

## How Businesses and Government Can Grow Public Trust

2020 has been a year defined by multiple crises - the phrase “unprecedented times” has become a normal part of our vocabulary. When it comes to how Americans view government and business sector response, there is opportunity for improvement. To grow the public’s trust, strong crisis communication plans are critical.

The Public Affairs Council is the membership association of over 700 corporations, associations, and nonprofits representing over 10,000 individual public affairs professionals worldwide. Based on a Public Affairs Council/[Morning Consult](#) survey and Council staff expertise, outlined below are insights on public opinion and steps for creating a communications plan.

### Opinion of Government

In a recent survey<sup>1</sup> by the Public Affairs Council, “2020 Public Affairs Pulse Survey: What Americans Think About Business and Government,” many Americans questioned if the government has done a good or excellent job of balancing health and safety with re-opening the economy during the pandemic:

- 51% of respondents said they held a favorable opinion of their state government when it comes to balancing health and safety
- 34% said they had a favorable opinion of the federal government
- 42% felt their state government had done a good job of balancing safety and health with the economy during the pandemic
- 27% rate the federal government’s performance as good or excellent

While the trust and approval in state governments is higher than in the federal government, the majority of respondents still did not report a favorable opinion of state governments, and so work still needs to be done.

### Opinion of Business

In the same survey, Americans were asked how they felt businesses were handling the major crises facing America:

- 45% of respondents had favorable opinion of major company’s pandemic response
- 66% of respondents had favorable opinion of small business’ pandemic response

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<sup>1</sup> [https://pac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Public-Affairs-Pulse-Survey-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://pac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Public-Affairs-Pulse-Survey-Report_Final.pdf)

- 75% of respondents said that racism is a serious problem in America, but only 28% viewed businesses as playing a positive role in combatting racism
- However, 51% said they would have a more positive opinion of a business if it took steps to combat racism.

While the results were more positive than the public's rating of the government, room for improvement is still indicated.

### **How to Grow the Public's Trust**

How can leaders from government and businesses close these opinion and trust gaps? Embrace the "Three Ts" of crisis communications and develop messages that are Targeted, Timely, and Transparent.

1. **Targeted**- Be more thoughtful when pushing out messages. Carefully identify the stakeholders who need to hear your message and consider the needs and background of their audience. Once you know your audience, dial in on your vehicle - whether that's social media, traditional media, email, etc.
2. **Timely**- Information comes at the public quickly and narratives can rapidly develop. It's difficult to overturn a narrative once it has taken root on social media or in the news. It's essential to "be the reporter"- to be the one bringing the facts and the story to your audience. In a time where "cancel culture" is trending, assume a controversy can develop at any time and have your communication plan already in place so you can lead the conversation rather than play catch-up.
3. **Transparent**- Study after study shows that authenticity matters to audiences and impacts their opinions and responses. Be as open and honest with stakeholders as you can (while still balancing any internal sensitivities). More transparency around information sources, why you are taking action, and how you are prioritizing stakeholder needs and safety will allow trust to grow.

In summary, the public expects government and businesses to be part of the solutions to the crises facing America. Finding ways to contribute and then communicate your contributions to the public in a timely, transparent, and authentic way will help the public invest in the policymakers and businesses leading our country.