

Arthur W. Page

ARTHUR W. PAGE SOCIETY

A Vax Tale

How New York City Communicators Approached a Mandate



A CASE STUDY SUBMITTED FOR THE
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Abstract

This case study will analyze how New York City communicators researched, planned, and implemented a vaccination mandate for its municipal workers. Explored through the lens of communication strategy, the case ultimately reveals the importance of listening to key stakeholders, remaining transparent, and committing to thorough research.

Introduction

In early 2020, communicators within the City of New York were faced with a herculean task, one unlike any other in recent memory: convey the threat (risk and impact) of a global pandemic to their more than eight million constituents. The magnitude of the crisis cannot be understated. As of this case study, the virus has killed more than 5.2 million globally. Arthur Caplan, founding head of the division of medical ethics at the New York University School of Medicine said, “Covid [sic] has been nothing short of the worst failure of public policy in modern memory” (Jacobson, 2021). Not since the 1918 influenza pandemic have public entities reckoned with such a consequential global catastrophe.

At the height of the crisis, city communicators needed to act quickly while at the same time remaining responsive to the near-daily deluge from scientific and medical experts. Given the scope of the pandemic, critical messaging had to reach not just city employees but all city residents and stakeholders in order to best combat the spread of the virus and protect the citizenry of what is considered the nation’s capital of business, finance, and culture.

This case is being analyzed from the communication strategy category, exploring how the City of New York developed and delivered its mandate, and the impact of its communications on the mayor’s overarching initiative to “end the Covid [sic] era once and for all” (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021).

Successful business communication results from careful research, planning, and implementation by the PR team. Defined as the “purposeful communication of an organization to advance its mission,” strategic communication is essential to all businesses, governments—and even individuals (Hallahan et al., 2007). The precepts of strategic communication theory—defining the problem, planning the response, responding and, finally, evaluating the response—are foundational to modern PR practice. According to the Public Relations Society of America, PR “is more than managing the flow of information between an organization and its publics. It is a communications discipline that engages and informs key audiences, builds important relationships and brings vital information back into an organization for analysis and action” (“Communicating public relations’ value,” 2017).

Effective communication occurs when a business or other entity can convey a message and receive valuable feedback. In this case, for the City of New York and its administration, feedback included walkouts, protests, and union negotiations. But the success (or failure) of the City’s communications strategy cannot be measured in acts of protest alone. With the deadline met, the city must assess whether its communication strategy produced desired outcomes and at what cost.

Overview

On October 20, 2021, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a COVID-19 vaccination mandate applicable to all New York City municipal workers, an extension to similar mandates for healthcare and education workers initiated one month earlier.

According to a press release by the City of New York, city employees receiving their first vaccine dose on or before the October 29, 2021 deadline were entitled to a \$500 incentive. Workers who did not show proof of at least their first dose on or before the deadline would be placed on unpaid leave until proof could be provided. The mandate would affect approximately 160,500 city employees, 71% of whom had already received their first dose (City of New York, 2021c).



"We have led the way against COVID-19 [...] As we continue our recovery for all of us, city workers have been a daily inspiration. Now is the time for them to show their city the path out of this pandemic once and for all."

Mayor de Blasio

Department of Education (DOE) and New York City Health and Hospitals (H+H) workers (whose vaccination mandate went into effect in September of 2021) showed increased vaccination rates following communication efforts. As of this case study, the vaccination rates for these groups are 96% and 95% respectively, a significant increase for both healthcare workers and educators. “Vaccination rates rose in every school job category after the mandate was announced,” and H+H rates are up 12 percent (Goldstein & Otterman, 2021a; Matthews, 2021).

According to the *New York Times*, more than 9,000 city employees are on unpaid leave as of November 1, to return only upon their first dose of the vaccine. In addition, at least 13,000 more employees remain unvaccinated but can continue to work while their religious or medical exemptions are reviewed (Goldstein & Otterman, 2021b).

Despite early backlash, Mayor de Blasio and his administration stand behind the workers' mandate, stating “we have led the way against COVID-19 – from fighting for the right to vaccinate frontline workers, to providing nation-leading incentives, to creating the Key to NYC mandate. As we continue our recovery for all of us, city workers have been a daily inspiration. Now is the time for them to show their city the path out of this pandemic once and for all” (City of New York, 2021d).

Since the mandate's issuance on October 20, 2021, the City of New York and its unions have negotiated, with union workers arguing for exemptions. According to Reuters, “New York City's public-sector employee union District Council 37 said union members who have not provided proof of at least one dose of the vaccine will have the option to resign or take a leave of absence. In both cases, employees will maintain their health benefits” (Singh, 2021). Those with no proof of vaccination who do not submit an exemption can be placed on unpaid leave through the end of November (Singh, 2021).

