

Communication plan: cancelling an international conference

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<p>In 2020, the event industry has been faced with unprecedented circumstances caused by the global coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. Events have had to be cancelled, and event organisers have had to communicate about the cancellation to the participants of the event. It is vital to have a communication plan ready when the crisis hits and event organisers must act fast regarding communication.</p> <p>The topic of this product-oriented thesis is event risk management and crisis communication. The aim is to create a communication plan for a situation where an international conference, which charges a registration fee, is cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. The plan focuses on communication to the participants, not any other stakeholders, and works as template when creating a plan for a specific event. The product of this thesis, the communication plan, includes step-by-step guidelines and sample messages.</p> <p>The communication plan was created by combining the knowledge presented in the theoretical framework and the findings from benchmarking. The theoretical framework explains the key concepts of the thesis and why the product of the thesis is essential. It presents relevant background theory and knowledge needed to create the communication plan. Benchmarking the communication of cancelled international conferences resulted in the creation of best practices when communicating to the participants.</p> <p>The thesis is commissioned by event agency Tapahtumantekijät Oy which designs and produces business and corporate events for its clients. The commissioner has a growing interest towards international conferences, and the current situation demands the agency to learn more about how to communicate if a conference is cancelled.</p>	
Keywords Crisis communication, event communication, event cancellation, event risk management, conference	

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1 Introduction

The year 2020 has had and will have an enormous impact on the event industry. The world is currently facing unprecedented circumstances caused by the global coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. Events have had to be cancelled, postponed, or transformed into virtual events, and the whole event industry has been hit by something that has changed the industry in just a matter of days. Lyti, which is a Finnish software specialised in participant data collection and management, conducted a survey where they asked 497 Northern European event professionals how they see the future of events. Between March and May 2020, these professionals had a total of 4973 events planned and 40 percent of these events were cancelled due to COVID-19. (Kauppila & Ridderstråle 2020.) Event organisers have been faced with an unexpected situation of having to communicate about the cancellation to the participants of the event when the cancellation is due to unforeseen circumstances not caused by the organiser. Having a communication plan ready for such a situation is vital in order to avoid making mistakes and wrong decisions when event organisers have to act fast regarding communication.

1.1 The aim of the thesis

The purpose of the thesis is to develop the commissioning company as communication professionals. The aim is to create a general communication plan for a situation where an international conference is cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances such as force majeure. The participants of the conference have paid a registration fee, and the communication plan focuses on communication to the participants, not any other stakeholders. The participants have invested more in the event when compared to an event which is free of charge and local. Everyone has made an investment by purchasing a ticket to the conference. Due to the conference being international, many participants have booked accommodation and flights or other transport to the conference. These investments create a need for specific communication.

The thesis is product-oriented where the product, the communication plan, is created based on the knowledge presented in the theoretical framework and the best practices gathered by benchmarking. The plan includes step-by-step guidelines and samples messages. The plan is a template which can be used as a base when creating a plan for a specific event.

1.2 The commissioner

The thesis is commissioned by Tapahtumantekijät Oy which is a Finnish event agency based in Turku and Helsinki. Its services include concept planning, strategic planning, creative design, event production, event directing, and framework agreements (Tapahtumantekijät 2019). Tapahtumantekijät Oy was founded in 1992, and it focuses on business and corporate events such as seminars, annual galas, marketing events, conferences, award ceremonies, and employee events. Its clients consist of companies, organisations, associations, and public administrations. According to Tapahtumantekijät (2019) “We are a full service event agency. Tapahtumantekijät translates directly into Event makers. We plan, produce and direct well designed and effective events. Events that move, touch, effect and activate - creating change.”

In March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Finnish government instructed to cancel events, and Tapahtumantekijät was faced with a sudden and unprecedented situation; all events planned for spring and summer 2020 had to be cancelled or postponed. A vast majority of the events Tapahtumantekijät designs and produces do not have a registration fee. However, there is a growing interest to design and produce more international conferences which often charge a participation fee. Cancelling an event which is free of charge for the participants is simpler than cancelling an event where the participants have been charged a registration fee. If an event with a registration fee is cancelled, the event organiser has to inform the participants whether they will receive a refund, and if so, when will this happen and how.

Although the client often has the main responsibility of event communication, Tapahtumantekijät is involved in planning and executing communication. The role of Tapahtumantekijät in event communication varies depending on the client and event project. The coronavirus pandemic created a need to understand more about event communication when an event has to be cancelled, especially when communicating to the participants of the event. The aim of the thesis is to create a communication plan which can be used as a template when tailoring a plan for a specific conference if Tapahtumantekijät is faced with event cancellations in the future.

1.3 The author and her objective

The author has around four to five years of experience working in the event industry. She has been working for Tapahtumantekijät since January 2017 and started her career at Tapahtumantekijät by doing her five-month work placement as an event assistant, which

was part of her studies in Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. After completing her work placement, she worked as a part-time event coordinator for four months during autumn 2017. From January 2018 the author started working full-time as an event coordinator, and upon the completion of this thesis she was promoted to producer during summer 2020. One of the author's main tasks at Tapahtumantekijät is to plan and execute participant communication together with her colleagues and clients. For the author, the objective of the thesis is to develop as an event professional by learning more about event risk management, crisis communication, and communication plans.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into six main headings. The structure supports a product-oriented thesis and is as follows.

- 1. Introduction:**
Presents the thesis topic, the aim of the thesis, the commissioner, the author, and structure of the thesis.
- 2. Theoretical framework:**
Introduces all the key concepts, justifies the need for a communication plan, and provides a knowledge-base for the creation of the plan.
- 3. Benchmarking:**
Looks into communication of cancelled conferences, and as a result, provides best practises of communicating a cancellation to the participants.
- 4. Development process:**
Explains how the communication plan was developed.
- 5. Communication plan:**
Presents the actual product of the thesis, the communication plan.
- 6. Discussion:**
Discusses the future use of the plan, describes the thesis process, and analyses the author's learning outcomes.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter explains the key concepts of the thesis and provides a knowledge-base for the product – the communication plan. It includes arguments and justifications why the product of the thesis is essential. In addition, it presents relevant background theory and knowledge needed to create a communication plan.

2.1 Conferences

Business events lack a universally accepted and standardised terminology regarding the whole industry and its sectors, which poses a number of problems when discussing the industry. There are differences in the terminology used in the English language in US and Europe. The terms conference, congress, and convention can all mean large-scale events which are hosted by professional, trade, or other non-corporate organisations. Conferences are events where a specific issue is presented and where the participants meet and exchange views. (Davidson 2019, 6.) According to the International Congress and Convention Association ICCA (2020) “a conference is a participatory meeting designed for discussion, fact-finding, problem solving and consultation”. A conference can be a one-time event or a recurring event. The duration of a conference is usually limited and it has specific objectives. (ICCA 2020.) Shone & Parry (2008, 8) define conferences as meetings designed to exchange ideas. The number of participants can extend from less than a hundred to tens of thousands (Bowdin, Allen, O’Toole, Harris & McDonnell 2011, 25).

According to Silvers (2008, 8-9) conferences fall under two event genres: business and corporate events as well as meetings and conventions. Business and corporate events often focus on specific strategic objectives which can be related to enhancing employee and/or financial performance, whereas meetings and conventions focus on bringing people together to exchange information, debate or discuss, educate, and build relationships. Conferences can be organised by trade or professional associations as well as corporate or government organisations. The organisers can also be educational, fraternal, military, religious, or social groups. Although all events have similarities in how they are managed and organised, it is important to determine which genre the event represents in order to understand its typical characteristics. By understanding the characteristics, we can figure out the scope and types of risks to focus on. (Silvers 2008, 7-9.)

In this thesis the term conference is chosen to represent all events that can be defined as conferences, conventions, or congresses.

2.2 Event risk management

Events are particularly likely to be affected by and vulnerable to risks (Bowdin & al. 2011, 594). In general, risk can be described as an unknown outcome, but it is not solely a negative concept – it is the potential of something bad or good happening. Risk management can uncover potential problems as well as opportunities. (Bladen, Kennell, Abson & Wilde 2012, 202; Silvers 2008, 4.) In the context of events, risk can be defined as the probability and consequence of an event not achieving its objectives (Bowdin & al. 2011, 593). Risk is an essential part of the event industry (O'Toole & Mikolaitis 2002, 134). In fact, all events are risks because their production incurs liabilities but can end up in a positive result. In order to be prepared for everything, one has to estimate the worst that can happen and the best that can happen. (Silvers 2008, 4.)

Management can be described as planning, organising, directing, and controlling of resources and activities in order to attain goals and objectives (Silvers 2008, 4). Event risk management is the process of identifying, assessing, and dealing with the issues that may prevent the event from fulfilling its objectives. However, risk management can also reveal opportunities. (Bowdin & al. 2011, 594.) In risk management, one does not avoid the issue, but recognises uncertainties and reacts to them with the sole purpose to minimise liabilities and maximise opportunities (Silvers 2008, 4). As stated by Silvers (2008, 1) “risk management is one of the primary responsibilities of event organisers, yet so often ignored or misunderstood”. In today’s world, risk management is becoming more and more a priority, also in the meetings and events industry (Silvers 2008, 3).

Assessing the risk plays a vital part in successful event design, event execution, and event budget management (Allen 2009, 335-339). Risks should be continually under review as they can occur anytime during the event management process (O'Toole & Mikolaitis 2002, 133). Risk management should be included in all phases of event management: initiation, planning, implementation, the event, and closure. Risk management is a process where all aspects of the event impact the whole event. In event risk management, it is equally as important to consider loss prevention and loss control as it is to consider the health and safety of everyone involved. (Silvers 2008, 3-4, 17, 13.) The aim is to minimise losses and maximise opportunities. A risk can also turn into an opportunity when changes to the event plan have to be made due to risk assessment and these changes turn out to have a positive effect on the event. (O'Toole & Mikolaitis 2002, 139.)

Risk management is a process where potential risks are identified, steps to reduce or mitigate them are taken, and contingency plans are produced (Shone & Parry 2013, 222-

223). The event organiser's ability to predict the future as accurately as possible is the key to successful event risk management (Bladen & al. 2012, 41). In practise, risk management can be described as the mindset of the event organiser. Risks are constantly assessed throughout the event project, and the organiser asks the question "what could go wrong?" numerous times during the project. The ability to identify and assess the risks grows as the organiser gains more experience.

Communication procedures and emergency planning are one of the key areas to consider in event risk management (Bladen & al. 2012, 195). In fact, Silvers (2008, 6) lists emergency planning as one of the typical event risk factors. It includes "inadequate crisis management plans, lack of emergency response coordination and deficient disaster contingency plans" (Silvers 2008, 6). There are several areas which should be considered when making a risk assessment, force majeure being one of them (Allen 2009, 336).

A communication plan is vital for the risk management process. An event communication plan should include strategies how to disseminate vital information in a crisis situation. (Silvers 2008, 139, 186.) This thesis focuses on having a communication plan ready in a situation when an actual risk, in this case the cancellation of an event, has actualised. More specifically, it focuses on a situation where the cancellation happens due to circumstances that are out of the organiser's control. It does not discuss how the cancellation could be avoided, or whether the event should be postponed or turned into a virtual event instead of cancellation.

2.2.1 Contingency plans

Risk assessment is the basis for contingency plans (Bladen & al. 2012, 203). They are an outcome of risk analysis. Contingency plans include feasible alternative actions which respond to the impact of the risk. (Bowdin & al. 2011, 601.) Contingency plans are strategies and detailed plans which deal with risks in case they actualise and how to recover from the situation. They are developed to mitigate the consequences of possible risks. Contingency planning is necessary in order for the event to be able to withstand the consequences of any types of risks. If an event is cancelled, the contingency plan should include the actions and steps which must be taken if the cancellation occurs. (Silvers 2008, 106, 134.)

Communicating about the cancellation to the participants of the event is part of contingency planning. In other words, a crisis communication plan is one of the contingency plans an event should have.

