

WhatsApp Campaign Guidance During COVID-19

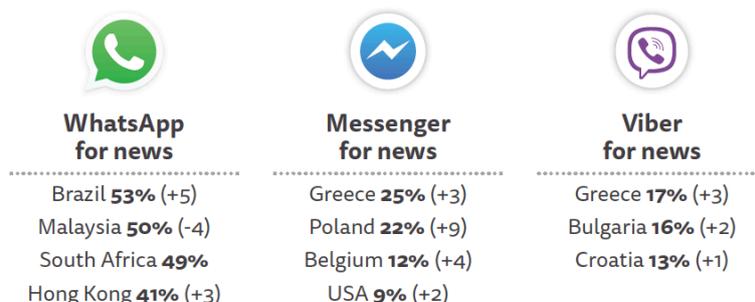
APPROACH TO DEVELOPING WHATSAPP CAMPAIGNS

Overview

WhatsApp Messenger is a Facebook-owned instant messaging mobile application that is currently the most widely used texting service available without additional mobile fees. Users with access to Wi-Fi or data can use the application to make voice and video calls, form group chats, and send encrypted text messages, voice notes, videos and images. WhatsApp is ad-free, relatively low cost (uses limited or low internet bandwidth), is linked to a SIM card instead of an online account and it is available on most mobile devices.

While WhatsApp is primarily used for personal communication among family and friends, the developer has also created WhatsApp Business, which enables organizations to communicate directly with their clients, beneficiaries or stakeholders. Government institutions can benefit from the application's features by setting up business accounts to disseminate content for public awareness campaigns through closed chat groups, broadcast lists, chatbots or channels.

About [25% of the world's population](#) (2 billion) uses WhatsApp. Weekly general usage grew by 45% between 2014 and 2019; exponential growth has been concentrated in Africa, Southeast Asia, India, Latin America and southern Europe. According to a [Reuters survey](#) of 79,000 online users in 30 countries, WhatsApp is becoming increasingly popular as a conduit for sharing news among contacts ([16% growth between 2014 and 2019](#)), even though this is not the primary purpose of the application. This demonstrates a trend in people's preference to engage privately rather than communicate on open platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and manifests differently across the globe. People in middle-income countries such as [Brazil \(53%\)](#), [Malaysia \(50%\)](#) and [South Africa \(49%\)](#) are reported to use the application to share and discuss news updates more than people in high-income countries such as the U.K. (9%) and Australia (6%).



Proportion that use each messaging app for news in selected markets.

Source: [Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 2019](#)

A [Kantar report](#) surveying the media consumption of 25,000 people in 30 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic (released April 3, 2020) indicates a 40% increase in WhatsApp usage—the highest increase among social media platforms. This is attributed to the pandemic intensifying people’s need to stay connected while they are physically apart, as they practice physical distancing, isolation and quarantine.

The private or closed nature of communication on WhatsApp has the unintended consequence of making it conducive to disseminating misinformation or fake news. WhatsApp offers end-to-end encryption and only the sender and receivers can see the shared information. While encryption makes the platform secure, it makes it almost impossible for the government or security agencies to track the source of original messages, thereby making it more prone to spreading misinformation. In addition to promoting [tips](#) to prevent rumors and fake news, the platform has implemented some measures to address this, such as tagging forwarded messages as “forwarded,” capping the group size at 256 members and limiting to five the number of chat groups on which a user can forward the same message.

COVID-19 Content Dissemination on WhatsApp

Information sharing

As an instant messaging app, WhatsApp facilitates two-way communication among contacts and engagement is initiated by users. Content generation and sharing relies mostly on users directly messaging their contacts or posting status updates that can only be viewed by their contacts. As a user-initiated platform, WhatsApp empowers audiences to “opt-in” to engage but may limit the extent to which an organization can reach a large audience. Therefore, it should be well integrated into a broader communication campaign strategy that facilitates promotion across multiple platforms, that is, using traditional media, Facebook and Twitter to drive people to initiate engagement on WhatsApp by sharing the number and promoting its advantages.

The platform provides three methods that governments can consider to transmit information to groups of recipients.