Conversations regarding the pros, cons, viability, and constitutionality of vaccination mandates are taking place nationally among governmental and corporate entities. According to one CNBC article, tensions are rising in the workplace between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated. On both sides, resentment is growing, either over health, personal autonomy, or some combination of the two (Ellyatt, 2021).

Politically, those opposing vaccination mandates are preparing for battle. Some feel the government shouldn't force their hand, while others believe the mandates haven't come soon enough. New York City, along with a handful of other major U.S. cities, like Chicago and Seattle, will be under the microscope, as city and community leaders assess the mandate's efficacy and the communication strategies that will ultimately lead to the success or failure of this major healthcare initiative.

NYC Background

Past & Present

As one of the original 13 colonies, New York played an important role (strategic and political) throughout the American Revolution. The Empire State has a population of 20.5 million (2021), is 54,555 square miles and has a motto of “excelsior,” or “ever upward.”

According to the Office of the Mayor, since his election in 2014, Mayor de Blasio’s mission hinges on the belief that “all New Yorkers deserve a chance to succeed in the greatest city on Earth. That means that every child gets a quality education, every community is safe, and every New Yorker has an affordable place to call home” (City of New York, 2021a).

Mayor de Blasio’s campaign was run on the promise to tackle “income inequality, aggressive policing tactics, and lack of affordable housing” (Barbaro & Chen, 2013).



New York City Mayor,
Bill de Blasio, 2021

Health Communicators

Dave Chokshi (MD, MSc) is the Chair of the Board to the New York City Board of Health and commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. His work is integral to the implementation of vaccination mandates and various public health initiatives. Dr. Chokshi has held his position since August 4, 2020, and served in multiple leadership roles at NYC Health + Hospitals, as a “White House Fellow” and as the principal health advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. In 2016, President Obama appointed Dr. Chokshi to the Advisory Group on Prevention, Health Promotion, and Integrative and Public Health (NYC Health + Hospitals, 2016).

On September 27, 2021, the Health Department announced two new members to the New York City Board of Health. This board is responsible for New York City Health Code and enforces all policies to promote health and safety in the city of New York.

According to Mayor Bill de Blasio, “with the appointment of Dr. Simona Kwon and Dr. Sidney Hankerson to the Board, I can truly say that the people of our city will be in good hands and good health” (City of New York, 2021b).

Since March 13, 2020

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic was first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019 and spread exponentially across the globe to become the fifth documented pandemic since the influenza pandemic of 1918. The first official case was reported on December 31, 2019, and by mid-March 2020, the United States declared a state of emergency. By April 2020, there were already one million positive COVID-19 cases worldwide, and the pandemic showed no signs of slowing down. By September 2020, there were one million documented COVID-19 deaths. At the time of the earliest positive cases, a race began to develop a vaccine.

In the City of New York alone, there have been more than 1.1 million total cases (positive test/symptoms/confirmed exposure), 124,498 hospitalizations and 29,429 deaths as of November 2, 2021. Individuals 18-24 years old have had more confirmed cases than any other age group, and individuals 75 years old and older have had the least. Although the elderly have had the lowest number of cases of any age group, they have the highest number of hospitalizations and deaths. The gender demographic is split, with females having 13,361 confirmed cases and males 13,317 (“COVID-19: Data Trends,” n.d.).

New York City's highest number of cases have been found in the Hispanic/Latino communities of the borough of Staten Island. Although some studies have shown a correlation between the number of confirmed positive cases and poverty level, they so far have not been able to prove causation linked to financial status.

Stakeholders

As vaccination mandates were implemented in the City of New York, key stakeholders responded. Some took to the streets in protest, while others filed suit. Firefighters called out sick. In Staten Island, New York's “red borough,” confrontations broke out between anti-vaccine protestors and police (Peiser, 2021). In Brooklyn, thousands of union workers gathered in opposition to the mandate (Lach, 2021). Thousands more, directly impacted by the mandate, quietly elected to receive the vaccine. From union leaders and members to city workers and everyday citizens, the actions of de Blasio, his administration, and the city's key communicators had a ripple effect on the lives and livelihoods of thousands of New Yorkers.