2.2.2 Cancelling an event

Cancelling an event is a result of risk management. If the risks become too great, the only option is to cancel the event. (Bowdin & al. 2011, 605.) Generally, for the event organiser, cancelling an event is the very last option (Bladen & al. 2012, 82). Having to cancel an event is considered as the event organiser's worst-case scenario (Flores 2 March 2020). In the mindset of an event organiser the first instinct is to make sure the event actualises, but sometimes the only correct decision is to cancel or postpone the event (Robinson, Wale & Dickson 2010, 96). The first important step when cancelling an event is to communicate with the participants and stop selling tickets. All tickets should be refunded and the event organiser should start the refund process as soon as possible. (Flores 2 March 2020.) The decision to cancel may not always be in the hands of the event organiser, but decided by the authorities as happened during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Event organisers enter into contracts with various stakeholders and event contractors, one of the them being the event participants. Event organisers must invest time in writing the contracts because in order to avoid disputes the contracts must be incredibly detailed. It is essential that all parties are in agreement, and that the contracts state everything clearly. (Van der Wagen, White & Van der Wagen 2010, 387.) When a participant purchases a ticket or registers for an event, it should be considered as a contractual agreement between the participant and the event organiser (Silvers 2008, 59). The contract clauses should include cancellation policy which covers the cancellation by either party (Bladen & al. 2012, 86).

When making event risk assessment, the event organisers should look into the contract clauses regarding force majeure and cancellation. Investing in an event cancellation insurance can prove to be beneficial as it can cover the cancellation costs. (Allen 2009, 337.) Events can be affected by issues that are outside the organiser's control, like disasters such as an outbreak of a contagious disease. If an event has to be cancelled, the event insurance can cover the situation. (Bladen & al. 2012, 82.)

2.2.3 Force majeure in events

The French term Force majeure translates to "greater force". Force majeure refers to a contractual clause which alters parties' obligations and/or liabilities under a contract when an extraordinary event or circumstance beyond their control, like a natural and unavoidable catastrophe, prevents one or all of them from fulfilling those obligations. (Investopedia 2020; Pinsent Masons 2020.) According to Meeting Professionals International (2020)

Force Majeure is something that neither party has no control of, and it makes performance impossible which will excuse performance by both parties.

Force majeure is an important contract clause which should be included in all event contracts (Silvers 2008, 61). Force majeure allows contract cancellation or termination due to conditions beyond the party's control when the conditions make it impossible to perform under the terms of agreement, and it removes liability from both parties. These conditions are described as acts of God such as weather phenomenon, natural disasters, war, terrorism, epidemics and pandemics, government regulations, transportation issues, disasters, and strikes. (Bladen & al. 2012, 87; Silvers 2008, 61.)

2.3 Event communication

Communication supports the whole event management process. Communication is also a critical part of the event risk management process as it works as a link between the stakeholders and the information related to the event project. Communication consist of the message, mode, and medium, and it is considered as a two-way process. (Silvers 2008, 184-186.)

Silvers (2008, 186) categorises event communication tools to four categories: written, visual, aural, and electronic. Written tools include, for example, brochures, contracts, manuals, and reports, whereas visual tools include, for example, videos, photographs, illustrations, and signage. Announcements, alarms, meetings, and telephone calls, for example, are considered as aural tools, whereas electronic tools include, for example, emails, internet, radio, and television. All these tools have multi-functional capabilities, and they have different functions and implications in the normal functioning of an event as well as in a crisis situation. (Silvers 2008, 186.)

Silvers (2008, 204) defines an event stakeholder as "an individual or organisation that is financially, politically, emotionally, contractually or personally invested in an event". Participants are categorised as one of the typical event stakeholder groups (Silvers 2008, 204). Participants are primary stakeholders; without them the event would cease to exist (Masterman & Wood 2006, 18). The event organiser must determine and manage the relationships with all various stakeholders by means of engagement and communication to ensure their commitment to the success of the event. Stakeholder management should include recognising possible conflicts and handling such conflicts through open communication. Communication plays a major role in improving the stakeholder's understanding and altering possible negative perceptions. (Silvers 2008, 204-205.)

2.4 Crisis communication

According to Heath & O'Hair (2009, 105) there are three central goals in crisis communication:

1. Preventing or minimising damage which can mean harm to people, finance, reputation, or the environment.
2. Maintaining the organisation's operations, in other words business continuity.
3. Repairing the organisation's reputation.

"The primary goal of crisis management is to protect stakeholders from harm and the secondary goals are to protect reputational and financial assets." A crisis threatens to damage the organisation's reputation which is a valuable, intangible resource and asset. A reputation refers to how the stakeholders perceive the organisation, and it is built through the organisation's relationships with its stakeholders where positive interactions create favourable reputations, and negative interactions create unfavourable reputations. (Heath & O'Hair 2009, 99, 107.) An organisation that doesn't do enough to handle a crisis will cause irreversible damage to its image and reputation (Anthonissen 2008, 14). The greatest damage can be caused by, not the crisis itself, but the way the crisis is managed, particularly the manner in which information provision and communication is handled (Pender & Sharpley 2005, 296). The organisation's reputation, image, and good name are at risk at every phase of a crisis situation. Building a positive image can take years of hard work and devotion, but it can be destroyed in an instant. (Anthonissen 2008, 15.) Crisis communication provides a tool to protect the organisation's vital resource and asset, its reputation (Heath & O'Hair 2009, 107). Silvers (2008, 130) lists crisis communication as one of the major emergency management functions in event management.

Zaremba (2010, 32) presents the four R's of crisis communication which are relationships, reputation, responsibility, and response. Relationships can exist before the crisis, and they refer to the link between the organisation and its stakeholders. Reputation also exists before the crisis, and it indicates whether the organisation is perceived as legitimate. The crisis and crisis communication can either reinforce or damage the reputation. Responsibility stands for whether the stakeholders think the organisation is responsible for the crisis and to what extent. Lastly, response is the way the organisation has responded to the crisis when it comes to communication and behaviour. (Zaremba 2010, 32-33.)

Crisis communication consists of two related processes: crisis knowledge management and stakeholder reaction management. There is a demand for knowledge in a crisis. By processing information, the crisis team creates knowledge, and by achieving situational awareness the team will have enough information to make decisions. In order to deter-

mine how to react and what message to communicate, the team must understand the crisis situation. Understanding how the stakeholders will perceive the crisis will enable the crisis team to manage and influence the reactions of the stakeholders by using communication. Stakeholder reactions can harm the organisation's reputation and image as well as cause financial loss. (Heath & O'Hair 2009, 99-100.) Zaremba (2010, 11) presents the golden rule approach to crisis communication:

"When communicating with audiences ask yourself these questions:

If you were a member of the particular audience

- a. What would you want to know?
- b. What would you need to know?
- c. How would you want the message to be communicated?
- d. What channels would you need to be available to you if you had further questions or comments about the crisis?"

(Zaremba 2010, 11.)

Communication is not a linear activity where the communication goes only one way from the sender to the receiver. It is inevitable that some of the receivers respond to the message with follow-up questions, which makes communication a nonlinear activity. A common misconception is to believe that the communication process ends when a message is sent. The organisation must be prepared to respond to the reactions the message induces. (Zaremba 2010, 29, 100.) A message the event organiser sends will most likely generate questions, hence there must be staff available to answer all the questions the participants have.

Crisis communication should be quick (Coombs 2015, 131; Heath & O'Hair 2009, 104; Isohookana 2007, 208; Kortetjärvi-Nurmi, Ollikainen & Kuronen 1997, 152). The organisation must get its message out fast, especially nowadays when current technology enables information to spread very quickly, which reduces the response time the crisis team has. Responding quickly is important in order for the organisation to create an impression of control and to be able to make sure that rumours do not start to circulate. A crisis creates an information void which someone will inevitably fill. If the organisation does not react fast enough, the void might be filled by inaccurate information which might enhance the damage caused by the crisis. The situation can become difficult if the stakeholder hears about the crisis before they are officially notified. (Coombs 2015, 130-132; Heath & O'Hair 2009, 104.) It is utmost important to communicate efficiently and effectively (Anthonissen 2008, 17). When responding quickly, the organisation might not have time to gather all necessary information. However, being silent implies that the organisation is passive, uncertain, and does not control the situation. (Coombs 2015, 132.) The response "no comment" should be avoided since it can be interpreted in many ways, and therefore, provide false information (Coombs 2015, 133; Heath & O'Hair 2009, 104; Isohookana 2007, 208;

Kortetjärvi-Nurmi, Ollikainen & Kuronen 1997, 152). It can, for example, be perceived as a sign of guilt. It is much better and completely acceptable to admit that there is a lack of information and that any updates will be communicated as soon as possible. (Coombs 2015, 131-133; Heath & O'Hair 2009, 104). The information should always be delivered when promised, otherwise the trust will be broken (Coombs 2015, 133).

Crisis communication should be consistent and conducted by the spokespersons who will be the voice of the organisation during the crisis. An organisation should appoint multiple official spokespersons. One will not suffice because one person cannot be available at all times. (Coombs 2015, 133; Heath & O'Hair 2009, 104.) The official spokespersons should provide a unified response by presenting a consistent message. They should be trained in advance to be truthful, clear, concise, calm, and controlled. One point of view is that people should be discouraged from becoming unofficial spokespersons. Anyone else expect the official spokespersons should refrain from commenting in order for the organisation to be able to control the communication. (Coombs 2015, 80-81, 133.) However, another point of view is that it is unrealistic to expect that no one else except the official spokespersons will comment on the situation to the media or stakeholders. Therefore, everyone in the organisation should have access to the same knowledge regarding the crisis. This enables everyone, also the unofficial spokespersons, to understand the situation which supports the creation of consistent messages. (Coombs 2015, 133-134; Heath & O'Hair 2009, 105.)

Crisis communication should be open. Openness can be defined as honesty, availability, and willingness to disclose information. The organisation must honour the stakeholder's request for information in order for the stakeholder to accept the organisation's message. If you cannot answer the question, let the stakeholder know why you don't have the answer and when will you be able to deliver the answer. As crisis-related information can be sensitive information which cannot be published, full disclosure is often impossible and not advised. The approach should be somewhere between limited disclosure and full disclosure. However, limited disclosure should not be a form of deception. (Coombs 2015, 134-136.) The stakeholders must receive accurate information about the crisis (Heath & O'Hair 2009, 104). The organisation must not lie to the stakeholders and should share all crisis-related information if there's a risk of further harm. In order for the organisation to maintain a good organisation-stakeholder relationship, the stakeholders should receive all the information they need to know. Dishonesty can cause serious damage. (Coombs 2015, 134-136.)

In a crisis situation, the first statement will have an impact on how further communication is perceived by the stakeholders. A crisis causes stress, and during emotionally charged situations people's ability to process information will be reduced. Consequently, the message needs to be clear and easy to understand. (Coombs 2015, 130.)

2.4.1 Crisis communication plan

An up-to-date crisis communication plan is a crucial tool when managing a crisis. No matter what sector the organisation operates in, what type of activity it has, or what the size of the organisation is, every organisation should have a crisis communication plan. An organisation should appoint a person who is responsible for mobilising and coordinating crisis communication when faced with a crisis situation. (Anthonissen 2008, 14-15, 32.) According to Silvers (2008, 139, 186) a communication plan with strategies how to distribute important information in a crisis situation is crucial for the event risk management process.

A crisis communication plan should include:

- The message.
- The recipient of the message.
- The author and sender of the message.
- The time the message is disseminated.

(Anthonissen 2008, 28.)

2.4.2 Stages of event crisis communication



Figure 1. Stages of crisis communication (Plaxen 2020)

As figure 1 demonstrates, there are three stages in crisis communication. The first stage is pre-crisis, where risks are monitored by exploring vulnerabilities and discovering what could potentially go wrong. In this stage decisions on how potential risks are going to be handled are made by creating a crisis communication plan which is based on the vulnerability audit. In addition, the people who are going to be involved in communicating on the organisation's behalf will be trained. The second stage is crisis where information is collected and processed in order for the crisis team to be able to make decisions. In this stage, crisis messages are created and disseminated. The third stage is post-crisis where the crisis management effort is assessed by analysing if people were satisfied. In this stage, follow-up crisis messages are provided. If the event is postponed, participants are informed of the new dates of the event or any new information. If the event is cancelled, information regarding refunds is provided. If the event is not postponed or cancelled, it is important to provide regular updates about the current situation. (Plaxen 2020.)

