



Government of the Netherlands

# Guide to the COVID-19 strategy in the Netherlands

National Crisis Communication Core Team (NKC) -  
Government of the Netherlands

June 2021

**alleen samen krijgen we  
corona onder controle**



**Permitted distribution TLP: WHITE**  
(Traffic Light Protocol)

This guide is labelled TLP: WHITE and is distributed by the NKC. The NKC uses the Traffic Light Protocol (TLP) to define clearly and unambiguously what may be done with the information it provides. If information has a TLP designation, you will know with whom you may share it. This is described in the First standard ([www.first.org/tlp](http://www.first.org/tlp)). Recipients may share the information from this guide within their organisation and outside it, and the information may also be published.

# Introduction

In March 2020, who would have guessed that the COVID-19 crisis would still dominate our lives today? While the measures to tackle COVID-19 disrupt society, the virus continually poses new challenges to us, communication professionals, in almost all communication disciplines. COVID-19 has a profound impact on our field of expertise and calls for ingenuity and flexibility: it is like a marathon with a course that is constantly changing.

Of course, during this prolonged crisis we still rely on 'classic' crisis communication, by actively providing information, offering immediate action perspectives and having authoritative administrators provide guidance. We continue to inform the public about the development of the virus, communicate meticulously on the measures in place, and the ministers and other administrators involved seize every (media) opportunity to provide context and explanation. However, the long duration of this crisis and the new phases on the horizon call for new emphases. That is what this guide is about.

This is the English version of the third guide of the Government of the Netherlands National Crisis Communication Core Team (NKC). This edition focuses on information that may also be relevant outside the Netherlands for communication professionals engaged in COVID-19-related communication.

In its first guide, published in April 2020, the NKC compiled the knowledge and insights available at the time on effective crisis communication. The update produced by the NKC in June 2020 already contained some additional insights from research, behavioural science and dilemma logic. After the easing of measures over the summer period, we were confronted by a second wave of COVID-19 infections in the autumn of 2020. The NKC became operational again and faced new challenges.

While communication should serve as a basis for acceptance and compliance with measures, there is a growing awareness that the existing communication is not enough. We are witnessing

increasing polarisation in a society where people are 'tired' of the pandemic and are looking for new certainties. Another issue that professionals have to deal with when communicating about COVID-19 is loneliness. This means that we need to consult other disciplines and definitely also require contributions from behavioural experts. In this guide, we will share our insights on this issue.

## **This guide:**

- is intended for all communication professionals in the Netherlands and elsewhere who adapt national COVID-19-related communication for use within their own environment (local, sectoral or organisation-wide) on a daily basis;
- compiles current insights on COVID-19 communication strategies pursued by government and semi-public organisations;
- has been prepared by the NKC, a Government of the Netherlands organisation, with the help of colleagues from all over the country, for which we are extremely grateful.

We are publishing this guide in full awareness of the fact that we do not know all there is to know. We are walking across the bridge while building it. Even so, this is a good time to share our updated knowledge, knowing that COVID-19 communication is a challenge for all of us at this point in time. We hope that this guide will help and inspire you and we expressly invite you to share your experiences with us. COVID-19-related communication is highly dynamic, and there is no single recipe for success. Let us strengthen each other.

## Analysis

# The state of the country

Where do we stand with our COVID-19-related communication, almost a full year after the start of the crisis? Campaign impact studies conducted during the first two waves of the pandemic have revealed several trends that are relevant for the approach to COVID-19 communication today. These include a lower sense of urgency, increasing polarisation, greater emphasis on the justification of decisions, the growing problem of fake news and increased confusion about measures. We will briefly explain each of these trends below.

### Lower sense of urgency during the second wave

The Dutch experienced the second wave very differently from the first. During the first wave, people were much more motivated to stick to the measures. The first period was more emotionally charged, with a prevailing sense of fear, isolation, panic and unreality. On the other hand, people also say they were positively surprised by creative initiatives showing compassion and altruism. Around the summer, people 'got used to' the situation and society became slightly more relaxed, thanks in part to consistent reports about falling infection rates. In the public perception, the risk of becoming infected was low, regardless of whether friends or relatives had already had the virus.

### Corona as a catalyst for polarisation

Overall, most people comply well, or reasonably well, with the measures and consider it important for all to do so. A relatively small proportion however disagree with the measures, for various reasons, and publicise their disagreement. As a result, more and more people come into contact with others who have strongly negative views about the measures, for example when asking them to respect social distancing in shops. Their request provokes a negative reaction, they are sworn at or even threatened. As reports about such incidents tend to circulate fast, the impression may arise that this 'negative' group is larger than it really is. Another consequence is that people may shy away from calling others to account over compliance with the measures, given the chance of a

negative response. Another interesting observation is that people tend to believe that others do not comply with the measures as well as they do. This increases the risk of thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them'.

### 'Why' is becoming more and more important

Whereas during the first wave the public readily accepted the measures and complied with them fairly strictly, things were quite different during the second wave. As knowledge about the virus increased, more and more people began to question the justification for some measures. Take the face masks, for example. Why did the government make face masks obligatory, despite virologist Jaap van Dissel of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment maintaining his earlier view, in early October 2020, that wearing non-medical face masks has 'an extremely small effect' on the spread of coronavirus? Nor did people understand why, during the period before the lockdown in mid-December, cinemas, where social distancing rules can be respected quite easily, had to close while busy shops were (or seemed to be) allowed to stay open. People appreciate it when the authorities share their considerations and dilemmas with them.