Problem

On October 20, 2021, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a citywide COVID-19 vaccination mandate for all municipal workers, including police, fire, and sanitation employees. This October announcement came on the heels of similar mandates for hospital workers (statewide) and New York City school teachers. These mandates would ultimately impact approximately 160,000 of the city's remaining employees, 30% of whom remained unvaccinated as of the October 20 announcement (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021).

The sweeping mandate was the most recent step in an aggressive effort to, according to Mayor de Blasio, "end the Covid [sic] era once and for all" (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). Just one year earlier, in the spring of 2020, New York City was "an epicenter of the coronavirus disease" (Thompson, 2020). By December of 2020, New York City had "recorded the country's highest number of deaths per 100,000 people since January 21, when the [United States] reported its first-ever case" (Kim, S., 2020).

The October 20 mandate spurred an almost immediate backlash across the five boroughs. On October 27, thousands of protesters gathered in downtown Brooklyn, voicing their opposition to the mandate. Protestors like Pat Lynch, president of New York City's Police Benevolent Association, said, "Now that the city has moved to unilaterally impose a mandate, we will proceed with legal action to protect our members' rights" (Lach, 2021). Days earlier, on October 25, New York City's police union had sued to block the mandate (Dolmetsch, 2021).



Anti-mandate protest, NYC 2021

The Mayor's Office faced a mix of challenges as it developed a communications strategy that would inform and incentivize New York City's remaining unvaccinated workers to get the first vaccine dose—on deadline.

- **Political:** COVID-19 and related mandates are highly polarizing and politicized.
- **Economic:** Costs surrounding marketing and defending the message, from ad campaigns to lawsuits, were record-breaking.
- **Sociocultural:** Stakeholders and city residents disagreed on the legal and ethical viability of the mandate.
- **Technological:** Utilizing media technologies to market the message and regularly interfacing with constituents would be crucial to effectively implementing the communications strategy.
- **Ecological:** City officials were relying upon thorough and strategic messaging to promote the city's short- and long-term health and wellness outcomes.
- **Legal:** Lawsuits from union leaders and stakeholders threatened to hold up the mandate roll-out.

Some residents feared the mandate would lead to worker shortages, and an upcoming mayoral election meant de Blasio's Democratic allies could face added political pressures from their constituents due to the mandate controversy. "The heads of the five major unions representing members of the New York City Police Department warned that 10,000 unvaccinated police officers were 'set to be pulled from [the] streets'" (Timsit, 2021).

Mayor de Blasio and his communications team delivered messaging across multiple platforms, from the Official Website of the City of New York to Twitter, with live appearances on major news networks like MSNBC, in an effort to inform both internal and external publics and stakeholders (Eisenberg, 2021). Early reports show progress despite the initial pushback, with four separate labor unions having signed mandate agreements and "over 92% of City workers" vaccinated as of November 4, 2021 (City of New York, 2021d).



