emails to our customer database. Although we weren't selling tickets, this was to some degree a continuation of our existing communications and content model, built around ongoing audience development and engagement and increasingly digital implementation.





## How Opera North played on during lockdown (cont'd)

### Investing in technology

But as the year progressed and COVID regulations continued to change, the Company made more significant changes, building a new video streaming platform and livestreaming two pay-to-view performances by the end of 2020. We also developed new kinds of participatory digital activity: a virtual choir, a raft of successful online events for supporters, and solo one-to-one performances by our musicians over Zoom. These were all offered on a pay-as-you-feel or donations basis, and crucially, underpinned by strong and cohesive digital communications, the development of new website functionality, and audio-visual content production.

### Building deeper customer relationships

This new mode of digital relationship goes beyond the content and customer

journey touchpoints of opening an email, liking a Facebook post or visiting our website, to offer audiences an increasingly active, personal and participatory form of digital experience. This has the potential to foster more dynamic and meaningful connections with the organisation across multi-platform digital spaces as well as within physical venues.

There are many challenges to face as the sector moves to restart live performances safely in the coming months and bring audiences back to physical venues, but the future may also offer significant opportunities for audience development and creative communications within a more blended model, bringing together live events, streamed and on-demand content, brand communications engagement, and digital participation.

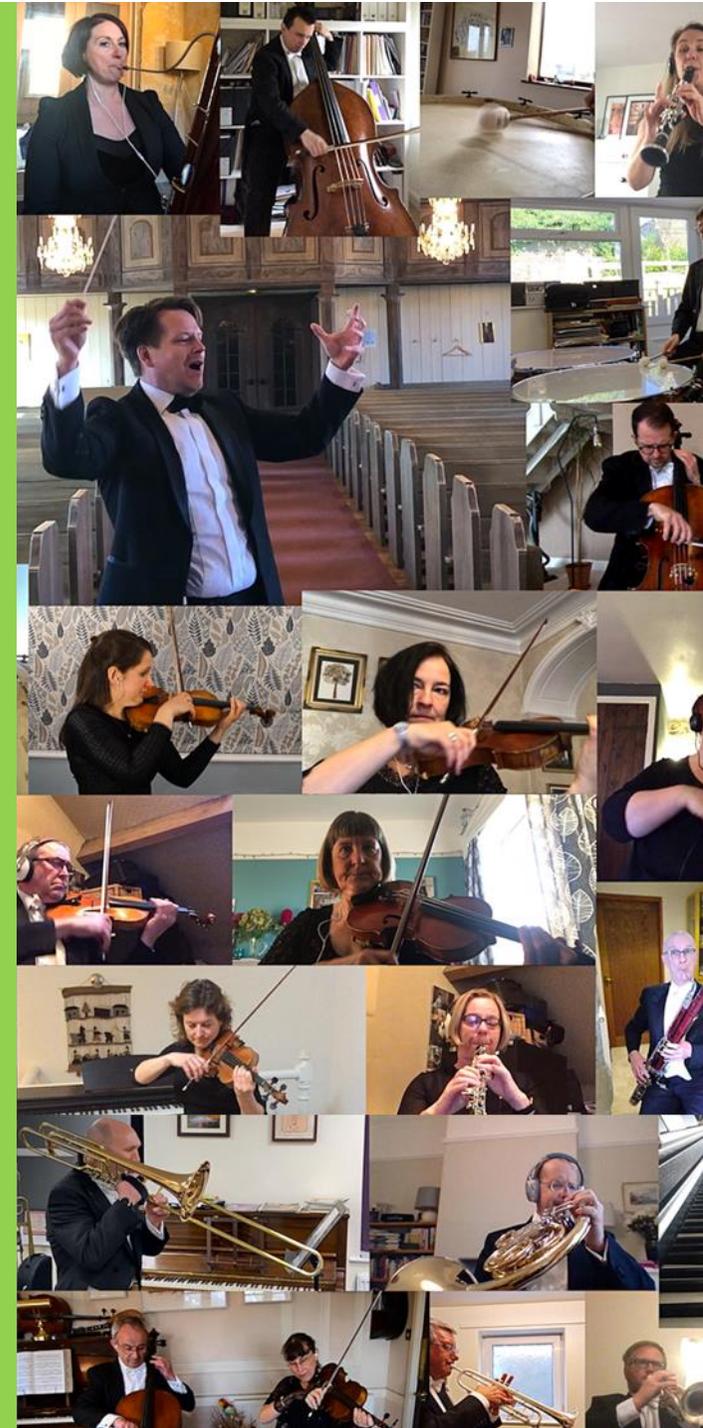




Image by Edward Howell at Unsplash

## From quarantine to vaccine.

### A year in the life of an NHS Communicator

Director of Communications and Engagement, Wirral University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust



The NHS has been the story for most of the last year -and for the Trust where I work it started earlier than most. Our Trust was the host for the first UK mass quarantine in 40 years when we looked after returning guests from Wuhan and the Diamond Princess cruise liner at Arrowe Park Hospital prior to the pandemic.