### Fake news is gaining ground

Fake news played a more prominent role during the second wave than during the first. Conspiracy theories and fables were gaining ground and a host of influencers helped them spread.

Organisations were under strong pressure to correct incomplete and erroneous information and prevent it from spreading. Much has been written about the coronavirus. It is not for the government to brand information as ‘news’ or ‘fake news’. Other, independent institutions do perform this task, such as [Leiden University](#) (NL) and [DPA Factcheck](#) (NL). Alleged disinformation can be submitted there for independent verification. Only in highly exceptional cases does the government itself respond to cases of alleged disinformation. This happens, for example, when a manipulated or incorrect message is disseminated with the false suggestion that it was sent by the Government of the Netherlands.

A easing of restrictions often results in increased confusion about the measures in place. Whereas people perceived the measures to be fairly clear during the first wave, this changed in the second wave, when many measures came with numerous exceptions and were slightly different from those for similar situations in the first wave. This made them difficult to remember, making people more uncertain as to whether they were actually in compliance (e.g. wearing a face mask in the right places). Some measures had the status of urgent advice rather than a strict rule, which made the importance of compliance less obvious. In addition, in the public perception there were inconsistencies in the roadmap presented in mid-October. Even though the group that felt the measures were fairly clear did increase, it never reached the level seen in April 2020. Less than a month later, the policy was modified substantially without a proper explanation. Differentiation of rules requires considerable communication knowledge and skills on the part of those who issue them.

The chapter about analysis on page 12 provides more information about campaign impact studies and other research methods that are used for communication on COVID-19.

Basic principles as a touchstone

# Communication principles

Our objective is to use our expertise, advice and resources in the field of communication to contribute as effectively as possible to the main goal of the crisis response strategy: getting the virus under control. We do so within the context of the main campaign message: 'Alleen samen krijgen we corona onder controle': Alone/only we'll get corona under control. We will flesh out this message by providing plain information about the virus and current measures, and clear action perspectives. The current phase of the crisis calls for a number of additional strategies.

## **1. Outline a realistic perspective**

No one knows exactly how the virus will develop, but it is certain that COVID-19 will remain with us for some time to come. We will have to learn to live with the virus, and we do not know for how long. In order to resensitise the public to the measures, we need a long-term perspective at this stage of the crisis. By presenting a concrete outline of the future, we aim to bridge the long period of uncertainty and provide some tangible milestones.

## **2. Be open about dilemmas**

People are more likely to understand and accept decisions if we communicate openly and actively about why they are necessary. It is important to remain open about the dilemmas that arise, the considerations involved, the resulting choices and to whom they apply. We communicate the desired image by showcasing people who set a good example, take the lead, are resourceful and act responsibly. These good examples will help others through this difficult phase. The emphasis is on what is possible, rather than what is forbidden.

## **3. Offer more in-depth information**

When the COVID-19 crisis began, government communication focused heavily on the measures (what is and is not permitted) and their implementation (how to organise them). Less information was available on why those measures were necessary in the first place. While the Coronavirus Dashboard offered many different and transparent parameters, knowledge about the virus was not actively shared in messages to the public. In the new phase that we are now in, it is important to share more in-depth knowledge with the public. How exactly does the virus spread? And exactly how many infections have been prevented by which specific measures? We should also highlight the different roles: experts advise, administrators decide, and politicians legislate and monitor. Facts are indispensable allies. We should counter misinformation with true facts.

#### 4. Show empathy

More facts alone will not get us where we need to be. Communication should always respond to people's perceptions and the many emotions they feel. Make sure to identify and acknowledge people's concerns and the ways in which they address and express their motivations, such as values. We use personal stories to present a recognisable picture of the various effects of the virus and the measures taken in the Netherlands. These stories show that while the virus challenges our strength of will, people manage to cope with discomfort and uncertainty, alone or with others.

#### 5. Strengthen the sense of community

COVID-19 is an increasingly divisive force in our society. Discussions and disagreement need to be taken seriously in order to prevent extreme positions from dominating the debate. After all, by far the majority of people in this country simply want to do what is necessary. They will be willing to comply with the measures as long they feel that the government acknowledges the problems they are experiencing. Therefore, in our general communication, we focus not just on medical aspects but incorporate all other perspectives that affect daily life in families, education, sports and work. This enables us to strengthen the sense of community and the encouragement that people seek from each other. We can do so by discussing the dilemmas and issues of people 'in the centre' and avoiding polarising statements that one can only be for or against.

#### 6. Communication contributes to behavioural change

Behavioural change (see also the chapter Translated into internal communication on page 19) requires a good balance between communication, context and control. There is a wealth of untapped knowledge that we could use to enable people to observe hygiene rules and social distancing measures. In this context, positive examples from society are crucial. These allow us to show how we can reorganise our lives for a (prolonged but) limited period of time to curb infection.

*Control:* Unambiguous and robust policies that can be complied with and enforced. Visible enforcement is important.