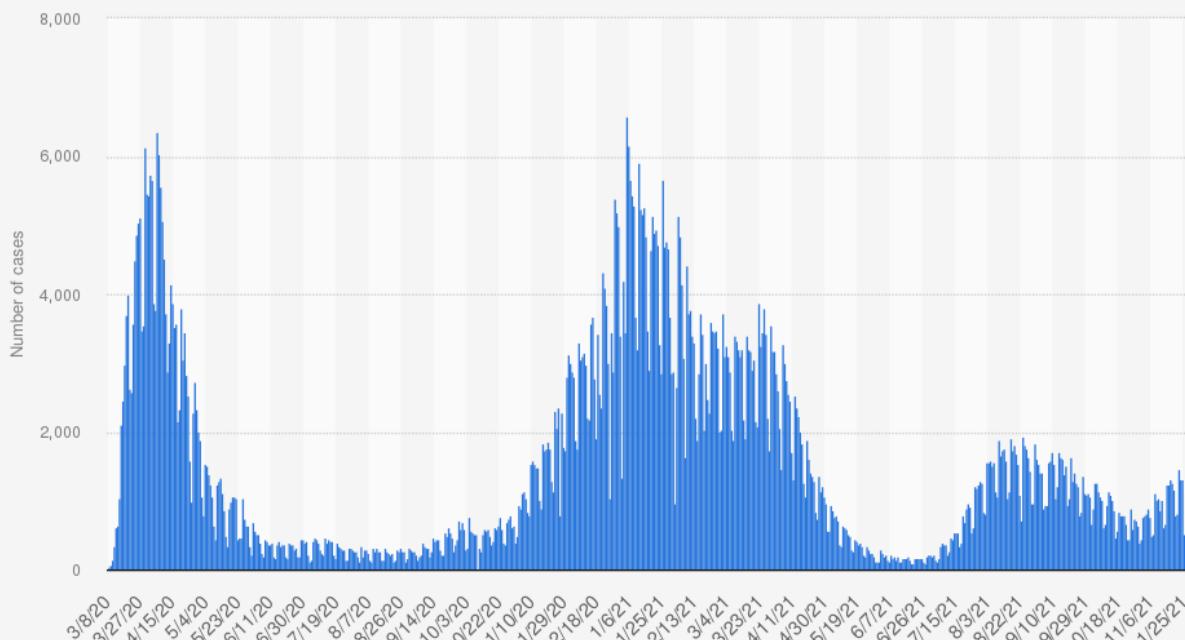
Anti-mandate protest, NYC 2021

Early Actions & Development

On March 12, 2020, in response to public health concerns surrounding growing COVID-19 cases, Mayor Bill de Blasio issued Emergency Executive Order Number 98, declaring a state of emergency in the City of New York (Kerr, 2021). This order would mark the beginning of a long road toward an eventual vaccination mandate for all city employees and, ultimately, “frame the entire nation’s response to the pandemic” (Kerr, 2021).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of New York relied heavily on official communications from the Mayor’s Office and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to strategically communicate important messaging to residents, workers and other key stakeholders.

Number of new COVID-19 cases in New York City from March 8, 2020 to November 28, 2021, by diagnosis date*



Source
NYC Health
© Statista 2021

Additional Information:
United States (New York); March 8, 2020 to November 28, 2021

COVID-19 cases, NYC

Implementation & Strategy

On March 22, 2020, following de Blasio's Emergency Executive Order Number 98, then New York state governor Andrew Cuomo initiated the PAUSE Program, calling for the closure of all non-essential businesses statewide. Days later, on March 25, 2020, Dr. Oxiris Barbot, then New York City Commissioner of Health and Mental Hygiene, declared a public health emergency. By April 1, 2020, there were more than 5,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 500 COVID-related deaths in the City of New York (Elflein, 2021). The city's lockdown lasted nearly three months, ending June 8, 2020. Like many large U.S. cities, the reopening was gradual, involving multiple phases, mask mandates, remote classrooms, and other restrictions.

On February 14, 2021, New Yorkers with underlying health conditions were eligible to receive their first dose of the much-anticipated COVID-19 vaccine. By April 6, 2021, all New Yorkers, aged 16 and up, were eligible to receive the vaccine.

According to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, "between January 17 and August 7, 2021, people who were unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated accounted for 96.1% of COVID-19 cases, 96.9% of COVID-19 hospitalizations, and 97.3% of COVID-19 deaths in New York City" (Order of the Commissioner, 2021). To move the needle on vaccinations, the city's health department spent a staggering \$125 million dollars on its vaccination campaign (as of July 2021) (Krauth, 2021). According to local media, "the city [was] blitzing the airways, internet and bus terminals with a COVID-19 ad campaign in multiple languages" and, according to the city's health department, their vaccination campaign was, "the biggest media campaign [they'd] ever done" (Krauth, 2021).

A study from Yale University's School of Public Health found that "the [Health] Department's vaccination campaign was estimated to have prevented about 250,000 COVID-19 cases, 44,000 hospitalizations, and 8,300 deaths...since the start of vaccination through July 1, 2021 (Order of the Commissioner, 2021).

With the emergence of the COVID-19 Delta variant, "the highly infectious form of the virus that Dr. Anthony Fauci...called 'the greatest threat' to eliminating cases across the country," Mayor de Blasio issued Emergency Executive Order Number 225 on August 16, 2021 (Closson, 2021). Known as the "Key to NYC," the order required that "patrons and employees of establishments providing indoor entertainment, dining, and gyms and fitness centers show proof that they have received at least one dose of an approved COVID-19 vaccine" (Order of the Commissioner, 2021).

Soon after, on August 24, 2021, the city's Health Commissioner issued an order "requiring that Department of Education employees, contractors, and visitors provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination before entering a DOE building or school setting" (Order of the Commissioner, 2021). Two days later, on August 26, 2021, the New York State Department of Health issued regulations "requiring staff of inpatient hospitals and nursing homes to receive the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by September 27, 2021" (Order of the Commissioner, 2021).

On August 31, 2021, de Blasio issued Executive Order Number 78, requiring that "beginning September 13, 2021, City employees and covered employees of City contractors be vaccinated against COVID-19 or submit on a weekly basis proof of a negative COVID-19 PCR diagnostic test" (Order of the Commissioner, 2021).