2.4.3 Event crisis communication

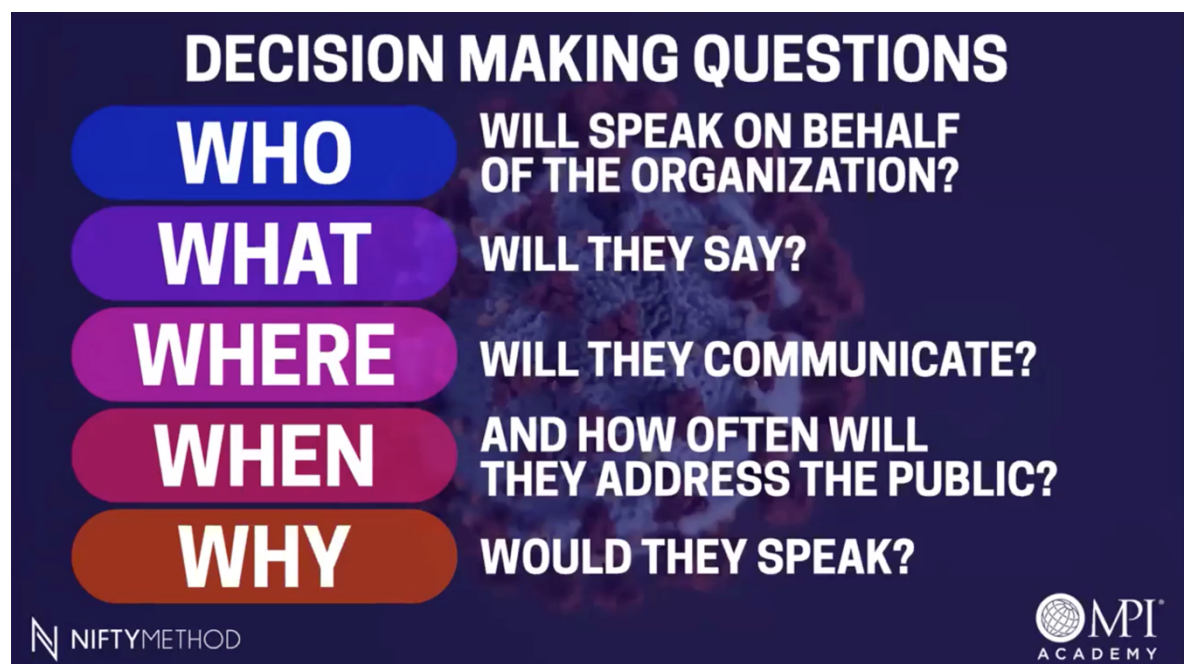


Figure 2. Decision making questions (Plaxen 2020)

An event communication plan can be created by asking five questions: who, what, where, when, and why (see figure 2). When making an event crisis communication plan, decide who will speak on behalf of the organisation. Decide what they will say and where they will communicate. Reaching as many people as possible is important and should be taken into account when considering where to communicate and what is the appropriate channel

to use. Therefore, often all channels are appropriate, and hence, should be used. Furthermore, consider how often will you communicate with the stakeholders. It is important to set expectations for how and when you plan to address people. If you can't answer the question why your spokespersons would speak, they shouldn't. Sometimes the hardest part is knowing when not to speak. (Plaxen 2020.)

Lenhart & Pinchera (2020) list nine event crisis communication best practises when disaster threatens an event, focusing on situations like the coronavirus pandemic.

1. Communicate across multiple platforms:

Use all possible platforms to communicate to your participants to ensure your message reaches everyone. Be the one who leads the conversation and is the source for information, otherwise you won't be able to control the messaging.

2. Be clear and consistent:

When using multiple platforms, make sure the information you share is consistent.

3. Share updates early and regularly:

Communicate important updates as soon as possible. Consider the timing of when to communicate major decisions such as cancellation or postponement.

4. Explain changes to norms:

If the social norms of your event have changed, such as shaking hands, inform all participants about it. By informing everyone you can make sure everyone is on the same page and knows how to act.

5. Tell the truth:

Even if cancelling the event will cause financial loss for you, do not hesitate to cancel when it is necessary for the safety of everyone.

6. Have compassion:

Consider offering full refunds if participants want to cancel their participation due to a rise in communicable disease transmission, even though this will cost you. Your reputation might suffer if participants feel they are being punished for something out of their control.

7. Explain contingency plans:

Make sure everyone understands that one should not attend the event if they have flu-like symptoms and how they should act if they get symptoms during the event.

8. Be available to answer questions:

Try to have staff available to answer questions the participants might have.

9. Provide resources:

Provide information from trusted sources such as the local health officials.

(Lenhart & Pinchera 2020, 8-9.)

According to Plaxen (2020) some best practices regarding event crisis communication are:

- Be transparent. Keep in mind that uncertainty may cause confusion and panic. By being transparent you show people that they can trust you.
- Centralise your information by creating an updated landing page on your website or a blogpost where you share all the updates. Make sure the latest information is at the top of the page for it to be the first thing that people see.
- In social media, you can pin the most important post to appear at the top of your message feed. The social media posts can include a link to your website where all information is centralised.
- Make sure to post clear updates everywhere, and never delete the old updates. By deleting you might create mistrust.

- Use email as the main communication channel, since it can be the most effective and versatile way to communicate.
- Let your participants know where and how often you plan to communicate.
- Monitor social media and allocate staff who can respond to questions and comments.
- Ensure your communication staff is trained in customer service and that they exercise empathy.
- Consistency is key, and therefore, make sure that all changes are communicated across all platforms.
- Communicate immediately, even if decisions to cancel or postpone the event have not been made. By communicating you are letting people know that you are aware of the situation.

(Plaxen 2020.)

When an event is cancelled, it is important to mention the refund policy when communicating the cancellation to the participants. The participants should be informed the amount of the refund, when the refund process begins, and when should they expect to see the refund credited to them. (Flores 2 March 2020.)

2.4.4 Message mapping

Message mapping can be used as a tool when deciding what will be communicated. When message mapping, the first step is to decide on the main idea which will be consistently demonstrated throughout all communication. The main idea may not be said out loud, but the communication will convey the idea. It is important that the entire team, meaning anyone communicating, is familiar with main idea as all communication is going to support it. The second step in message mapping is to create three key messages by asking three questions which fit the situation. The questions can, for example, be: what is the scenario, who needs to be reached, and what is the concern. When the three key messages are communicated effectively, the main idea will come across. However, communicating the three key messages only will not suffice. The third step is to create three proof points for each key message. These proof points act as evidence for the three key messages. The proof points support the key messages which support the main idea. It is important to communicate all three key messages together with the three proof points in order for the main idea to be effectively communicated. (Plaxen 2020.)

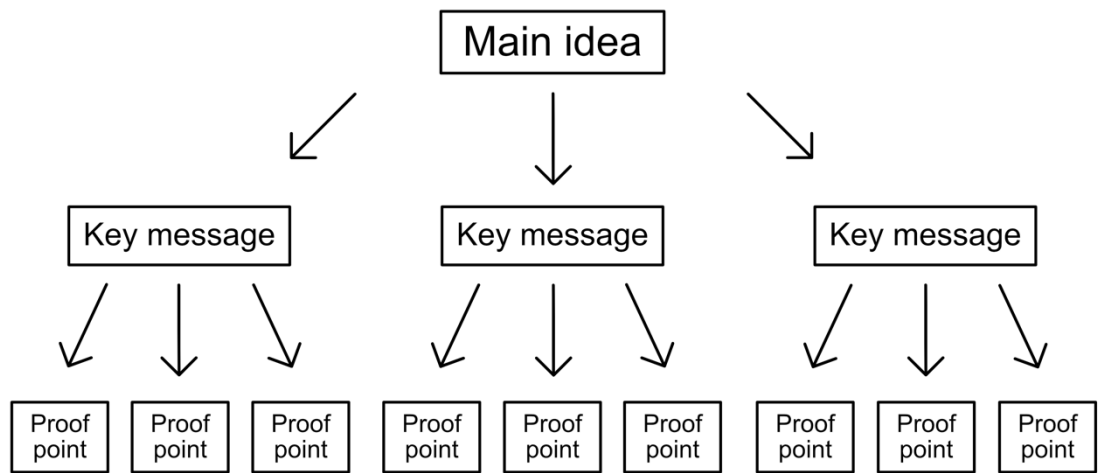


Figure 3. Message mapping (adapted from Plaxen 2020)

3 Benchmarking

This chapter defines benchmarking and describes the benchmarking process of the thesis. Benchmarking was used to find out the best practices of how to communicate an event cancellation to the participants. It supports the creation of the communication plan.

Codling (1998, 3) defines benchmarking as “the most powerful technique for gaining and maintaining competitive advantage”. The story of benchmarking begins with Xerox Corporation in US in the early 1980s. The company was very successful, and held 100 percent of the market share because of the worldwide patents they had. However, in 1978 the patents expired, their Japanese rivals entered the market, and in just two years the market share of Xerox went down to just 20 percent. Xerox had to find out why and how, so they started to examine their own processes and compare them to those who they believed did better. They found best practises and developed, adjusted, and transformed their processes which helped them gain back some market share they had lost. This is considered as the birth of benchmarking. (Codling 1998.) Tuominen (2016, 6) defines benchmarking as “the process of identifying, understanding and adapting outstanding practices from organisations anywhere in the world to help your organisation improve its performance”. In benchmarking one looks for the best practises in the industry to help enhance one’s performance. There are three major types of benchmarking: strategic benchmarking, performance benchmarking, and process benchmarking as well as four ways of doing benchmarking: internal benchmarking, external or competitive benchmarking, functional benchmarking, and generic benchmarking. (Jurevicius 19 January 2014).

3.1 Benchmarking process

The 5-phase and 12-step Xerox Benchmarking Process illustrated in figure 4 has been created by Robert C. Camp, the manager of Xerox responsible for benchmarking (Jurevicius 19 January 2014). The process can be used to benchmark crisis communication. In this thesis, benchmarking was used to learn from others. Benchmarking resulted in finding out the best practices of how to communicate a crisis to the participants of an event, in this case the cancellation of an international conference which charges a registration fee.

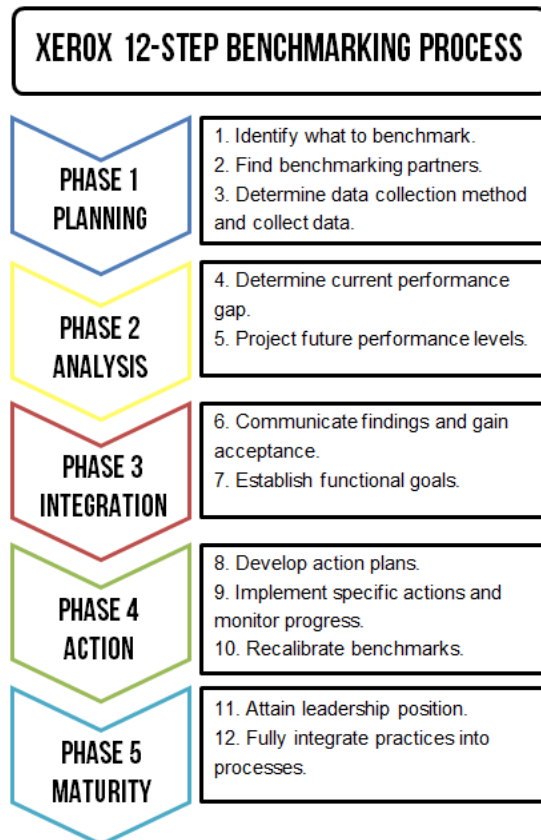


Figure 4. Xerox benchmarking process description (Jurevicius 19 January 2014)

3.2 Benchmarking phase 1: Planning

Step 1. Identify what to benchmark

To get a picture of how event organisers communicate to the participants when cancelling an event, the communication done via different channels such as websites, emails, and social media was researched and analysed. Different methods and approaches event organisers used in their communication were identified to determine the best practices. The following criteria was set to be collected:

- Facts presented
- Content of the message
- Tone of the message
- Language and diction of the message

Step 2. Find benchmarking partners

The chosen benchmarking conferences represent a variety of international conferences in Europe and North America. Most of them are annual conferences and have been organised for decades. All of them have a registration fee which the participants must pay to attend the conference.