*Context:* We facilitate desired behaviour (e.g. in the design of physical outdoor space, through interventions in supermarkets and crowd control, by making it easier for people to stay in quarantine etc.).

*Communication:* Communication allows us to provide information and action perspectives on desired behaviour, to stimulate and reward good behaviour and to communicate about context and control (via the central government, regions, sectors and branches of industry).

#### 7. Target specific groups

Government communication is for everyone, but sometimes it takes an extra effort to reach each and every individual. We have an eye for specific groups that can only be reached effectively through their own means, channels or expressions (such as language and images). We tell them the same story, but sometimes in a different form. Of course, we do so in collaboration with the target groups themselves and with organisations and networks that already maintain contacts with specific groups. Preferably, we go for co-creation in the development and implementation of the communication strategy. And we engage behavioural experts.

#### 8. Undertake a joint communication effort

The past few months have shown how important it is for government parties to join forces to provide accessible information on approaches and measures. The state, the region and the municipalities know where to find each other. We communicate as one government and share knowledge and good examples. We want to continue this approach. Shared responsibility and shared ownership promote the transfer of information and, even more importantly, allow that information to be customised. We are more recognisable and accessible, which is important if we are to maximise the reach of our communication effort.

#### 9. Broaden the emphasis

The COVID-19 crisis is making considerable demands of our society. This is evident not only in hospitals, nursing homes and care institutions, but also at home, on the street and in our work. A high level of knowledge of the measures does not translate into a proportional level of desired behaviour. This means that more is needed to influence behaviour and that we need different emphases in our communication efforts.

**Start of the COVID-19 crisis: focus on urgency and clear communication**

**During the COVID-19 crisis: focus on motivation and connection**

'Behavioural determinant': fear of COVID-19 / the unknown as the main driver of behaviour

'Behavioural determinant': compliance with the social norm  
*Face masks in supermarkets when this was recommended, not yet mandatory: initially only 10% wore face masks, but the figure soon grew to over 75%*

We have to get through this

It demands a lot from us, but we can do it

Maximum control of the virus

Dealing with the virus in everyday life

Restrictions: focus on measures

Opportunities: focus on behaviour

Promote compliance  
*'Comply with the measures in force'*

Encourage people to be resourceful  
*'How do you manage to keep going?', 'Where do you get your energy?'*

Directive and strict

Be empathetic and showcase good behaviour  
*70% abide by the rules or at least try to do so*

Discourage  
*Motivated by alarming figures*

Encourage  
*What have we managed to prevent, for whom we are doing this?*

Provide information, issue instructions  
*'The following measures are in force'*

Explain measures, storytelling  
*'We understand it's tough.'*



## Knowledge of behaviour

# Communication that works

In recent months, behavioural scientists and communication professionals have gained a great deal of knowledge about the factors that influence adherence to coronavirus measures and how to use this knowledge in communication. To give you an idea of relevant behavioural knowledge, in this chapter we share key strategies for understanding and responding to behaviour. An overview of 'behavioural determinants'.

### Dealing with risks

If people think that there is a serious risk of them becoming infected themselves and infecting others, and if the consequences of an infection seem serious to them, they are more inclined to comply with the measures. However, any positive aspects to non-compliance will reduce the tendency to comply. This often involves social dilemmas: on the one hand, we are deeply concerned about people falling ill and want to protect them by adhering to the measures as closely as possible but, on the other, we also want to maintain our social contacts, for example, and keep our business running.

Provide information on causes and consequences of infections in a concrete and convincing way. For example, you could present local figures from the [dashboard](#), [visualisations](#) (NL) of the effects of COVID-19 on the human body, and [Zij stierven door corona](#) (NL), a series of TV specials. Emphasise the positive effects of complying with the measures ('gain frame') or the negative effects of not complying with the measures ('loss frame'). If you opt for a loss frame, always offer a perspective for action, showing people how they can prevent this from happening. A good example is the [#daardoeikhetvoor](#) (NL) campaign of the municipality of Rotterdam, which combines a gain frame with a tangible perspective for action.

### Convince people that the measures are necessary

People are more likely to comply if they believe that the measures really help to reduce the risk of infection. So it is important to explain why the measures are important and effective, and also to highlight the consequences of non-compliance (for yourself and for others), in clear and specific terms. The message should address both cognitive and emotional capabilities. One good example of an initiative to explain the necessity of anti-COVID-19 measures is the [visual explanation](#) (NL) by science journalist Diederik Jekel of the combined effect of measures.

### Preventing regret

'Anticipated regret' is based on the assumption that people are receptive to advance awareness of the regret they would feel if they were faced with negative consequences of not complying with the measures ('How would you feel if...'). For example, some elements of this strategy appeared in the [speech](#) (NL) by Health Minister Hugo de Jonge at a press conference on 20 January 2021: 'Imagine how big our regret would be if we waited now and looked back three weeks from now only to see the precious opportunities we had missed?'

### Confidence in own behaviour

People need to feel confident that they are able to comply with the measures effectively and consistently, even in difficult situations. This requires support, skills and motivation. The social environment can strongly influence this idea of 'self-efficacy', both in a positive and a negative sense. It is helpful to show examples of compliance from people who see compliance as challenging but achievable, as illustrated on the website [examples from practice](#) (NL). Offer tips and tools that facilitate compliance. Identify opportunities for practical and emotional support and make it easy for people to ask for and offer help. The [Quarantine Guide](#) is a guide on assistance for people in home quarantine, and the national platform for COVID-19 support brings together supply and demand for help.