WhatsApp Groups

These are closed networks of people with shared interests who can only chat with each other and share information in a closed or private chat. The initiator of a group chat is automatically assigned the role of “group admin,” which enables them to invite others to join the forum (up to 256). This is a good opportunity to share credible, reliable information among a moderately large group of people. [More information on how to set up a WhatsApp group.](#)

WhatsApp Chatbots

Organizations can set up dedicated chatbots to share COVID-19 related information. A WhatsApp chatbot is a service, developed through a [WhatsApp business account](#), that sorts and sends automated responses to messages and queries from people. [WHO](#) and governments in [South Africa](#) and [India](#) are using chatbots developed by companies such as [Praekelt.org](#) to

disseminate accurate information on the pandemic. Users receive responses to frequently asked questions about different topics, for example, local updates on the number of identified cases, how and when to get tested, how to recognize symptoms, how to prevent transmission, how to practice physical distancing, and updates on government measures to address the pandemic. This approach is ideal for counteracting people's exposure to misinformation as it gives people direct access to information they need from credible sources. A chatbot is set up to respond to questions in FAQ format, which might be a limitation in that complex or nuanced questions cannot be easily answered. Alternatively, chatbots can be set up to include a live chat function to improve engagement with users. Other advantages of using chatbots:

- Most effective method to manage and track campaign content and performance (reach, engagement)
- Good potential for wide reach, for example, the South Africa chatbot had been used by 3.5 million people in the three weeks after its launch in mid-March
- Can provide content in multiple [country specific languages](#)
- Enables simple sign-up process, but can restrict users according to the country phone code and/or national identification number

Governments are encouraged to pursue partnerships with WhatsApp (like WHO has) to receive additional support to develop a country-specific chatbot.

WhatsApp Broadcast Lists

Governments and other public organizations can send broadcast messages directly to users on their existing databases. WhatsApp enables individuals to send regular messages to a list of recipients. There are some limits to this approach. The effectiveness might be limited by each country's regulations/laws related to privacy and data protection, i.e., there may be restrictions on how organizations can use citizens' personal contact numbers. Countries must consult or refer to local legal guidelines on privacy to determine whether they have permission to use numbers on their database for such campaigns. Although there is no limit on the number of broadcast lists one person can create, there is a restriction of 256 members on each broadcast list. This is slightly different from the WhatsApp group in that individual recipients of broadcast messages can only engage with the sender and not with other recipients, whereas WhatsApp groups can allow multiple and individual conversations. [More details on WhatsApp broadcast lists.](#)



WhatsApp Channels

This is another option for sharing regular updates in multimedia formats to many recipients at once. Organizations would have to apply to Facebook to have a [channel set up](#) and initiate engagement with users by sending a subscription link via text or social media. [More details on WhatsApp channels.](#)

Other Examples of COVID-19 WhatsApp Campaigns

[WhatsApp coronavirus information hub](#)

- [The Press Information Bureau of India and WHO have joined with WhatsApp to launch a service to “bust” fake news during the current outbreak](#)
- [The government of India launched a COVID WhatsApp chatbot](#)
- [Singapore’s government is using WhatsApp to broadcast daily updates](#)
- [In South Africa, an activist launched a WhatsApp channel for youth to discuss politics and the election](#)

Content Generation and Management

Content for messages and formats must be tailored to meet the communication needs of people who rely on WhatsApp to stay connected during the pandemic. Governments must access local statistics on WhatsApp usage to segment their audiences and ensure messages are crafted in a way that is suited for each audience.

Here are some recommendations and details on creating and managing WhatsApp content:

- Recommended content formats: engaging photos, infographics, memes, GIFs, audio, profile photo filters.
- The **video** formats supported are MP4 (recommended), AVI and MKV with H264 or MPEG4 video codec and AAC or AC3 audio codec. The maximum video size supported is 16 MB.
- The **image** formats supported are JPEG, PNG and GIF.
- The **document** files supported are PDF, DOC and DOCX.
- Maximum size upload for image and document is 100 MB.
- For regular content dissemination, use **short texts** and **emojis** as the primary form of communication, while other media formats and URLs can be used to support the messaging.
- People don’t immediately trust information shared on WhatsApp because of rumors and disinformation. Governments can apply for verified logos. However, in other instances it is recommended that governments brand all content to legitimize it, i.e. add a government logo, watermark, and/or government contact information such as a toll-free hotline if one exists.
- Use a communication cascade: redirect users to credible information sources such as the URL for an official website.

- A message (chat) can be forwarded to up to five people. However, from then on, frequently forwarded messages can only be forwarded to one chat at a time.

If WhatsApp is not a feasible option, governments or organizations can consider [Telegram](#) and [Signal](#) as alternatives.

Campaign Grid: A Proposed Structure for the Content Flow of a WhatsApp Campaign

Content Theme	Sender	Users	Information Hub
Launch a dedicated WhatsApp chatbot/helpline	Ministry of Health, subnational or city health department	Anyone who wants real-time information about symptoms, lockdowns, health advice, etc.	Local health department or ministry, WHO page on COVID-19
Video messages by minister of health, prime minister/ president/head of state giving important information	Ministry of Health, Prime Minister’s Office, etc.		MoH, WHO
“Myth-buster” campaign	Health authorities	General public	MoH, WHO, CDC
Community engagement	NGO coalitions, religious groups, medical associations	General public (when the level of public trust of the government is low, same messages can be broadcast via trusted groups)	MoH, WHO, CDC