The events chosen were:

- Nordic Business Forum Helsinki 2020
- Baltic Connections 2020
- ISME 34th World Conference
- 2020 AAN Annual Meeting
- 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition
- NAFSA 2020 Annual Conference & Expo

Step 3. Determine data collection method and collect data

Data was collected by systematically going through communication of each event from the channels that were available and relevant.

3.2.1 Benchmarking: Nordic Business Forum

Nordic Business Forum organises world-class business conferences in Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Their flagship event in Helsinki, Nordic Business Forum, is an annual business conference organised by Nordic Business Forum every autumn. In one of the most significant business conferences in the world, the world's best business experts share their insight into how to enhance leadership skills and take the business to the next level. (Nordic Business Forum 2020a.) In 2020, the event was supposed to be held on 23–24 September. On 26 June 2020 Nordic Business Forum announced the cancellation of the 2020 event in Helsinki. (Nordic Business Forum 2020b.)

Nordic Business Forum sent their ticket holders three emails regarding possible cancellation of the event in Helsinki. First two of the emails were updates regarding how the current COVID-19 situation might affect the event and the third announced the cancellation. These emails can be found from the appendices (appendix 1, 2, 3).

On 13 March 2020 Nordic Business Forum sent an email to its customers with tickets to any of their 2020 events in Helsinki, Stockholm, or Oslo (see appendix 1). The title of the email is "Update on COVID-19 effects on our events". In the email they state that for the time being, all three events are going to be held as scheduled in September 2020. However, they are closely monitoring the situation and how COVID-19 affects the event industry. They emphasise that the health of everyone involved in the events is their top priority and they will not take any risks. The email has two bullet point sections. The first bullet points are about what the ticket holder should know about the current situation. They explain that the events might be rescheduled within six months of the original event, or even cancelled if the local officials decide to prohibit events like Nordic Business Forums. The current tickets will be valid for the rescheduled events, and if the events are cancelled the tickets will be refunded. The second bullet point section explains what actions Nordic

Business Forum have taken to make sure they control the situation and its effects on the events. This includes the board of directors following the situation closely and the events related to Speaker Contest being rescheduled from spring 2020 to autumn 2020. The tone of the whole message is reassuring, and it gives the impression that Nordic Business Forum is prepared for and in control of the situation. The email is signed by the CEO of Nordic Business Forum.

On 7 April 2020 Nordic Business Forum sent an email to the participants of the Helsinki event (see appendix 2). The title of the email is “An update on the COVID-19 effects on NBForum 2020 Helsinki”. The email begins with a wish that the receiver of the message is healthy and well. The email repeats most of the information which can be found in the email sent on 13 March. It states that, for the time being, the event in Helsinki is going to be held as scheduled, but if the COVID-19 situation demands them to reschedule or cancel the event, they are fully prepared to do so. Again, the tone of the email is very reassuring and indicates Nordic Business Forum is in control of the situation. Again, the email is signed by the CEO of Nordic Business Forum.

On 26 June 2020 Nordic Business Forum sent an email titled “Nordic Business Forum 2020 in Helsinki rescheduled to 2021” to the participants of Nordic Business Forum in Helsinki (see appendix 3). In the email they announce “with heavy hearts” that they cannot organise Nordic Business Forum 2020 in Helsinki and are forced to reschedule the event to September 2021. Since Nordic Business Forum in Helsinki is an annual event, and therefore, would’ve been organised in autumn 2021 anyhow, it can be deduced that the 2020 event is, in fact, cancelled. However, Nordic Business Forum doesn’t use the term “cancelled” in their communication, but instead states that the event has been rescheduled. In the email they explain the current situation regarding the speakers of the event. They also elaborate on how they came to the decision not to organise the event in September 2020. The email has a link to a report by the Finnish government-appointed scientific panel which the email refers to as one of the factors why the event cannot take place in 2020. The email contains clear instruction what happens to the tickets for the 2020 event. All tickets are automatically valid for the 2021 event, but the participant can also cancel their ticket if they wish to do so. There’s a link to a cancellation form and a deadline for the cancellation. The tone of the email is polite, considerate, empathetic, and emotional as it emphasises how sad the organisers are that the event had to be cancelled. They express their gratitude towards the receiver for trusting the organisers and hope that the receiver will keep their ticket and attend the event in 2021. The email is signed by the CEO of Nordic Business Forum and contains the contact details of their customer care. They encourage the participant to contact them with any possible questions.

3.2.2 Benchmarking: Baltic Connections 2020

Baltic Connections conference aims to “bring together scholars working on comparative, economic, social, global, and other types of history and related social sciences to address various East-West historical processes and events as well as comparative and transnational analysis, including at the Baltic region, Europe, and the world”. The first Baltic Connections conference was held in Helsinki in 2019, and the second was supposed to take place at the University of Jyväskylä, in Jyväskylä, Finland on 26–27 March 2020. It was supposed to be hosted by the Department of History and Ethnology and co-hosted by the discipline of Economic and Social History at the University of Helsinki. The cancellation of the conference was announced on 10 March 2020. (University of Helsinki 2020.)

Baltic Connections published the following update on their website on 5 March 2020. At the time of writing this thesis the update was already deleted from the event website. The author received the update from the event organiser by email.

“Registration for the conference is now open. Please visit our Registration page to register and for information on fees, included events and payment options. The registration deadline is March 16.

Corona (Covid-19) information: Currently (March 5), the Baltic Connections 2020 is planned to take place as scheduled. We will keep you updated on this page and will also email any changes to participants. You can follow the situation in Finland on the Finnish institute for health and welfare's web page Coronavirus COVID-19 – Latest Updates (scroll down for The situation in Finland).

<https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/baltic-connections>
<https://thl.fi/en/web/infectious-diseases/what-s-new/coronavirus-covid-19-latest-updates>”

(Heilala-Rasimov 19 July 2020.)

The update states that the conference is, for the time being, going to take place as scheduled. However, the participants are informed that if the situation changes, the information will be posted on the website, and all participants will also receive an email. There is a link to the website of Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare which contains the latest information about the COVID-19 situation in Finland.

On 10 March 2020 the organisers published a new update on the website (see figure 5). The update states that the organisers have decided to cancel the Baltic Connections 2020 conference. They explain that although the situation in Jyväskylä where the conference is being held doesn't require the organisers to cancel at the moment, the decision derives from the situation many of the participants have. Flights have been cancelled, and participants are unable to attend the conference due to institutional travel restrictions. The update also explains that all registration fees will be refunded and participants will be con-

tacted after the university has decided on the guidelines regarding the refunds. The update is signed by the organising committee and includes an email address people can contact if they have any questions. The message is short and sticks to the facts without elaborate explanations.

BALTIC CONNECTIONS 2020 CANCELLED, WELCOME TO THE BALTIC CONNECTIONS 2021!

Dear Conferees,

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19 and the following safety measures in Finland and around the world, we have made the decision to cancel the Baltic Connections 2020 conference. The situation in Finland and especially in the Jyväskylä region is not severe yet (three cases), but hundreds of flights have already been cancelled, many have had to cancel their participation due to institutional travel restrictions, and it is understandable that people have personal doubts about travelling at a time like this.

All of the registration fees already paid will be refunded. We will contact you on this after the university decides on guidelines.

To offer some further consolation, all the papers accepted to this year's conference will be automatically accepted to the Baltic Connections 2021 in Helsinki, Finland. Keynotes there will be Joel Mokyr (Northwestern), Jenny Andersson (Uppsala University), and Arja Turunen (University of Jyväskylä).

For our part, we apologize any inconvenience the cancellation causes. We wish good health to all of you and hope to see you in Helsinki in the spring of 2021!

Sincerely,

Baltic Connections 2020 Conference Committee

Please send any questions and inquiries to balticsocsciencehist@gmail.com.

Figure 5. Baltic Connections 2020 cancelled (University of Helsinki 2020)

The cancellation was also posted on Baltic Connections' Twitter account the same day the cancellation was announced on their website (see figure 6). The Twitter post shortly states the cancellation, the reason for the cancellation, and the link to the website where the full cancellation statement can be found.



Baltic Connections 2020 cancelled, welcome to the
Baltic Connections 2021!

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, we have made the
decision to cancel the Baltic Connections 2020.

[#twitterstorians](#) [#econhist](#) [#socialsciencehist](#)



Figure 6. Baltic Connections Twitter (Baltic Connections 10 March 2020)

3.2.3 Benchmarking: ISME 34th World Conference

International Society for Music Education (ISME) organises the ISME World Conference biennially. The 34th World Conference for the International Society for Music Education was hosted by the University of the Arts Helsinki, and the conference was supposed to be held in Helsinki, Finland on 2–7 August 2020. The conference “aims to foster global understanding and cooperation by strengthening ties and sharing ideas that promote music education as a culturally responsive, inclusive, and life-long transformative journey”. (Uni-arts Helsinki & ISME 2020.) The cancellation of the conference was announced on 2 April 2020 (International Society for Music Education 2020a).

On 16 March 2020 ISME published an update on their website about the current situation regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the 34th ISME World Conference (see figure 7). The update addresses the concerns the conference participants might have. It begins with empathetic words about how the organisers understand the feelings the participants might have, and how they recognise the demand for information. It states that currently the conference is going ahead as planned. However, the organisers are monitoring the situation and will act on the advice of the health authorities. The early bird registration has been extended to 9 May due to the uncertain situation. The organisers inform that by 9 May they

will be able to make a more informed decision about whether to go ahead or postpone the conference. If the event is postponed, the current registrations will remain valid or the participants can receive a refund. They also explain that they are aware that the situation affects travel bookings, and therefore, they will issue a formal notice in case the event is postponed. The update finishes with well wishes and encouraging words about how we will get through this together. It ends with a promise to provide an update as soon as the organisers have more news. The update is signed by the president of ISME. The tone of the message is empathetic and reassuring. It shows the organisers are prepared for the situation, aware of the situation many participants are facing, and in control of the situation.

Update about COVID-19 (coronavirus) and the ISME World Conference

16 March 2020

Message from Susan O'Neill, President, ISME

Dear Members

Many people are feeling anxious and uncertain right now as the world is facing a pandemic with the Covid-19 virus. These feelings are understandable as we are in an unprecedented situation that is changing day by day. There are an increasing number of major events being cancelled or postponed world-wide, and ISME is aware that members would like information about plans for the ISME Helsinki 2020 World Conference and the pre-conference seminars.

At this point, with the 2020 World Conference nearly five months away, we will:

- Continue to plan and develop the conference and pre-conference seminars with the intention of them taking place as planned in early August.
- Continue to monitor closely, consult widely and act on the advice of the World Health Organisation as well as Health Authorities in Finland and other countries in determining the best course of action.
- **Extend the early bird period for registration until May 9th.**

The extension of the early bird registration gives all of us time for the situation to become clearer. By May 9th, which is 8 weeks from now, we will be able to make an informed decision about continuing or postponing the World Conference. In the event of a postponement, we would offer you a chance to carry your registration forward or receive a refund.

We are aware this may affect travel bookings and insurance, so if we do postpone we would also issue a formal notice. Most airlines are now recognising the need for people to re-book and are offering to do so without any additional cost. There are many possibilities for hotel accommodation in Helsinki and so a delay until May 9th for making a booking is also an option. **We hope that members will continue to register with confidence, knowing there are options if we need them.**

We will also extend the Award application date to 31 March.

As a strong and caring community of music education professionals, we will continue to draw strength from each other during this challenging time. We will get through this by pulling together, listening to the experts, and each of us doing our part.

Stay well and thank you for your patience and collegiality through these extraordinary times. We will update you again as soon as we have more news.

Sincerely

Susan

Susan O'Neill
President, ISME

Figure 7. Update about COVID-19 (coronavirus) and the ISME World Conference (International Society for Music Education 2020a)

ISME also posted the update on their Twitter account on 16 March (see figure 8). The tweet included a brief summary of the update and a link to the full update.