As I start to write this on my nearly one year old NHS laptop, I notice that the vowels 'o' and 'i' have been worn away after a year of typing COVID-19. For many of us it will feel like a year rubbed out, a year not punctuated by high days and holidays, family celebrations, spectator sport, live arts, gigs and festivals; and time spent with people we care about. For so many, it will be about the loss of loved ones and a deep, deep unforgettable sadness.

#### Innovation at pace

It's been a year of incredible sacrifice in the NHS, a time of challenge, for innovation at pace, for showing that a 'can do' spirit, plus kindness, compassion and togetherness. And as the pandemic hit us in waves, each time, we applied what we had learnt and vowed to keep some of the good practices, the agile working, which is less fettered with bureaucracy - and to build back better.

For communicators, our work has been valued like never before and we too have been frontline in this campaign against an invisible enemy - when behaviour change communications became vital.

## From quarantine to vaccine. (cont'd)

We were needed to reassure patients that we would be there for them still if they needed treatment. Communicators helped to convey the new ways of contacting the NHS and facilitated innovations like virtual clinics, online consultations and self-care guides. We promoted materials to support staff wellbeing and mental health through the many new and varied channels and tools available. COVID-19 communications were urgent, operational and life-saving. Making sure staff wore the correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), that visitors and patients followed procedures that could save their lives and that clinical trials could recruit people to drug trials, vaccine trials and plasma donations that helped us build research in real-time.

### A coordinated system

As NHS communications professionals and teams, we worked in (and are still bound by) 'Level 4' national incident

command structures. These recognise the need to work as a co-ordinated system, speaking with one voice for the NHS.

This has been a valuable lesson - to be reminded how powerful comms can be when we get aligned messaging and have clarity. The 'battle rhythm' of being embedded in the command structure is a lesson for future crisis comms - being 'in the room when it happened' is invaluable to conveying the messages afterwards. And as a wordsmith who enjoys the craft of the draft, I relearnt the value of short, sharp messaging- using immediate channels like What's App.

And whilst COVID-19 gave 'permission' to use some of the digital innovations and virtual patient contacts to continue transforming the NHS, as a communicator, for me, it also highlighted the value of the face to face and personal communications.





Image by Jon Tyson at Unsplash



## From quarantine to vaccine. (cont'd)

Our communications still keep the personal touch, even if using MS Teams and we regularly hold an open forum with our Exec Team and all staff. In amongst all the tech innovations like the iPad visits for patients when people can't come onto the wards, or are far away, it's the human touch that matters most.

### Living the news agenda

The NHS has been the story for most of the last year - and for the Trust where I work it started earlier than most. Our workload tracked those waves of infection and national data graphs that the public saw at Downing Street media briefings. We could see, daily, in our hospitals, twice as many patients in wave three, during winter pressures and after Christmas, than we had at the peak in wave one, April 2020.

We could see the increased use of oxygen - in fact our Trust built a new oxygen plant in a matter of days to meet demand in a way we'd never seen before. Those twists and turns in the national story and the human cost were our daily lives. Why did we experience increases in community transmission despite all we were doing in infection prevention and control? Then, news of a new, and more transmissible, variant gaining hold in the community.

### Hope springs

And then there is the vaccine. Working in one of the first vaccination hubs was a career highlight and a privilege. It was really satisfying to complete that circle from quarantine site to vaccination hub in less than a year, including work we'd done as a research and teaching hospital to be part of the vaccine trials.



## Working at pace to keep students safe

Emma Leech, Director of Marketing & Communication, Nottingham Trent University

The COVID pandemic brought challenges for everyone and universities were no exception. At Nottingham Trent University (NTU) we had started to scope a new approach to stakeholder relations just before the pandemic hit. Perfect timing.

### Pace and precision.

COVID brought uncertainty, fear, disruption and critical business risk. It hit us like a tsunami. We shifted our business model overnight with comms thrust centre-stage as fixers, problem solvers and transformation experts in one neat (and overly stretched) package. The team focused on teasing out organisational decision making at pace and with precision. We brought clarity to a complex and rapidly evolving agenda, and ensured empathy, choreography and practicality permeated our communications. We took an integrated, cross-channel approach with a digital first mindset. And we

championed stakeholders and asked the hard questions. Out of hours became the new business as usual as we navigated changing policies and information vacuums.