An important tool that helps people increase their self-efficacy is to show the consequences of behaviour and illustrate good practices. In the [television commercial](#) (NL) about the need for social distancing during the Christmas holidays, not observing the 1.5-metre distance rule was portrayed as a situation-related 'mistake' in a way that many people recognise. This helps to convince people that while mistakes are understandable, the measures are feasible. For effective communication, it is important to also offer a perspective for action: how to prevent this kind of mistake from now on? This is done quite well, for example, in the [television commercial](#) (NL) about shopping. Prime Minister Rutte's [speech](#) (NL) at the press conference on 17 November 2020 contained a good example of presenting 'successes' as personal behavioural achievements, which promotes consistent compliance: 'The figures show that the measures are effective. Or rather that our behaviour is effective. (...) I think that is a compliment to all of us. So there's no doubt we can make another joint effort again.' For this strategy to be effective in mass communication, we need to show incidents that a wide audience can relate to.

### Responding to habits

There are more approaches though that help people to perform and sustain desired behaviour. One is capitalising on habits. Translate your measures into concrete 'when, then' plans. 'When you come home, wash your hands.' 'When you go shopping, go alone.' This allows the situation itself to automatically 'trigger' good behaviour. The 'when to wash your hands' list in the [Wash your hands thoroughly](#) (NL) poster also does this in part, although it lacks the 'when, then' wording that research shows really promotes positive behaviour. The poster does provide very clear and concrete explanations of exactly how the requested behaviour should be performed; this promotes compliance. It also helps if people think about potential obstacles in advance and come up with appropriate solutions. An example of communication that helps people to do this is the government's [Travel Smart](#) information from June 2020.

### Motivate: keep it up!

When a person's physical and mental reserves are depleted due to prolonged stress, fatigue or exhaustion, that person's ability to adapt or control their behaviour is reduced. This may also increase resistance to measures. It is important to recognise that the measures take a toll on everyone and that compliance may be difficult. During the [press conference](#) (NL) on 12 January 2021, Mr Rutte said the following: 'Not a surprising decision, but a huge setback of course. And for many people, the message is also extremely unwelcome. (...) We see it all around us and perhaps feel it ourselves - a sense of powerlessness, frustration and dejection. It's getting harder and harder to keep going and that's understandable.' Remember to identify support options. For example, the [Quarantine Guide](#) shares practical resources (Red Cross, municipality, Thuisgekookt Foundation) for help with shopping, food and medicines, plus help lines for people who need contact.

Make sure to identify your overarching goals, and to explain for each measure how it will contribute to achieving these goals. Invite people to think for themselves what they are 'doing it for' (such as the [#IStayHomeFor](#) challenge on Instagram). Encourage them to accept their individual responsibility, explain that the behaviour of an individual affects the community (as worded in the slogan 'Alleen samen krijgen we corona onder controle' / Alone/only we'll get corona under control). By doing so, you will appeal to people's underlying motives and values, i.e. what they (often unconsciously) consider important in their lives.

Another major contributor to sustained good behaviour is a supportive social environment. In this context, social norms play an important role: if others comply with the measures and think this is important, you are more likely to do so yourself. For example, consider the [statement](#) (NL) made by Justice and Security Minister Ferd Grapperhaus about New Year's Eve: 'The vast majority of people have cooperated very well indeed.' Do not however refer to the social norm if it does not point in the desired direction. In such cases, you could consider using a dynamic norm ('more and more people...'), as Minister De Jonge did in his [speech](#) (NL) at the press conference on 20 January 2021: 'More and more people appear to be willing to be vaccinated.' Authentic and reliable 'models' – influential people who are seen as positive examples in specific target groups – who comply with the measures also play an important role in promoting social norms.

### Finally: perceived fairness counts

People are more likely to comply with measures if they feel they are fair. This includes both the process that has led to the measure and the measure itself. This also explains why it is so important to use clear and simple texts and images: why are certain measures necessary, how did they come about, which procedures were followed, who was involved in their design and in decision-making? Why the measures are necessary is communicated quite effectively in the headlines of, for example, the [poster](#) (NL) on testing for coronavirus if you have symptoms ('Many people with complaints actually have COVID-19. With a test, you'll quickly know whether you can go outside again or whether you need to be extra careful so as not to infect others') and the [poster](#) (NL) on the Netherlands in lockdown ('The coronavirus is spreading rapidly. To keep healthcare accessible, we need to keep our contacts to a minimum.'). Communicate not only established facts, but also the aspects that require further research and what you are doing to improve your knowledge as soon as possible. For example, in his speech at the [press conference](#) (NL) of 12 March 2020, Mr Rutte was quite open about the fact that there were many things we simply did not know: 'The fact is that in a crisis like this, you have to make 100% of the decisions with 50% of the knowledge and therefore have to bear the consequences.'

### Read more

More information on behavioural determinants and communication methods to support desired behaviour can be found [here](#) (NL).