Figure 8. ISME Twitter (ISME 16 March 2020)

On 2 April 2020 ISME published a statement on their website stating that the 34th ISME World Conference is cancelled (see figure 9). The organisers explain that the ISME board unanimously voted for the cancellation. The reasoning behind the decision is thoroughly explained, and it derives from the various impacts the coronavirus pandemic has had and will have. The statement recognises the important work many have done for the conference and the disappointment the cancellation causes. The organisers explain their hopes to organise some virtual activities to replace parts of the conference. More information about these activities will be provided as soon as possible. They also inform that the next ISME World Conference might be held in 2022, and an announcement will be made after the ISME board has reached its decision. The statement repeats the information already provided in the update on 16 March 2020: all participants who have registered for the conference will receive a refund. The tone of the message is very empathetic and compassionate. The message is long; however, it explains the situation very thoroughly. The message ends with acknowledgements to everyone who has been involved in the conference and a positive message about how ISME will emerge even stronger because of everyone's efforts. The statement is signed by the president of ISME and the chair of the ISME 2020 Helsinki Conference Committee.

ISME 34th World Conference cancelled

2 April 2020

Message from Susan O'Neill, ISME President and Elina Laakso, Chair, Helsinki 2020 Conference Committee

Dear ISME Members, 2020 Helsinki World Conference Participants, and Colleagues,

We are writing to inform you that the International Society of Music Education (ISME) is cancelling the 34th World Conference that was due to take place in Helsinki, Finland from August 2-7, 2020. This decision was reached through a unanimous vote of the ISME Board on March 30, 2020 after consultation with the Helsinki 2020 Conference Team and Uniarts Helsinki.

For more than 2 years, ISME has anticipated the convening of the Helsinki 2020 World Conference. As a membership society, we value our biennial, face-to-face meetings and the opportunities they afford for sharing and discussing scholarship and practice, celebrating music making, and networking both formally and informally with colleagues from around the world.

Since the beginning of the year 2020, the world has seen unprecedented conference cancellations due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. In order to control the spread of the virus, the World Health Organization and governments world-wide have limited international travel and the borders of many countries have been closed for an indefinite period. Major events and conferences in countries around the world have been cancelled and universities have moved away from in-person to remote instruction. Many universities have cancelled all international travel by students and faculty until further notice. At this time, it is not known how long the impact of the global pandemic will be felt, but major economic implications are already predicted and it is not likely that any major international conference travel will be taking place for many months and possibly longer.

Sadly, as a result of COVID-19 and the travel and economic impact that is happening around the world, it is no longer feasible for ISME to hold an international conference in Helsinki in 2020. We are also unable to hold the Commission pre-conference seminars. However, we are working on plans to reimagine some opportunities for virtual presentations and meetings that will enable us to honour our professional responsibility to share significant research and practice. We will provide more information about our plans for virtual activities as soon as possible.

A few additional issues to note:

- Those members who are already registered for the World Conference and/or pre-conference seminar **will receive refunds**.
- **A virtual General Assembly will take place on August 6, 2020** to enable members to review the biennium budget and activities and to announce the results of the Board Elections.
- **ISME will publish the 34th World Conference Proceedings of accepted full papers.**
- The ISME Board will be spending the next few months reviewing options for holding the **next ISME World Conference in 2022**. An announcement will be made to all members as soon as a decision is reached by the Board.

We know that this is disappointing news. A record number of ISME members worked very hard on their submissions and looked forward to an amazing in-person seminar or meeting this year in Helsinki. We also collaborated with many dedicated people from around the world who contributed in numerous ways to the planning, reviewing, sponsorship and organization of the World Conference and pre-conference seminars. We thank each of you for sharing your expertise and for your tremendous efforts and goodwill in supporting the work of ISME. Your actions and service to the Society have made a positive difference to our community, and ISME will emerge even stronger because of your efforts.

Susan O'Neill
ISME President

Elina Laakso
Chair, ISME 2020 Helsinki Conference Committee

Figure 9. ISME 34th World Conference cancelled (International Society for Music Education 2020b)

The cancellation was also posted on ISME’s Twitter account simultaneously with the announcement on the website (see figure 10). The tweet explains that the conference is cancelled due to COVID-19 and includes a link to the full statement.



Figure 10. ISME Twitter (ISME 16 March 2020)

On the same day the cancellation was announced, ISME tweeted another tweet later in the evening (see figure 11). Evidently, ISME had received lots of questions regarding the cancellation and refunds. In the tweet they instructed people to check their emails for more information about the conference fee refunds.

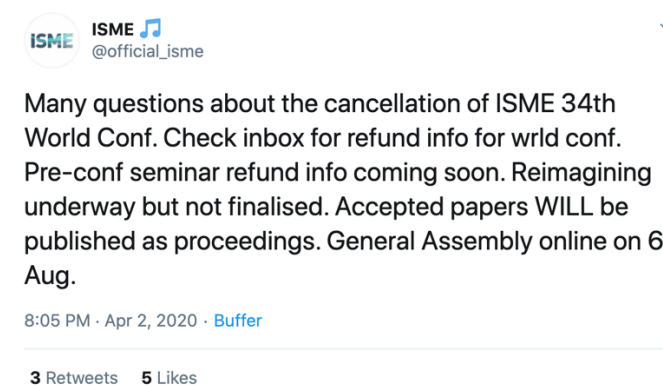


Figure 11. ISME Twitter (ISME 16 March 2020)

3.2.4 Benchmarking: 2020 AAN Annual Meeting

2020 AAN Annual Meeting is, as the name suggests, an annual event organised by the American Academy of Neurology (AAN). In 2020 the event was supposed to be held in Toronto, Canada on 25 April – 1 May. On 13 March 2020 the organisers announced the cancellation of the 2020 event. The event is the world's largest gathering of neurologists and was cancelled for the first time in its 72-year history. (American Academy of Neurology 2020a.)

On 13 March 2020 AAN published a statement on their website stating that the 2020 AAN Annual Meeting has been cancelled due to COVID-19 (see figure 12). The statement gives a thorough explanation into why the decision to cancel was made, explaining that the health and safety of the participants is paramount for the organisers. The current travel restrictions make it impossible for many people to travel to the conference. Furthermore, the organisers point out that especially as the conference participants are doctors and medical professionals, it is even more important for everyone to stay in their communities to work and also to set an example of social distancing by not attending large public gatherings such as the conference. They state that the organisers have been following the instructions from the health authorities and provide links to these websites. In the statement, they acknowledge all the hard work many people have done for the conference. They also inform that registration fees will be refunded. The statement includes an email address people can contact if they have any questions as well as a note that more information will be posted on the website and social media. The statement is signed by the president of AAN. The tone of the message is matter-of-fact and very convincing. It is a long message, but this is required in order to include all the reasoning behind the decision to cancel.

AAN ANNUAL MEETING: COVID-19

March 13, 2020

Dear AAN Members and Annual Meeting Registrants,

Due to the global COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, the American Academy of Neurology announced March 13, 2020, that it has no choice but to make the necessary decision to cancel the AAN's Annual Meeting originally scheduled for April 25–May 1, 2020, in Toronto.

Protecting the health, safety, and well-being of our members, attendees, and ultimately our neurology patients is paramount, and serves as the reason for our decision to cancel the AAN Annual Meeting for the first time in our 72-year history. Put simply, canceling the AAN Annual Meeting is the right thing to do during this historic time.

Our team has been meeting daily, actively monitoring the situation and following guidance from the [World Health Organization](#), the [Centers for Disease Control](#), and [Canada Public Health](#). On March 11, 2020, for example, the World Health Organization elevated the status of the novel coronavirus outbreak to a pandemic, and the United States President announced the US government's decision to restrict travel from mainland Europe. Specifically affecting Toronto, the location of AAN's 2020 Annual Meeting, the global COVID-19 pandemic is impacting Toronto and surrounding communities. Additionally, many US academic institutions have restricted employee travel, preventing many of our faculty and speakers from being able to attend the AAN Annual Meeting and making us unable to provide the educational offerings you need and expect.

We have been in constant contact with our Board of Directors, and members of our committees who have worked tirelessly to organize the more than 3,000 scientific sessions, hundreds of education courses, and experiential learning areas for the 15,000 professionals we had originally expected to attend. I want to thank all of them for their incredible work and leadership during this difficult time.

We also want to recognize two other important considerations. As an organization of physicians and medical professionals, it is important to keep our members in their communities—where you stand by to help patients during this time of uncertainty. We also have a professional responsibility to model social distancing and not contribute to the spread of the virus through a large public gathering.

We recognize canceling the world's largest gathering of neurologists impacts many of you and your education needs. Look for more information on different AAN educational opportunities throughout the remainder of 2020.

Please also allow us time to process full registration fee refunds for the thousands of members who registered for the Annual Meeting. Information for exhibitors and sponsors will be forthcoming.

If you have further questions, please contact AAN Member Services, memberservices@aan.com, otherwise, more information will be posted on this page and on social media in the days and weeks ahead.

Thank you for your patience, understanding, and unwavering commitment to the field of neurology and the AAN.

Sincerely,

James C. Stevens, MD, FAAN
President, American Academy of Neurology

Figure 12. AAN Annual Meeting cancelled (American Academy of Neurology 2020a)

The website of 2020 AAN Annual Meeting has a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section with information about registration refunds and hotel cancellations (see figure 13).

Registration and Housing FAQ

Q: How will registration refunds be handled now that the 2020 Annual Meeting is cancelled?

A: Thank you for your patience as the AAN processes all Annual Meeting transactions. The AAN will begin issuing Annual Meeting registration refunds on April 15. If you paid by credit card, the date the refund will be posted to your account will vary based on your credit card company. Please allow 1-2 weeks and check your credit card statement regularly. If you paid your registration by check, EFT, or wire, your refund will be issued via mail and may take longer to receive.

Q: How will hotel cancellations be handled now that the 2020 Annual Meeting is cancelled?

A: All hotel reservation cancellations for attendees who booked through the AAN room block were completed on March 23. If you booked within the AAN room block, there is no action you need to take to cancel your hotel room. The credit card used at the time of booking has not been charged, therefore will not require a refund. Any reservation made outside of the AAN Housing block will need to be cancelled with the hotel directly and is subject to the cancellation policy provided when you confirmed the reservation.

Q: Who do I contact for assistance with my registration and/or housing?

To register, reserve housing, or make changes to registration and hotel reservations:

Convention Management Resources

US/Canada: (800) 676-4226

International: (415) 979-2283

Online: <https://aanam.cmrushelp.com/>

Monday - Friday 6:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m. PT

Contact the AAN

For direct email and phone contacts, please contact **Member Services**.

Toll Free: (800) 879-1960

International: (612) 928-6000

Figure 13. Registration and Housing FAQ (American Academy of Neurology 2020b)

3.2.5 Benchmarking: 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition

The 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition was scheduled to take place in Barcelona, Spain on 13–16 October 2020. The event is organised annually by the European Association for International Education, and it is the largest international education event in Europe. On 19 May 2020 EAIE announced the cancellation of the 2020 event. (EAIE 19 May 2020.). The registration for the conference had not been opened, since it was supposed to open on 17 June 2020 (EAIE 23 March 2020).

On 23 March 2020 EAIE announced on their blog on their website that the 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition has been rescheduled from 15–18 September 2020 to 13–16 October 2020 due to COVID-19 causing the rescheduling of another event in the same conference venue (see figure 14). EAIE states that many international conferences have already been postponed or cancelled due to the COVID-19, but the EAIE event in Barcelona is still going forward as planned. At the end of the message they promise to continue to communicate any new information.

2020 EAIE Conference & Exhibition rescheduled to 13-16 October

EAIE News
By EAIE



The 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition, taking place in Barcelona, has been rescheduled to 13-16 October 2020. The date change is due to the rescheduling of another event at our 2020 conference venue, Fira Barcelona, as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

We understand that moving the EAIE Conference dates may affect your plans and we are working hard to limit the impact. Together with our exhibition and hotel partners, we have been working closely to ensure a smooth and efficient transfer of all existing bookings to the new event dates.

As you will be aware, the COVID-19 outbreak has already greatly impacted the higher education sector, with the closure of universities around the world. As the host of Europe's largest international higher education event, the EAIE is also a member of the event industry which has seen the cancellation and postponement of many international events in the past weeks. Within the wider international higher education community, this has led to the unfortunate cancellation of the 2020 NAFSA conference and postponement of the 2020 APAIE conference. While the COVID-19 outbreak presents unique challenges, we are taking inspiration from our Barcelona conference theme and remain committed to 'forging creative pathways'.