### New tools for new challenges

A new intranet, a strong social media strategy, more visible senior leadership, a project-led and agile approach and a clear and reassuring tone of voice were essential parts of the toolkit. New ways of working for us, including the wholesale adoption of Microsoft Teams, opened opportunities to innovate. From interactive Q and A sessions with the VC, staff briefings and our first ever digital colleagues conference to a bespoke comms hub, online wellbeing resources, COVID Q and As, and a proactive approach to video including self-shot material, the team embraced it all.

## Working at pace to keep students safe

NTU also set up a one stop shop approach for queries, complaints and issues. Our biggest shift? To fully embrace these channels University wide in one hit.

### Partnership working

We also enhanced external partnership working with national and regional bodies, the NHS, police, Public Health England, the Cabinet Office and many others. We're more connected than ever before. New stakeholder groups also took centre stage for us, notably parents. An innovative approach to parental/guardian communications saw almost 500 people sign up within 24 hours of launch and we've continued to see growth as we help our students' supporters stay up to speed, allowing them to signpost, nudge and guide "their" student at a difficult time.

### Active listening

Feedback has been consistently good - even during the bumps - but we've learnt to listen actively, communicate more quickly and clearly, and to be unafraid of saying "we don't know yet". We've used more video, animation and infographics. We've offered greater access to senior staff

than ever before. Crucially, we're seeing more two-way engagement, increasingly positive staff pulse survey feedback, and higher levels of student engagement.

It's very clear that the genie won't be going back into the bottle anytime soon. We'll keep all that we've launched and we'll build back better on the face-to face and human centric stuff.





## Focusing on hope for global charity

### Theirworld

Nicole Martin, Head of Media & Partnerships

As I write this, I am in the throes of organising our International Women's Day event, which brings together more than 400 activists, philanthropists, business leaders, educators, and policy makers to discuss prioritising girls' education around the world.

#### From face-to-face to screen-to-screen

This flagship event has always been in-person; however COVID-19 has forced us, like so many others to move online. With that comes challenges, not least because our diverse group of speakers and award-winners is spread across the world, with varying degrees of connectivity. So, unsurprisingly we have tested

and retested the platform and included pre-recorded content. In addition, speakers have been put through numerous tech checks and briefings to make sure they will sound their best on the day.

#### Messages of hope

We've launched new projects with our partners around the globe to help some of the world's most vulnerable children continue learning during the pandemic.

We have increased our communications with stakeholders and supporters to keep them up-to-date on how we are meeting the challenges of the pandemic.

## Focusing on hope (cont'd)

And because we want to spur action, we have used a message of hope rather than fear in our content and prioritised sharing positive news to help inspire and motivate people to join and amplify our campaign. This has meant fewer stories about the misery of COVID-19 and more reports about the impact of our work on the ground.

### Telling a positive story

Throughout the pandemic, we have celebrated with our supporters important milestones in our work, such as

winning large grants or launching a new project. It may seem counterintuitive to adopt an upbeat tone during a crisis but we believe that sharing positive stories and creating uplifting moments during these uncertain times are key to attracting, building and growing our supporter base.

It's been a huge undertaking. While the team hasn't been able to meet in person or visit our projects overseas, our ambitions have remained the same. If anything, they've been heightened by a pandemic that has exacerbated the global education crisis.





## Content trends 2021: Connections & Communities

Joanna Wells, Co-founder & Content Director

### Four online weddings ...

We are officially in the future we all imagined growing up - the one where our whole lives are managed via video calls and online group chat. I've seen the doctor, met my kids' teachers, had therapy and been told what products I need to dye my hair - all through my computer or phone screen. Schooling, counselling, dating, medical diagnosis, weddings and even funerals have all been live streamed and this trend is set to continue. Even as live events start again, we will have the choice to experience them in person or online, which will potentially make culture and the arts more inclusive and accessible.

As we emerge from our homes, having become increasingly screen reliant, what content trends will continue throughout 2021?

### Content fuelling the customer journey

As we have been forced to live our lives increasingly online, we've become more discerning. Customers want connective content and they want it in easily digestible formats. Now is the time to focus on your customers' journeys, recognise any pain points and fix them quickly. How consumers interact with content is now equally important as the content itself. And this means that simplicity is key. If a potential customer clicks on something and it's full of ads and banners, the layout is cluttered and confusing, the chances are that their journey will end at that stage.

### The continued rise of social responsibility

Inclusivity and sustainability continue to influence which brands we as consumers interact with. As we strive to build a better planet, brands need to be in touch with what consumers want and expect.