For further details, see the [Basic document on preventive behaviour and well-being](#) and the [Roadmap for government communication on interventions](#) (NL).

The Government of the Netherlands has developed the Communication Activation Strategy Instrument ([CASI](#)) (NL) to help communication specialists translate behavioural knowledge into communication strategies and interventions.

Constant monitoring

# Analysis

Measurement is knowledge. And knowledge is the basis for effective communication. This is why we actively use different types of communication research, to test our communication approaches or to fine-tune a message. Since the research methods and results are also suitable for regional, local or sectoral use, we present an overview of the studies conducted, their applications and the location of research reports (if available).

## Quantitative pretest

This is a brief quantitative poll within the target group to obtain numerical insights and test communications in their final (or nearly final) state. In our case, the target group was mostly the general public. Sometimes however we targeted more specific groups, such as young people aged 18-28.

### Application

During the development of the 'Alleen Samen' public campaign, the campaign communications were tested for optimisation. The test included questions about appreciation, understanding, clarity, message transfer and sentiment. A quantitative pretest is particularly suitable for testing resources and adding some finishing touches.

### How the knowledge from research is used in practice

More than ten quantitative pre-tests were carried out in the second half of 2020. A well-known example is the campaign run by the municipality of Amsterdam featuring portraits of young people and quotes with their reasons for complying with the measures. The campaign has since been converted to the central government's house style. The test also offered insights on how to do this effectively (which quotes work, which don't?) and how diversity among respondents can be addressed.

## Campaign impact study

Normally, a campaign impact study maps out the effects and communicative impact of a campaign (pre and post-measurement). In the case of the COVID-19 crisis, the existing communication and media frenzy made it difficult to pinpoint the actual impact of our 'Alleen Samen' campaign.

The government also implemented a campaign impact monitor to track trends relating to the measures. As it was not clear beforehand how long the campaign would run (there is a starting point, but no end point), the government opted for a continuous monitoring system.

### Application

The campaign impact study made it possible to measure progress on the communication goals – initially every day, later every week and currently every four weeks. The results allow us to quickly identify trends ('corona fatigue', for example) and adjust our communication efforts accordingly. In this situation we should be careful, however, to automatically attribute effects to the campaign. In addition, it is important to focus on actual behaviour in questions on behavioural aspects, for example by asking respondents what they did yesterday, rather than what they intend to do. This produces more reliable data, because people are usually bad at predicting their own behaviour and may be inclined to provide socially desirable answers. If possible, ask a behavioural expert for advice on this matter.

### *How the knowledge from research is used in practice*

We have distilled a number of trends and key insights from the vast amount of data generated by the campaign impact studies. This has revealed some similarities compared to the first wave, as well as some important differences in how the target groups perceive the communication and comply with the measures. For example, it has become far more important to explain why decisions are taken. This meant that the communication strategy had to provide more space for dialogue. Examples include the live Q&A sessions organised with Minister De Jonge and Prime Minister Rutte. People are becoming more critical and there is a trend towards polarisation. There is a group that strictly adheres to the measures, but there is also a group that emphatically opposes them. It is difficult to devise a communication strategy that serves all sides well. The majority comply with the measures, but constant monitoring helps to keep in touch with the public and their preferences and expectations regarding contacts with the government and with each other.

Campaign impact study reports can be found [here](#) (NL). Behavioural studies carried out by RIVM can be found [here](#).

### **Qualitative research**

This type of research involves face-to-face interviews with one or two respondents, or with a group. Given the current restrictions, these conversations are obviously conducted online.

### *Application*

Qualitative research enables in-depth examination of sentiments on certain topics. For example, after the press conference on Tuesday 3 November, qualitative research was carried out in the form of ten duo interviews. At least one person in each of these duos belonged to the target group of people who are vulnerable to COVID-19. The other member was that person's partner, a family member, a friend etc. Respondents were selected to ensure a balanced distribution according to age, stage of life, migration background and level of education.

The starting point for the interviews was how the respondents had experienced the press conference of Prime Minister Rutte and Minister De Jonge. The interviews covered the respondents' perception of the measures, aspects that went well and others that were more difficult, how they expected to get through the winter with the current measures and what the government could do to help people comply.

### *How the knowledge from research is used in practice*

During a concept test for one of the campaigns, it turned out that the concept did not work. The idea was to offer a perspective, but people found the effort totally unconvincing and also insufficiently concrete. That was interesting: we knew that people were badly in

need of positive perspectives, but this approach clearly did not hit the right chord. So it was back to the drawing board.

Online qualitative research reports can be found [here](#) (NL).

### **Web analysis**

Web analysis involves research into the web statistics of visitors: how many people visit a site, how do they reach that site and from where, how do they navigate the web, what do they search for on the particular website etc.

### *Application*

On a daily basis, the editors and the web analyst for [rijksoverheid.nl](#) analyse which COVID-19 pages are frequently viewed, study the feedback from users and the most frequently used search terms in Google and in the website's own search tool. This shows us whether we already have (the right) content for specific topics and what content still needs to be developed.