Preparations remain underway for the same high-quality and interactive conference programme that you have come to expect from the EAIE. The finalised programme will be live in early June and registration for EAIE Barcelona 2020 will open Wednesday 17 June. We will continue to communicate any new information and look forward to seeing you in Barcelona at the 2020 EAIE Conference and Exhibition.

23 March 2020

By EAIE

Figure 14. EAIE 2020 rescheduled (EAIE 23 March 2020)

On 19 May 2020 EAIE announced on their blog on their website that the 32nd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition has been cancelled (see figure 15). The message begins with apologetically explaining how the situation caused by COVID-19 has forced the organisers to decide to cancel the conference. The message doesn't focus much on elaborating the detailed effects of COVID-19, but on how to compensate for the lack of having a conference. EAIE explains how they understand that many are concerned how COVID-19 will affect their work, and therefore, EAIE has plans to have an online Community Summit

in June 2020 where participants can share their views and challenges, as well as having unique networking and learning alternative during the original conference dates in October 2020. They encourage people to follow their website and check their emails for more information during the following weeks. They also announce that the 2021 event will be held in Gothenburg and the 2022 event will return to Barcelona. The message ends with encouraging words about how the community will survive the challenges together and wishes of strength for everyone in these times. The message is signed by the EAIE board. The tone of the message is empathetic and forward-looking as it offers alternative ways for the community to come together.

Important news about EAIE Barcelona 2020

EAIE News
By EAIE



It is with great regret that we announce we will not be able to meet in Barcelona for our Annual Conference and Exhibition, scheduled to take place 13–16 October 2020. With the COVID-19 outbreak ongoing and uncertainties around travel and gatherings, the welfare of our community remains our primary concern. For this reason, we have made the difficult decision to not move ahead with our physical event. We know that this will come as an enormous disappointment, to you, our loyal EAIE community who make this event a huge success every year.

Connecting our community online

From our recent virtual interactions with many of you, we have learned that one of your main concerns is how to understand and plan for the next academic year. With this in mind, we are working to bring you an online EAIE Community Summit on 16–17 June. The Summit will offer you a series of opportunities to exchange your challenges and expectations as we navigate the 'new normal' of international education through the next academic year.

We are also working hard to offer you a unique networking and learning alternative on 13–16 October, the same dates as the conference was planned. The October event will provide a new and inspiring way of connecting with the community, offering the same high quality that you expect from the EAIE.

Our return to Barcelona in 2022

Barcelona is not forgotten! We are thrilled to bring the EAIE Conference and Exhibition back to Barcelona in 2022, following next year's event, which will take place in [Gothenburg](#), Sweden, 07–10 September 2021. We would like to thank our Barcelona local partner, Government of Catalonia, for their support in helping us postpone the Barcelona event to 2022.

More information about the June Summit will follow quickly, with registration set to open in early June. Please stay tuned to our website and keep an eye on your inbox for your invite. Similarly, more information around the October experience and the [Gothenburg](#) call for session proposals will also follow in the coming weeks.

Despite the unprecedented challenges of the year so far, this experience has reconfirmed once again that the passion of our community is the lifeblood of our sector and we will make it through this stronger because of you.

We wish you strength and courage and look forward to seeing you in June and October – albeit virtually!

The EAIE Board

19 May 2020

By EAIE

Figure 15. EAIE 2020 cancelled (EAIE 19 May 2020)

Both the rescheduling and the cancellation were also posted on EAIE's Twitter account (The EAIE 23 March 2020; The EAIE 19 May 2020), EAIE's Facebook page (EAIE European Association for International Education 23 March 2020; EAIE European Association for International Education 19 May 2020) and EAIE's LinkedIn page (EAIE: European Association for International Education 23 March 2020; EAIE: European Association for International Education 19 May 2020) on the same day the statements were posted on their website.

3.2.6 Benchmarking: NAFSA 2020 Annual Conference & Expo

NAFSA stands for Association of International Educators which is the world's largest association dedicated to international education and exchange. Every year NAFSA organises the NAFSA Annual Conference & Expo which is the "largest and most dynamic international education event in the world". NAFSA 2020 Annual Conference & Expo was scheduled to take place in St. Louis, Missouri, US on 24–29 May 2020. On 19 March 2020 NAFSA announced that it will cancel the 2020 conference. (NAFSA 2020a.)

On 19 March 2020 NAFSA published a statement on their website about the cancellation of the NAFSA 2020 Annual Conference & Expo (see figure 16). The statement is long and focuses mainly on how NAFSA recognises the challenges their community, the international education community, is facing because of the COVID-19 pandemic and how NAFSA will continue its work for the community. The message explains how the annual conference is a very important event for many people and for various reasons. NAFSA promises to create new ways for the community to connect virtually now that the conference is cancelled. It urges to follow NAFSA's website and social media for updates and upcoming events. It also includes a link to frequently asked questions section on their website. The statement expresses gratitude towards the community members for their understanding and support. It finishes with words of acknowledgement to everyone involved in organising the conference and promises to contact various stakeholders with more details. The statement is signed by the president of NAFSA. The tone of the message is polite, considerate, very empathetic, compassionate, and it shows that NAFSA cares about its community. The message doesn't focus on thoroughly explaining the reasons behind the cancellation, but more on how the pandemic affects the whole community and how NAFSA is aware of the situation.

Message from NAFSA President Ravi Shankar on NAFSA 2020

Dear NAFSA Members and International Educators Everywhere,

After careful consideration, and in deep concern for the health and safety of our attendees, the NAFSA board of directors has decided to cancel the 2020 NAFSA Annual Conference & Expo scheduled to take place on May 24-29 in St. Louis, Missouri.

For many of us, the NAFSA Annual Conference & Expo represents an opportunity for our entire community to gather and explore our shared passion for creating a stronger, interconnected world. It not only brings the world together, but it also supports jobs and education around the globe, and we do not take that responsibility lightly. We will do everything within our power to continue to look for ways to bring international educators together, make vital connections, and continue to enhance global perspectives throughout higher education.

The international education community faces unique, exceptional challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The NAFSA leadership recognizes that international educators will need an opportunity to come together during this critical time; and to that end we are exploring ways to re-envision our program in the virtual space by offering a new series of virtual events in lieu of our traditional conference. Our 2020 conference theme is Innovate, Influence, Impact. In that spirit, we will innovate and find new ways to present a rich array of programming. There will be more information on these new offerings forthcoming.

This pandemic is causing tremendous difficulty for so many in the field. Please know that NAFSA will continue to be your advocate. We remain in close communication with public health officials and federal agencies on the latest guidance for immigration, study abroad, and international education in general. As always, know that NAFSA is dedicated to protecting and defending the field at this critical time.

Thank you for your continued patience, understanding, and support as we navigate through the crisis. Please continue to monitor the NAFSA.org website and social media channels for updates and upcoming events, and please practice self-care and be safe. We have posted responses to [frequently asked questions](#) on our website.

NAFSA thanks its dedicated members and volunteers, especially the Annual Conference Committee, who work for years to shape each conference, and whose commitment inspires us as we strive to offer programming in a new format. We will follow up separately with specific information for those who have registered for the conference, and related pre-conference programming. Global Partners, sponsors, and exhibitors will also receive special communication from your contacts on the NAFSA staff. I am confident that together we will emerge from the challenging months ahead with a renewed commitment to creating a stronger, more interconnected, more peaceful world.

Sincerely,
Ravi Shankar
President, NAFSA: Association of International Educators

Figure 16. NAFSA 2020 Annual Conference & Expo cancellation (NAFSA 2020b)

On the same day the cancellation was announced on the NAFSA website, they posted a tweet on their Twitter account (see figure 17). The tweet states the cancellation, how the decision was made after careful consideration, how NAFSA is aware of the challenges the international educators are facing, and how NAFSA will continue its support virtually. It also includes a link to the full statement on their website.



Figure 17. NAFSA Twitter (NAFSA 19 March 2020)

A day after announcing the cancellation, NAFSA tweeted about the FAQ page on their website and instructed people to visit the page if they have any questions (see figure 18). The NAFSA 2020 cancellation FAQ page includes information about why the conference was cancelled, registration refunds, hotel and travel cancellations, the 2021 conference, and contact details, among other things. (NAFSA 2020c.) The reasons why the conference was cancelled are elaborated, and the refund policy is explained. This information is not available on the statement.



Figure 18. NAFSA Twitter (NAFSA 20 March 2020)

3.3 Benchmarking phase 2: Analysis

Step 4. Determine current performance gap & Step 5. Project future performance levels

Tapahtumantekijät is an event agency which designs and produces events for its clients. Conferences with a registration fee have not been the most common type of event project

for Tapahtumantekijät, however, there is a growing interest in focusing more on international conferences. Tapahtumantekijät doesn't have a crisis communication plan template for conferences, and the role of Tapahtumantekijät in event communication varies depending on the client and the conference. Event cancellations have been extremely uncommon in the almost 30-year history of the agency. But the current situation demands the agency to explore, study, and learn how to communicate to the participants in a situation where an event has to be cancelled. Consequently, there is a need for a general communication plan for a situation where a conference has to be cancelled which can be used as a base when tailoring the plan for a specific conference. Many of the conferences benchmarked are annual and have been organised for decades. Thus, the conference organisers have lots of experience.

Based on the benchmarking, the best practices when communicating about the cancellation to the participants are:

- Use all possible communication channels, but centralise the information to the event website.
- When posting on social media, include a link to the website for more detailed information.
- Be proactive! Publish the first update when people might start to have concerns about whether the event will be able to take place.
- Explain the steps the organisers have taken, and the steps they will take to control the situation.
- Make sure all communication is polite, empathetic, and compassionate. Show that the organisers understand the situation the participants are in. In addition, describe the feelings the organisers have.
- Explain the reasons behind the decision to cancel in order for the participant to understand and agree that it was the right decision. If the decision is based on guidelines from the authorities, provide links to the websites which present these guidelines.
- Express gratitude towards the participant and everyone involved in organising the conference.
- Explain what happens to the current registrations, and provide details about whether the registration fees will be refunded as well as how they will be processed. If possible, provide this information before the decision to cancel has been made and announced.
- Have an actual person, such as the CEO or president of the organisation, sign the statements.
- Provide contact details for possible questions.
- Add a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section to the event website which answers to the most common questions regarding the cancellation. Guide people to look for answers from FAQ.
- Include information about how to handle hotel and flight cancellations, even when the bookings have been made by the participants, and therefore, they are not the responsibility of the event organiser.
- Explain the possible plans to achieve the objectives of the conference through alternative activities.

3.4 Benchmarking phase 3: Integration

Step 6. Communicate findings and gain acceptance & Step 7. Establish functional goals

The findings will be communicated to Tapahtumantekijät when the author will present the product of the thesis, the communication plan, to the commissioner. The current situation in the event industry where lots of events have been cancelled has created a demand for more information on how a cancellation of an event should be communicated. Hence, the findings of the benchmarking are relevant. The goal is to include the communication plan in all future conference projects. This requires Tapahtumantekijät to recommend this to their clients and for the client to understand the importance of the plan.

3.5 Benchmarking phase 4: Action

Step 8. Develop action plans.

This phase will be covered in chapter 5 of the thesis.

The benchmarking process also includes steps 9 and 10 in phase 4: action and steps 11 and 12 in phase 5: maturity. However, these are not in the scope of this thesis, and therefore Tapahtumantekijät will be responsible for executing the following steps:

Step 9. Implement specific actions and monitor progress

Step 10. Recalibrate benchmarks

Benchmarking phase 5: Maturity

Step 11. Attain leadership position

Step 12. Fully integrate practices into processes

4 Development process

This chapter explains how the communication plan was created by using the theoretical framework and findings of the benchmarking. It also presents the commissioner's comments of the first version of the plan and the suggested additions which were incorporated in the plan.

4.1 How the communication plan was created

The plan was created by first determining the scope of the communication plan. It was decided that the communication plan is for a situation where an international conference, which charges a registration fee, is cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. In other words, the plan is for a crisis situation. Furthermore, it was determined that the plan focuses on communication to the participants only, not any other stakeholders. The plan is a general plan which can be used as a template for any future conferences. It was decided that the plan does not focus on which specific communication channels should be used and how since each conference has its own set of channels available.

