AGENCY WEBSITES AND CORONAVIRUS. MARCH 2021

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Agency directors and trustees need to take a look at their online offerings. Most agencies have good websites and some are excellent. However, there is a minority of agencies who have sites that could best be described as woeful.

Category: Observations

In the initial stages of the pandemic, I worked my way through a sample of over 100 mission agency websites to get an idea of the way in which agencies were responding to the situation. A year on from the first lockdown in the UK, Iâ€™ve returned to the same sample of agencies to reassess the situation.

The sample of agencies is the same one that I have used for all of my analyses of mission agencies and is derived from the Global Connections membership list which is available online. I have discussed the pros and cons of using this list in various publications.

In my initial analysis last year, I looked at a variety of factors including whether or not short-term mission trips had been cancelled and whether long-term missionaries had returned to the UK. This time round, I took a simpler approach. I looked at the agency home page and clicked onto links that looked as though they might have references to the agencyâ€™s coronavirus response such as the â€œlatest newsâ€ pages. I did not spend a long term searching through every link on the sites; my aim was to replicate a casual visitor looking for news, rather than a researcher seeking to analyse the content in detail. Any overt mention of the pandemic was noted. These varied from in-depth discussions of the situation, to passing references. No attempt was made to explore the different types and depths of reaction.

The following results are presented as percentages derived from a sample of 133 agency websites. These figures are updated from my original blog post from April 2020.

	Mention of COVID on home page	Mention elsewhere on the website	Linked financial appeal	No Overt mention
May 2020	55.6%	8.3%	24.1%	31.6%
March 2021	30.1%	10.5%	12.8%	59.4%

The most obvious observation is that the number of agencies who do not overtly mention the pandemic on their websites has almost doubled over the past ten months and at the same time, the number of agencies who are making financial appeals targeted on the pandemic response has halved. A *caveat* needs to be raised. It is possible that a number of agencies did mention the pandemic, but the references were buried so deep in the website that I did not find them. That being said, if it required a deep dive into the site to discover the references, they may as well not exist in the first place.

It is not clear why there are significantly fewer references to the pandemic today as opposed to a year ago, though a few hypotheses can be considered.

- Early in the pandemic, the websites may have been updated with temporary content relating to the situation, awaiting the production of more considered responses which were never developed.
- Agency staff feel that the pandemic has become *normal* and therefore no longer worthy of significant comment.
- The initial financial appeals linked to the pandemic have finished so there is no longer a clear reason to mention it.

However, there are a series of other observations related to the whole concept of agency websites which need to be considered.

- There are some agencies who do not appear to pay much attention to their websites. One more than one occasion the link to the â€œlatest newsâ€ led to a blank page or a dead link. In other cases the most recent news was several years old. Intriguingly, while some of these sites were old and somewhat amateurish, others had clearly been professionally produced (at some cost) and then been left to whither.Â
- Another consideration is the issue of social media. A number of agencies have clear links to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms. It seems likely that up-to-date news about an issue such as the pandemic would be shared via these means, rather than on the website. If social media is being used in this way, it means that the tables above may significantly underestimate the degree to which agencies are talking about coronavirus. That being said, I do not expect that this would account for the whole change observed over the last year. For more consideration of agency social media use see this link (sorry, you need to pay).

A couple of conclusions:

- Agency directors and trustees need to take a look at their online offerings. Most agencies have good websites and some are excellent. However, there is a minority of agencies who have sites that could best be described as woeful.
- There is a need for more research into how agencies are using online media and what impact this is having with various generations. My expectation is that some of the larger agencies have a good handle on this, but there is nothing sector wide.

Just in case anyone is interested, I've made this blog post available as a pdf download.