### *How the knowledge from research is used in practice*

By tracing [rijksoverheid.nl](#) campaign codes in the URLs of, for example, posts on social media (known as UTM codes), we can see exactly how many visitors these social media posts generate. This information is not directly traceable to an individual person. Shortened URLs such as [rijksoverheid.nl/corona](#) have also been 'tagged' with these UTM codes, to see how often they are used. In addition, qualitative user research is also used for [rijksoverheid.nl](#), such as online surveys and user experience research.

With the help of Piwik (an open-source program for tracking website visitor statistics), we use dashboards to monitor the scores for the various COVID-19 topics. This enables communication consultants to determine the impact of the content provided. Collaboration between the editor, the communication consultant and a web analyst helps to identify issues that qualify for improvement. Weekly feedback to policy staff on communications on [rijksoverheid.nl](#) allows for adjustments to be made.

Examples of findings that denote improvement potential are frequent negative feedback, search terms used in the search tool that do not produce any results, visitors visiting an overview page with only links, not clicking on them and then leaving. Or pages which, despite abundant content, only attract brief visits. For example, much of the content and structure for 'Vaccination against COVID-19' was adjusted after web analysis showed the need for improvements.

## Environmental analysis

This is an analysis based on coverage in the press and on social media (trending topics and sentiment).

### Application

The environmental analysis generates overarching insights on a collection of topics that attract media attention. These are topics that tend to influence views and sentiments among the public. Those insights can then be used to adjust or fine-tune communication. Environmental analyses have been carried out on a daily basis during this crisis. The analysis involves, among other things, mapping sentiment on social media and identifying online disinformation. Environmental analyses are widely shared internally and externally (with partners).

## A research community

In a research community, it is possible to question people on specific topics in a closed, online environment. A research expert or agency can help you set up a community around your target group or issue, enabling you to gather in-depth qualitative insights in a short time. You can also link up with an existing community to conduct your research there. The advantage of a community is that participants can also put topics on the agenda themselves, which gives us a good idea of their concerns.

### Application

It is a relatively quick and efficient way to present questions to an audience. Useful for gathering qualitative input, for example to explore a new theme or to test potential improvements to specific communications.

### *How the knowledge from research is used in practice*

All central government organisations can present issues to a permanent community of over 150 individuals, the NLDenktMee community. Over the last six months, NLDenktMee was engaged in multiple studies into the [Coronavirus Dashboard](#).

Coronavirus Dashboard study reports can be found [here](#) (NL).

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) has for several years had a permanent community of teachers and school governors that was also available during the current crisis to discuss issues. Over the past year, the OCW Teachers' Community took part in several surveys on the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for the education sector. The insights gained have been incorporated into communications, interactive policy-making and political decision-making.

The studies carried out within the OCW Teachers' Community can be found [here](#) (NL).

## The flash poll

Short-term quantitative research. Usually the results are available within one to three days. A flash poll normally consists of a brief survey among a cross-section of society. A flash poll provides a snapshot of a particular issue, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Current events can have a major impact on the result, so it is important that you interpret the result within the context in which you conducted the poll.

A flash poll can also be a valuable complement to an environmental analysis. Debates on social media tend to be dominated by highly vocal individuals, rather than the 'silent majority' in the centre, with the risk of over-representing extreme views. A flash poll to gauge the 'weight' of an issue or sentiment can help to put this into perspective.

### Application

From July through December, a total of five flash polls were conducted. Flash polls make it possible to quickly establish, for example, the prevailing sentiment or the level support for particular policies or measures. They are also suitable for testing a certain choice of words or images.

### *How the knowledge from research is used in practice*

A shortened additional impact monitor on COVID-19 and the Christmas holidays was conducted a month and a half before those holidays. There was a need to get an idea of how people expected to celebrate the holidays. In addition, the government wanted to gauge the level of support for a fireworks ban – which proved considerable. The government used these findings to better assess the communication that might be required in the event of such a ban. In the end, it turned out that a large majority complied with the measures during the Christmas holidays, confirming the results of the poll.

Flash poll research reports can be found [here](#) (NL).

Translated into communication with the general public

# Words and images that work

Due to the long duration of the crisis and the new phases on the horizon, communication efforts need different emphases from last year. Which words and images have proved effective in communication with the general public, and what elements are important in communication targeting specific groups such as the functionally illiterate?

## Use of words

Language belongs to everyone and is constantly changing. The following recommendations and examples are intended for communication with a wide audience and are certainly not set in

stone. Some words that had an important function at the beginning of the crisis now tend to be used less frequently. Above all, it is important to be aware of the meaning that people attach to the words you use.

<b>Recommendations for your verbal strategy</b>	<b>Examples:</b>
<i>Choose words that immediately clarify the message.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stick to the basic rules. For yourself and for others.</li> <li>• We observe the social distancing rules</li> <li>• We wash our hands and wear a face mask (where necessary)</li> <li>• In case of symptoms we stay at home and get tested</li> <li>• If it is busy, leave</li> <li>• Let's give each other the space we need</li> </ul>
<i>Traditional words, expressions and sayings are effective provided you don't overdo it. Although they are not used very often, they are easily recognised.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cautious</li> <li>• Craving for</li> </ul> <p><i>Language research has shown that these terms are particularly effective among older people.</i></p>
<i>Use descriptive rather than prescriptive language. Choose words that make people stop and think: words that may be unusual, but bring home the message.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'We wash our hands' instead of 'You must wash your hands'</li> <li>• We go to school on foot or by bike</li> </ul>
<i>Use 'we' to emphasise the group feeling and stress the need for a collective effort.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-and-a-half-metre society</li> <li>• Intelligent lockdown</li> <li>• We are in this together and help each other</li> <li>• Together, we have made it possible to ease restrictions</li> </ul>