The creation of the plan began with looking into the theoretical background of event risk management, conference cancellation, event communication, and crisis communication. The theoretical framework is presented in chapter 2. The author studied the materials and gained knowledge of how crisis communication should be conducted and what a crisis communication plan should contain. This knowledge was filtered and transformed into elements of the plan. The plan applies theories by Van der Wagen, White & Van der Wagen and Bladen & al. regarding event cancellations presented in chapter 2.2.2. Chapter 2.4 explains crisis communication theories by several authors. Heath & O'Hair state that there is a demand for knowledge in a crisis, and the crisis team should process information and achieve situational awareness in order to be able to make decisions. According to Zarembo, communication is not a linear activity and organisations must be prepared to answer questions. Coombs states that crisis communication should be quick, consistent, and open, which is backed by several other authors. All this theory has been incorporated in the communication plan. The step-by-step guidelines in the plan are based on the stages of crisis communication by Plaxen presented in chapter 2.4.2. The guidelines have been created by using decision making questions and best practices regarding event crisis communication by Plaxen, as well as nine event crisis communication best practises by Lenhart & Pinchera, which are all presented in chapter 2.4.3. The guidelines also include recommendations regarding refund policy by Flores. Chapter 2.4.4 describes message mapping by Plaxen which is used to create messages in the plan.

After looking into the theoretical framework, the next step was to benchmark other conferences that had already been cancelled, and to examine and determine the best practices in their communication. The author noticed that the theory she had studied was implemented in many of the messages she analysed. By benchmarking the author created a list of communication best practices, presented in chapter 3.4, which were then incorporated in the plan.

The communication plan is a combination of the theoretical background of the topic and the benchmarking findings.

4.2 Comments from the commissioner

The commissioner commented on the first version of the communication plan. Mainly, the commissioner was satisfied with the plan, but had a few suggestions of what should be added to the plan. The suggested additions were:

- Include a mention to seek for legal advice specialised in contract law when drawing up contract clauses and cancelling the conference.
- Emphasise the importance of collaboration between everyone involved in organising the conference.
- Internal communication has an important role in crisis communication. The preparation stage should include establishing internal communication procedures and channels.
- The team should establish a precise internal timetable for the implementation of the communication plan.
- Everyone should be aware of, familiar with, and committed to the plan.
- All facts regarding the cancellation should be revised and verified.
- When the crisis hits, a meeting with all the organisers is vital. The meeting should focus on making sure everyone is on the same page and up to speed. It should act as the initiation of implementing the communication plan.

The communication plan was developed and improved according to the commissioner's comments.

5 Communication plan

This communication plan is designed for an international conference which charges a registration fee and is cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. The plan focuses on communication to the participants only, not any other stakeholders. The plan is a general plan which can be used as a template when drawing up a plan for a specific conference.

The communication plan is divided into two parts. The first part includes step-by-step guidelines from the preparation stage to the stage after the cancellation. The second part includes instructions on how to create messages as well as two sample messages.

In order to successfully implement and execute the communication plan, all organising parties of the conference must be aware of and familiar with the plan. Everyone must be absolutely committed to the plan, otherwise the plan is futile and redundant. Furthermore, full collaboration and communication between all organising parties is essential and imperative.

To start with, here is a list of general communication guidelines.

General guidelines for crisis communication:

- Be quick, consistent, and open.
- The tone of all communication should always be empathetic, compassionate, and polite.
- Answer all questions, being silent is not an option. Admit if you don't have the answer, and make a promise when you will get back with the answer.
- Never use the phrase "no comment".
- Provide all necessary information.

General guidelines for communication channels:

- Use all possible communication channels, but centralise the information to the event website.
- When posting on social media, include a link to the website for more detailed information.
- Pin the important post to the top of the message feed.
- Never delete any updates.

5.1 Step-by-step guidelines

The first part of the plan includes step-by-step guidelines from stage one to four.

5.1.1 Stage 1: Preparations

Step 1: Contract clauses

- Invest time and resources to the contract clauses regarding registration cancellation and force majeure.
- Seek for legal advice specialised in contract law when drawing up the contracts.
- Make sure the contract clauses are clear and understandable for both the event organiser and the participant.

Step 2: Designate and train the team

Appoint and train:

- A crisis communication manager who will be in charge if crisis communication is needed.
- A crisis communication team which will work under the crisis communication manager.
- The spokespersons who will be the main persons to communicate with the participants. One spokesperson will not suffice, there must be several. They can be members of the crisis communication team.

Step 3: Tasks for the crisis communication team

- Establish internal communication procedures.
- Determine and set up internal communication channels.
- Follow the situation closely and proceed to stage two without delay when necessary.
- Establish a precise internal timetable for the implementation of the communication plan. The timetable will be modified throughout all stages as new information will influence the need to communicate.

Step 4: Decisions to be made

- Who will sign the official statements and messages? This should be an actual person such as the CEO of the organisation.
- Will the registration fees be refunded, and if so, what is the process? Decide on the policy, and determine the refund process.
- If the conference is cancelled, can the objectives of the conference be achieved through other activities? If so, make a draft of possible activities.

Step 5: External communication channels

- Determine the communication channels used to communicate to the participants and the purpose of each channel. Keep the general guidelines in mind.
- If you decide to use email as a communication channel, make sure the mailing lists are ready for use.

5.1.2 Stage 2: Cancellation is looming

Step 1: Initiation meeting

- Set up a meeting with all the organisers. This meeting is absolutely vital.
- The meeting should focus on making sure everyone is on the same page and up to speed.
- The meeting should act as the initiation of going forward with the communication plan.

Step 2: Tasks for the crisis communication team

- Seek for legal advice specialised in contract law to make sure the possible decision to cancel the conference is lawful and to find out what should be taken into consideration regarding the contract between the organiser and participant.
- Gather and process all information related to the cancellation. All facts should be revised and verified.
- Create knowledge and produce materials for everyone involved in the event project.
- Make sure information is available for everyone, not just the official spokespersons. Make sure everyone knows where to find the materials and familiarises themselves with the materials.
- Prepare a statement of the current situation.
- Allocate staff to answer questions and comments via email and social media.
- Prepare to release a cancellation statement.
- Prepare a cancellation FAQ section which will be added to the website after the cancellation has been announced. It should include:
 - Refund policy
 - Details and timetable of the refund process
 - Information about hotel and flight cancellations
 - Contact details for questions

Step 3: First message

- Communicate by releasing a statement of the current situation as soon as the participants might start to have concerns whether the event will be able to take place.

5.1.3 Stage 3: Cancellation

Step 1: Announce the cancellation

- Finalise the cancellation statement and publish the news simultaneously in every possible channel.
- Add the cancellation FAQ section to the event website.

Step 2: Tasks for the crisis communication team

- Make sure there is enough staff answering all the questions via email and social media.
- If the policy is to refund the registration fees, start issuing refunds.

5.1.4 Stage 4: After cancellation

Step 1: Follow-up messages

- Release updates regarding possible alternative activities which are replacing the conference programme.
- Send a follow-up message regarding the refund process if necessary.

Step 2: Evaluation and learning points

- Assess how the whole team performed.
- List the main learning points and adjust the processes accordingly.

5.2 Creating messages

The second part of the plan includes instructions on how to create messages and two sample messages which are emails.

All messages are created by using message mapping and message-specific general guidelines. Message mapping is illustrated in figure 19. The instructions to message mapping are:

1. Decide on the main idea which you want to communicate.
2. Create three key messages which support the main idea by asking these three questions:
 - a. What is the scenario?
 - b. Who needs to be reached?
 - c. What is the concern?
3. Come up with three proof points for each key message which act as evidence.

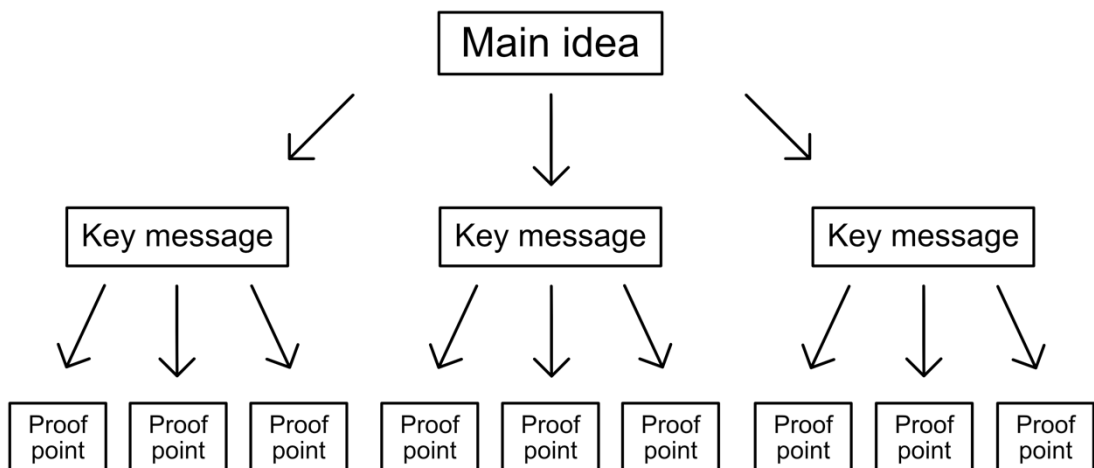


Figure 19. Message mapping

5.2.1 Message(s) before cancellation

General guidelines:

- Address the concerns the participants might have.
- Report the steps the organisers have taken to control the situation.
- Describe the steps the organisers will take to continue controlling the situation.
- Explain what happens if the conference is cancelled; will the registration fees be refunded, and if possible, how the refund process works.
- Have an actual person, such as the CEO or president of the organisation, sign the message.

Creating a sample

Situation: the conference hasn't been cancelled, but the participants are worried whether the conference will take place as planned.

The main idea: our organisation controls the situation, and you can count on us to do what is in the best interest of our participants.

Key messages and proof points:

1. Key message: we are monitoring the situation closely.

Proof points:

- We are following the guidelines and advice of the authorities, and here are links to the resources we are using.
- The organising team is following the situation very closely and is ready to make the decision to cancel if it is necessary.
- For the time being, the conference will take place as planned.

2. Key message: we empathise with our participants.

Proof points:

- The well-being of our participants and everyone involved in the conference is our top priority.
- We understand the situation is uncertain and stressful because so many are looking forward to the conference.
- If the conference has to be cancelled, all tickets will be refunded in full.

3. Key message: we will keep our participants updated.

Proof points:

- All updates will be posted on the conference website.
- All decisions are made after careful consideration.
- We will also continue to communicate any new information by email as soon as we have it.

Sample email

Subject line: Update on the xx conference

Dear xx

We are reaching out to you to share an update on the current situation (explain the current situation in more detail). We understand the situation is uncertain and stressful because so many are looking forward to the xx conference. For the time being, xx conference will take place as planned.

The well-being of our participants and everyone involved in the conference is our top priority. We are following the guidelines and advice of the authorities. Here are the links to the resources we are using (add links here).

The organising team is monitoring the situation very closely and is ready to make the decision to cancel the conference if necessary. All decisions will be made after careful consideration. If the conference has to be cancelled, all tickets will be refunded in full.

All updates will be posted on the conference website (link to the website). We will also continue to communicate any new information by email as soon as we have it. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Sincerely,

First name Last name

Title

Organisation

5.2.2 Cancellation message

General guidelines:

- Provide a detailed and thorough explanation into why the decision to cancel was made. If necessary, refer to reliable sources such as the authorities.
- Show that the organisers understand the situation the participants are in.
- Describe the feelings the organisers have.
- Explain the possible plans to achieve the objectives of the conference through alternative activities.
- Announce the refund policy and process.
- Express gratitude towards the participants and everyone involved in organising the conference.
- Provide contact details for possible questions.
- Have an actual person, such as the CEO or president of the organisation, sign the message.
- Guide people to the cancellation FAQ section on the event website.

Creating a sample

Situation: the conference has been cancelled.

The main idea: we are a responsible organisation, and the decision to cancel has been made in the best interest of our participants.