## Content trends for 2021 (cont'd)

Brands that are inclusive or have a view on the environment will see a positive impact in 2021, particularly with the UK focus on COP26. Listed companies are likely to see increased overlap between their ESG reporting and socially responsible consumer content. On the flipside, those that are inclusive, diverse and environmentally driven will reap the benefits of deeper connections with their communities.

### Building communities

As brands play their part in connecting and creating virtual communities there will be an increased reliance on User Generated Content (UGC) and Employee Generated Content (EGC) content across social media. UGC can be seen as more trustworthy by users. It shows that you have a product worth talking about and is a major influence on purchasing decisions. For evidence, just look at the proliferation of Instagram shops in your feed. Many brands have turned to this as a key content pillar over the last year and this trend will continue as social media users watch along, participate in and create more content, fuelled by platforms like TikTok.

### Hello. Can you hear me?

2021 is the year of audio. 2020 saw more of us communicate with our tech verbally whilst trapped home alone craving human interaction and voice search has increased with 1 in 5 in the UK having a smart speaker. Audio content will continue to proliferate in 2021 and beyond fuelled by our continuing appetite for podcasts and new platforms such as Clubhouse.

### Hello. Is it me you're looking for?

Visual search has also grown in popularity in recent years. I predict ecommerce retail will see a big increase in revenue for brands that create and design their pages accordingly. Visual search will become more important in determining overall SEO rankings. This increases the importance of the image alt tag descriptor - which also has the benefit of making content more inclusive.

As we emerge from our homes and start to begin to adjust to life After Covid (AC) - our onscreen dependency, which grew in lockdown will fuel a need for brands to develop integrated, multi-platform strategies with engaging digital content at their heart.



# The five lessons of COVID comms

## 1. Pace and productivity

The first lesson is about pace. Through COVID, we've realised that by taking a ruthless approach to prioritising the outcomes that matter most, we can all be more productive while maintaining high creative standards. The pace of the early days of lockdown is unsustainable but our contributors discovered that increased focus on key priorities, brings with it faster work and better outcomes. As our work patterns begin to take a have a new rhythm in the coming months and years, the most effective teams will keep that focused approach on the most important outcomes to guide how they work and what they prioritise.

## 2. New tools and new tech

All, our contributors embraced the technology and tools that helped them collaborate with colleagues and reach audiences more effectively and these are likely to be among the most enduring changes as we move to the next phase of working patterns. A poll of coms pros conducted in March 2020 supported this

with most respondents saying that they would continue using the new tech they had adopted including video meetings, virtual networking and digital collaboration tools. So, it looks like tools such as Zoom and Slack are here to stay. The challenge for employers will be how to best use new found collaborative tech with face to face interaction in a bended working model.

## 3. Partnership and collaboration

Partly driven by the increased use of digital collaboration tools and the need to keep stakeholders informed in a fast-paced environment, brands and organisations in the private and public sector forged partnerships during the pandemic. This reflected a broader societal coming together and an expectation that organisations should be working together for a greater good. This expectation of collaboration and partnership will endure long after lockdown (hopefully) becomes a distant memory.

# The five lessons of COVID comms (cont'd)

## 4. Know your audience

Our contributor Emma Leech of Nottingham Trent University used the term 'active listening' in her chapter. COVID has forced organisations to listen to their stakeholders - inside and outside their organisations - and to base their actions, communication and content on what they hear. As the nation (and the world) was plunged into a reality that few of us could have prepared for, we looked to our employers, to the organisations we trust and the brands we buy to meet our new needs. They could only do this by really understanding those needs. This focus on active listening and audience insight is likely to drive an increase in investment in planning, research and data in the practice of communication.

## 5. Personal and accessible

Before the pandemic I had never been in the homes of many of my colleagues or clients. By the end of the first month of lockdown I had seen kitchens, bedrooms, dining rooms, living rooms and even one very lucky colleague's home pool! We've seen our CEO's in a way very few of them will have previously brought to the workplace and we've seen them more often. And it was the same on television and on social media. We've seen movie stars,

politicians, scientists and journalists in their homes, showing a different and more personal side. We've probably all learned more about the domestic lives of our colleagues than ever before and no longer bat an eyelid when a video meeting is interrupted by a curious cat or a demanding child. Even in a time when most of us have had very little face to face contact, this has had the effect of making communication more personal. For employee communication, it has made leadership more accessible and increased expectations around communication from the top. This is a trend that will endure and have an impact on comms ranging from consumer marketing and PR to corporate reputation and employee engagement.

**For more information or to find out how JW Squared can support your communication, content or culture strategy, please get in touch:**

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Our next **SQRD Field Report** will focus on how employers will rise to the challenge of new blended working patterns. To find out more, to contribute or share an insight, contact [jane@jwsquared.co.uk](mailto:jane@jwsquared.co.uk)