## Words that do not work

<b>What does not work?</b>	<b>Examples:</b>
<i>Management speak and jargon that does not mean anything for most people. While this type of language is functional in the debate with stakeholders, it is counterproductive in communication with the public.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scaling up/down</li> <li>• Exit strategy</li> <li>• Transition phase</li> <li>• Anchor points</li> </ul>
<i>A prohibition is often mistaken for an instruction to do the very thing you want to avoid. Tell people what you want them to do, rather than what you DON'T want them to do. Compare this with the effect of circles in parks ('Here you are welcome').</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stop hoarding</li> <li>• This must / may not</li> <li>• Avoid crowded places</li> </ul>
<i>Use of difficult words</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social distancing</li> <li>• Social cohesion</li> <li>• Test capacity</li> </ul>
<i>Aggressive language evokes conflict.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frontline</li> <li>• Fighting the virus</li> </ul>
<i>Vague language, indefinite terms and concepts that allow for a lot of interpretation.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalisation</li> <li>• The new normal</li> <li>• Distribution of public space</li> <li>• Common sense</li> </ul>

## Use of images

We would like to advise you as follows on the use of images in COVID-19 communication:

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Further explanation</b>
<i>Before putting your message on paper, think about how you could use images to clearly convey your key message.</i>	Convert complicated or lengthy texts to images (illustrations, infographics, visuals) or add supportive images.
<i>Use icons to provide overview and clarity at a glance.</i>	Icons show what the information is about and can be repeated over and over again. As such, they ensure that your topic or message is always recognised. For the most frequently used icons we do not use the government house style, so that everybody can use them without bothering about copyrights. These icons can be found <a href="#">here</a> (NL).
<i>Use images to make your message accessible (for example, to the functionally illiterate or people who cannot read Dutch).</i>	Visualise behaviour using clear imagery, or use photographs exactly showing the desired actions. Make sure to include good descriptions of what is being depicted so that the visually impaired can still use reading devices and to ensure effective page indexation by search engines.
<i>When using images (audio, video and graphics) online, observe the applicable web guidelines.</i>	The web guidelines are intended to ensure that information from visual communication is also understandable for people with a functional impairment, such as dyslexics, the colour-blind, the physically disabled, the functionally illiterate, the deaf/ hard of hearing and the blind/ partially sighted.



<i>In COVID-19 crisis communication, use the standard campaign colours as much as possible.</i>	Check <a href="#">here</a> (NL) for the colour specifications 'dark yellow' and 'ruby red'.
<i>Do you work for a government body (local or provincial authority or the national government)? Then use the image bank for COVID-19-related photography.</i>	Check <a href="#">here</a> (NL) for the image bank.
<i>Make sure that your COVID-19 communication is recognisable.</i>	Support all communications with the COVID-19 logo and pay-off: 'Alleen samen krijgen we corona onder controle'.
<i>Ensure a clear emphasis on 'together' and a collective effort.</i>	Always include at least two people in the picture (both in illustrations and in photography).
<i>Use images that reflect the experiences of your target group as closely as possible.</i>	For example, vlogs for and by young people, about how they deal with the measures against coronavirus in their daily lives.
<i>When using photos, videos and visuals, remember to show enough diversity so as to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.</i>	For the sake of diversity, show the front door of a flat instead of just terraced houses and depict all target groups (singles, single parents or double-income couples without children).
<i>Consider using infographics or data visualisation for complex information or data.</i>	Check <a href="#">here</a> (NL) for examples.
<i>Your target group should be able to identify with the images, also when used in illustrations.</i>	Outline the essence of your message for your target audience. Use few details, bright colours and credible imagery (e.g. no blue or red faces).
<i>When you commission images, also consider the platforms where you intend to publish them.</i>	On social media, for example, pay attention to the right dimensions for each platform. Portrait or landscape? Avoid making your videos too heavy so that they can be shared easily via WhatsApp.
<i>Make sure that the image you use always reinforces the message.</i>	If the image distracts from the message of your story, it may be better not to use an image at all.

## Communicating with the functionally illiterate

Two and a half million people in the Netherlands are functionally illiterate. This means that they have great difficulty reading, writing and/or doing sums. Many in this group are also less digitally proficient. Tips for effective communication with the functionally illiterate:

- **Use visual communication supported by text, rather than the other way around.**

This forces you to be brief and to the point. As for the language level of the supporting text, don't exceed B1, preferably stick to A2. Note however that the use of these language levels is no guarantee of success. Only pre-tests will tell you whether a text is really comprehensible.

- **Only communicate the core of your message.**

Readers who are functionally illiterate or have a different first language often cannot distinguish between necessary information and background information. Use a title and intermediate headings: make sure to arrange the information in a recognisable way. An example of this is the news report in simple language about the [press conference](#) (NL) of 20 January 2021.