Key messages and proof points:

1. Key message: the decision to cancel was the correct decision.

Proof points:

- The well-being of our participants is our top priority, and therefore, after careful consideration, the decision to cancel was the only option.
- The decision is based on the guidelines and advice of the authorities, and here are links to the resources we have used.
- The travel restrictions make it impossible for some speakers and participants to attend the conference.

2. Key message: we empathise with our participants.

Proof points:

- We understand the news are disappointing as so many were looking forward to the conference.
- We would like to thank everyone for their hard work and contribution for the conference.
- All tickets will be refunded in full. More details regarding the refund process and information about hotel and flight cancellations can be found from cancellation FAQ from our website.

3. Key message: we have not forgotten the objectives of the conference.

Proof points:

- We are currently working on alternative activities.
- The decision regarding the next conference will be made soon.
- We will share all updates, please follow our website.

Sample email

Subject line: Conference xx cancelled

Dear xx

We are reaching out to you with important news. Sadly, we have to announce that we have come to the decision to cancel the xx conference. The well-being of the conference participants is our top priority, and therefore, after careful consideration, the decision to cancel was the only option. The decision is based on the guidelines and advice of the authorities (explain more about what affected the decision). Here are the links to the resources we have used (add links here). Furthermore, the current travel restrictions make it impossible for some speakers and participants to attend the xx conference, which affected the decision.

We understand the news are disappointing as so many were looking forward to the xx conference. The xx conference is important because... (explain why it is important). We are currently working on alternative activities in order to compensate the void the lack of xx conference causes. Furthermore, the decision regarding the next xx conference will be made soon. Please follow our website where we will share all updates.

All xx conference tickets will be refunded in full. More details regarding the refund process and information about hotel and flight cancellations can be found from cancellation FAQ from our website (link here).

We would like to thank everyone for their hard work and contribution for the xx conference. (explain more about who contributed to the conference and how)

Thank you for your patience, understanding, and commitment to the xx conference. We apologise for any inconvenience the cancellation causes.

We hope to see you (add where and when, for example, the next conference).

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions you might have by emailing to (add email address).

Sincerely,

First name Last name

Title

Organisation

6 Discussion

The last chapter of the thesis includes future recommendations for the commissioner as well as a description of the thesis process and author's learning outcomes.

6.1 Recommendations for the commissioner

Tapahtumantekijät can use the product of the thesis, the communication plan, in all future conference projects where the conference has a registration fee. Each conference is different with its unique characteristics, and therefore, each conference requires its own specific plan. At the beginning of a conference project, Tapahtumantekijät determines the responsibilities of different elements and aspects of the project together with the client. The responsibilities vary depending on the project. When discussing who is responsible for communication and the various elements of communication, Tapahtumantekijät should bring the responsibility of crisis communication to the discussion. Tapahtumantekijät and the client should agree who is responsible for creating a crisis communication plan which addresses a situation where the conference has to be cancelled. It is utmost important that everyone is aware of and committed to the agreed responsibilities.

The communication plan should be developed in the future, after each time it has been used. From experience Tapahtumantekijät will notice if the plan lacks something or something should be modified, developed, or altered. In the future, the plan could be a part of a greater crisis communication plan which includes plans for several crisis situations, not just event cancellation.

6.2 Thesis process

The author had started several thesis topics before this topic, but all of them had proven to be difficult or impossible to execute. The most recent topic was related to an event project the author was working on at Tapahtumantekijät. However, due to the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic Tapahtumantekijät had to cancel or postpone all events planned for spring and summer 2020, which meant the author couldn't go forward with the thesis topic of the time and had to find a new topic. The author and commissioner came up with a new and very topical thesis topic, the topic of this thesis, which arose from the situation caused by COVID-19. The process of this thesis began in April 2020. During the process the biggest difficulty the author was faced with was how to find suitable conferences to benchmark. The author found out that, in fact, many conferences had not been cancelled, but

instead postponed or turned into virtual events. The thesis was completed by the end of July 2020.

6.3 Learning outcomes

The author of the thesis was immediately interested in the thesis topic as the topic was extremely current and so closely related to her work. The personal goal set in the beginning of the thesis process was to develop oneself as an event professional by studying event risk management, crisis communication, and communication plans. The author had some knowledge and experience about event risk management, but not regarding communication as part of risk management. Communication, in general, is a topic and field the author has a growing interest towards.

Working on the thesis project was a huge learning experience on many levels. The author has always preferred team work and would rather not work on a project alone. Typically, working alone leads to procrastination and inability to undertake the project. The thesis seemed like a huge, overwhelming, and challenging project. The difficulties the author had had with the previous thesis topics affected negatively on her vision of this thesis project. The author also considered herself as a slow writer who didn't enjoy writing and was convinced completing the thesis would take a lot of time. However, once the author had the time to focus solely on the thesis and the writing process kicked off, she noticed that she wasn't such a slow writer after all. The thesis topic was extremely interesting, and the scope of the thesis was clear, which made working on the thesis pleasant. A product-oriented thesis suited the author better than a research-oriented due to it being practical and closely related to her work. The thesis had a clear ultimate deadline, which meant procrastination was not possible. The author learnt that dividing the project, especially the writing process, into smaller parts helped and assisted the progress. In the end, the author was ahead of her writing schedule, which left more time for editing. All in all, the thesis process was easier than initially expected, and the author was surprised how pleasant writing turned out to be. The thesis process was an encouraging experience where the author discovered new positive aspects of herself.

Studying the sources used in the theoretical framework and the benchmarking process resulted in acquiring vast amounts of knowledge which will be highly useful in the author's work and future career. Risk management is an integral part of event management and every event project should have a crisis communication plan. When a crisis hits, there is no time to waste. Communication should be quick, consistent, and open. A well-planned

communication plan, which is ready to use, saves time and resources. The author's interest in risk management and communication grew during the thesis project, and she will continue to study the topics to develop herself as a professional.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Email (Nordic Business Forum 13 March 2020)



Update on COVID-19 effects on our events

Dear ,

We wanted to reach out to you and all customers with tickets or live stream to our 2020 events to share a status update on the effects of the COVID-19 on our events.

We at Nordic Business Forum are closely following the situation with COVID-19 and its effects on the event industry. At the time being, our Nordic Business Forum events in Stockholm, Helsinki and Oslo are going to be held as scheduled in late September 2020.

The health of our customers, speakers, partners, and staff is our top priority and we do not want to risk the safety and well-being of anyone in any way. That is why we keep closely following the situation and the decisions and advice made by the officials. We understand that the situation causes uncertainties about the future and we want to put your mind at ease when it comes to your participation in our events. Here's what you should know about the current situation:

- At the time being, our Nordic Business Forum events in Stockholm, Helsinki and Oslo are going to be held as scheduled in late September 2020.
- If the local officials are not allowing events like ours to be organized in September, we will reschedule the events within six months of the original event and customers can use the original tickets or live stream to access the events on those new dates. There are multiple speakers in events organized by Nordic Business Forum, and therefore individual changes to the list of speakers are possible.
- If the events are cancelled altogether, you will get a full refund for your purchase.

We have also taken steps to make sure we are on top of the situation and its effects on our events. Here are the actions we have taken:

- Our board of directors are constantly following the situation. With the help of our global networks, we are trying to keep ourselves fully updated on the progress of the situation.
- We have rescheduled our events related to the Speaker Contest from the spring to fall in order to contribute to the likeliness of getting the COVID-19 situation in control.

We keep following the situation closely and prepare to accommodate the possible changes in the plans. Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,
Aslak de Silva, CEO of Nordic Business Forum

Nordic Business Forum - Building leaders who change the world with the annual conferences in Helsinki, Stockholm, and Oslo. [See our upcoming events here.](#)



Appendix 2. Email (Nordic Business Forum 7 April 2020)



An update on the COVID-19 effects on NBForum 2020 Helsinki

Dear

I hope you are healthy and well! We wanted to assure you that we are prepared to reschedule or even cancel Nordic Business Forum 2020 Helsinki if the COVID-19 situation so demands, but still hopeful that the event could be run on the planned time. Only time will tell.

Due to new updates from other event organizers, we wanted to reach out to you again. If the situation so allows, with more than 6300 tickets already sold, we are fully able and prepared to arrange the event as scheduled.

The health of our customers, speakers, partners, and staff is our top priority and we do not want to risk the safety and well-being of anyone in any way. This is why we keep following the situation closely, as well as adhering to any and all official orders and advice.

Here's what you should know about the current situation:

- At the time being, Nordic Business Forum in Helsinki is going to be held as scheduled in late September 2020.
- If local or international authorities are still forbidding events such as ours in September, we will reschedule the event accordingly. This rescheduling will shift the time of the event with no more than six months, and customers can use the original tickets or live stream to access the events on these new dates. There are multiple speakers in events organized by Nordic Business Forum, and therefore individual changes to the speaker lineup are possible.
- If the event is canceled altogether, you will get a full refund for your purchase.

Meanwhile, you should have received free access to our Video Library and Online Webinar Platform live.nbforum.com. We have uploaded speeches from our previous events and will have live webinars coming from Gary Hamel, Robbie Kellman Baxter, and Stéphane Garelli in the upcoming weeks. We hope these videos and webinars provide value and inspiration for you and your team during these times.

We keep following the COVID-19 situation closely and prepare to accommodate the possible changes in the plans. Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,
Aslak de Silva
CEO of Nordic Business Forum

Nordic Business Forum - Building leaders who change the world with the annual conferences in Helsinki, Stockholm, and Oslo. [See our upcoming events here.](#)



Appendix 3. E-mail (Nordic Business Forum 26 June 2020)



Dear ,

We hope you are healthy and well. We are reaching out to you with an important update regarding the outbreak of COVID-19 and its effects on Nordic Business Forum 2020 in Helsinki.

With heavy hearts, we have to inform you that we cannot organize Nordic Business Forum 2020 in Helsinki, and will instead reschedule the event to September 2021. All tickets to Nordic Business Forum 2020 in Helsinki are automatically valid for the 2021 Helsinki event organized on 29-30 September 2021. If you can't make it next year, you can cancel your ticket(s) and get a full refund.

You will be happy to hear that Yuval Noah Harari, Lloyd Blankfein, and Björn Wahlroos have already confirmed their attendance for the new dates. We also have two new speakers, Zoë Chance and Francesca Gino, joining the lineup. More speakers are to be announced once they are confirmed. You can find more details about the 2021 event [here](#) and feel free to [mark in it your calendar](#).

The situation in Finland is currently fairly well under control, and the government has allowed large indoor events to be held starting from 1 August 2020 with certain restrictions. However, the travel restrictions for our speakers and customers seem unlikely to be lifted before September. The COVID-19 virus is still spreading rapidly in many countries around the world, and we have no certainty of what the situation is in September. In addition, [a report by the Finnish government-appointed scientific panel](#) suggests that until there's a vaccine for the virus, large indoor events should not be held due to the bigger risk for the spread of the virus. The health and wellbeing of our customers, partners, speakers, and employees is a top priority in our conference operations. Therefore, unfortunately, we have come to the conclusion to reschedule our flagship event to September 2021.

Our entire team is sad that it had to come down to this and we apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you. We want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for trusting us and for signing up for the Helsinki event. And we really hope you will support us by keeping the ticket(s) for the next year and seeing you attending our soon to be launched online events and webinars as well.

Here's what you should do next:

Your purchased ticket(s) to Nordic Business Forum 2020 in Helsinki is automatically valid for the 2021 Helsinki event organized on 29-30 September 2021. You will also get to keep your [live.nbforum.com](#) access and revisit speeches from our previous events, live stage interviews, and webinar recordings. We will also have new exciting online products coming, so stay tuned!

We understand that you might want to cancel your ticket(s), and this is of course possible. **If you want to cancel your ticket(s), please let us know before 31 August 2020 by clicking the link and updating the information:**

In case we do not hear from you by 31 August 2020, we consider you to agree to transfer your tickets for 2021. Cancellation beyond that date will not be possible.

Despite the current situation, we are looking forward to seeing you in our future

events. Thank you for your understanding. We hope you stay safe!

Sincerely,
Aslak de Silva, CEO of Nordic Business Forum

Please, do not hesitate to contact us with any questions you may have. We are here for you! Our customer care is at your service at info@nbforum.com



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