- **Only communicate definitive plans to this target group (i.e. no intended decisions).**

Only communicate on matters that require a specific response. For example: The obligation to wear a face mask comes into force on 1 December. From that day, you have to wear a face mask in a number of places. View the [video summary](#) (NL) about the obligation to wear a face mask.

- **When you write text for this target group, remember the following:**

- Clearly state the subject of the text, and start with the main message.
- Use one message per sentence. Limit your sentences to 15 words at most.
- Use words at B1 level. You can check this at [www.ishetb1.nl](http://www.ishetb1.nl) (NL), for example, or use [Klinkende Taal](#) (NL) software.
- Via Reading level | [Accessibility.com](http://Accessibility.com) (NL) you can check the reading level of your text. For the functionally illiterate, the text should not exceed B1, and preferably be at A2 level.
- Make sure the reader feels taken seriously. Simple and clear writing does not mean that you can use childish language.

- **If you use a link to a website in your message, send the reader straight to the right page.**

Since searching for information is a challenge for functionally illiterate readers, avoid sending them to an overview page if the information they need is on a subpage.

- **If possible, also contact your target group personally.**

People who have difficulty with language do not read much and any letters they receive often end up unread. They are best served by verbal contact.

- **Testing, testing and testing.**

The most important tip for creating communication tools for the functionally illiterate is to test your tool. Talk to your target group and ask them for feedback. For example, find out which parties in your municipality and/or organisation are active in this field and involve them in your communication tests. You can also contact [Stichting ABC](#) (NL) (a nationwide volunteer organisation of and for the functionally illiterate) and ask their [test panel](#) (NL) to test your communication tool.

### More information

- [Rijksoverheid.nl/corona-eenvoudig](http://Rijksoverheid.nl/corona-eenvoudig) (NL)
- Accessible services | [Lezen & Schrijven](#)
- Writing tips | [Direct Duidelijk](#) (NL)
- Direct Duidelijk Taalhulplijn ([directduidelijkhulp.nl](http://directduidelijkhulp.nl)) (NL)
- Getting started | [Tel mee met Taal](#) (NL)
- Functional illiteracy and limited health skills - [Pharos](#)
- [Steffie](#) explains COVID-19 in simple terms

Translated into internal communication

# Organise mutual attention

The importance of effective internal communication increases as the crisis continues. Now that working from home has been the rule for quite a while, employees have learned to team up online for information, consultation or training. We are getting more and more familiar with online collaboration and better at using the tools needed for that. But more needs to be done. Internal communication is no longer just about cleverly organising and facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing. Ensuring connection is at least as important.

## Connecting people by sharing stories

How to work at home when your children are there too? How to say farewell without a party or start your new job without having your new colleagues around? Just imagine: working in the frontline risking your own safety. How are these employees doing? Will they manage? How do they arrange their work? And what about employees without children, who have to fill the gaps? Talking and listening to each other encourages people to be open about what they really care about. Connecting people is more important than ever. So how can we connect under the present circumstances?

## Strategy

Many organisations have incorporated internal COVID-19 communication into their existing internal communication structure. For example, they have placed a COVID-19 dossier on the intranet, included a COVID-19 section in their internal newsletter or post regular email messages from the director. The primary objective is to ensure attention and recognition for the challenges and concerns of employees. Crucially, this involves empathy and plenty of opportunity for people to express their feelings. In this context, organisations should also pay more attention to colleagues who need help. For example, some organisations have set up 'care teams' to monitor and ensure the well-being of colleagues.

## The role of communication

To be able to connect, you need to be able to listen. This also applies to internal communication, and has consequences for the role of the internal communication professional. It is more important than ever to be aware of issues and concerns among the members of the board, the management team and employees, and of the tensions and uncertainties within your organisation. Now that you are less likely to meet colleagues for an informal chat, as an internal communications consultant you will have to be proactive and keep an ear to the ground. Regardless of the subject, join in on consultations that allow you to listen to colleagues you would not normally meet. What do they talk about, what words and images do they use, and what do they hope or wish to achieve? Often such consultations concern questions shared by many: help to formulate those questions and start a dialogue. It is also useful to regularly consult colleagues by telephone rather than by email, as this creates extra opportunities for direct contact.

### Resources and actions to promote connection

Besides knowing what is going on, connection is also about bringing employees together so that they feel connected to each other and to the organisation. To this end, we have developed a range of resources and initiatives:

- Many organisations now have a 'pub quiz' (sometimes even involving a league with international teams), a virtual coffee corner, virtual blind dates (to get acquainted with new colleagues) or weekly online drinks. Bottom-line: be creative in organising events or structures to bring employees into contact with each other.
- Colleagues are randomly paired as buddies to collaborate on a topic involving multiple teams or departments or to serve as each other's sounding board.
- And sometimes a team leader suddenly appears on the doorstep with a plant, an apple pie or a piece of chocolate to express appreciation for colleagues working at home.



**Publication**

National Crisis Communication Core Team (NKC)  
PO Box 117, 2501 CC The Hague  
Turfmarkt 147, 2511 DP The Hague,  
The Netherlands  
+31 (0)70 751 5555

**For questions** email [communicatiecovid@minjenv.nl](mailto:communicatiecovid@minjenv.nl)

**More information:** [www.government.nl/coronavirus](http://www.government.nl/coronavirus)