A few months later, on October 20, 2021, Executive Order Number 78 was rescinded, and, in its place, Commissioner Chokshi issued an official vaccination mandate for all city workers:

No later than 5 p.m. on October 29, 2021, all City employees [...] must provide proof to the agency or office where they work that:

1. they have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19; or
2. they have received a single-dose COVID-19 vaccine, even if two weeks have not passed since they received the vaccine; or
3. they have received the first dose of a two-dose COVID-19 vaccine.

There's a narrative that @fdny firehouses are closing. That's not true. Sure, some companies are going out of service, but no fire house is closed. "Most of our firehouses have two companies assigned (engine:ladder). One is always in service," said a senior fire official.

3:38 PM - Oct 30, 2021

33 8 Copy link to Tweet

Tweet your reply

**Tweet from Myles Miller
SPECTRUM NEWS NY1 , 2021**

Commissioner Dave A. Chokshi, MD
@NYCHealthCommr

Today the NYC Board of Health unanimously ratified my Commissioner's Order on the City employee vaccine mandate, underlining the public health rationale for this important policy.

Read the order here on.nyc.gov/2Y4FtSX

4:43 PM · Nov 1, 2021

73 See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

Tweet your reply

**Tweet from Commissioner Chokshi, MD,
2021**

Almost immediately, stakeholders, from police, fire, sanitation, and other city services, reacted, notably, with protests and sick-outs ("FDNY: 2,000 Firefighters," 2021). There was speculation that the mandates would lead to a shortage in city workers, potentially exacerbating public safety and healthcare shortages. Mayor de Blasio stood behind the mandate, telling reporters, "My job is to keep people safe — my employees, and 8.8 million people. And until we defeat Covid [sic], people are not safe...we must, must stop Covid [sic], and that must, must include our public employees. In fact, they need to lead the way" (Durkin & Eisenberg, 2021).

On November 4, 2021, de Blasio announced agreements with four labor unions regarding the City's vaccination mandate, including exemption requests and leave policies.

As of November 2021, 94% of city employees are vaccinated, compared to 67% of the general population and up from 86% (Ramos, 2021; Szekely, 2021). In a public statement, Mayor de Blasio said, "We needed to go farther [sic], to go where very few cities or states have gone in this country. Very few have gone to this place of a full vaccination mandate for all employees, but it's time. I'm going to say upfront to every mayor in America, every Governor in America, to every CEO of a company in America, go to a full vaccination mandate because it will allow us to end the COVID era once and for all...now, we know we have real results from this mandate" (City of New York, 2021d).

Tweet from City of New York, 2021

Using a combination of public forums, press releases, appearances, interviews, and official communications, such as Commissioner Chokshi's October 20 order, Mayor de Blasio, in conjunction with state officials, attempted to communicate to his constituents and his staff the need for a vaccination mandate across all city departments.

In staggering their mandates, beginning with hospital and education workers, city and state officials, either by accident or design, were able to prime New Yorkers for a far-reaching mandate. In other words, the writing was on the wall.

According to global consulting firm McKinsey and Company, "COVID-19's speed and scale breed uncertainty and emotional disruption. How organizations communicate about it can create clarity, build resilience, and catalyze positive change" (Mendy et al., 2021). Therefore, communicators should provide "instructing information to encourage calm," and then shift communication to "focus on adjusting to change" (Mendy et al., 2021).

Upon implementing the worker-wide mandate, Mayor de Blasio and his team provided publics and stakeholders with science-driven data in support of vaccines and instructional information. Despite best efforts, the politicized nature of the virus, vaccine, and mandates—and disagreements over the validity of the science—continues to present challenges to city officials and department heads as they strive to effectively communicate messaging in the midst of an evolving crisis to a sometimes-skeptical public.

A City Responds

New York City is one of the largest (by population), most influential cities in the United States, and has been called a “model” for pandemic recovery (Dzhanova, 2020). The city’s residents also happened to be among the hardest hit as the pandemic spread across the country. New York City and its leadership, ever under the microscope, had to carefully consider its mandate communications strategy in order to avoid major blowback, not just from its residents, but from the greater U.S. and global audience. The city’s communication strategy and dialogue across publics were high stakes, as mandated communications, along with stakeholder responses, were reported on extensively, both locally and nationally.

Loss of workers and (potential) staffing shortages due to the mandate were hot button issues, with multiple outlets citing concerns from major stakeholders, such as NYPD and NYFD, soon after de Blasio’s October 20 announcement. The staffing response, however, has thus far not been as substantial as was predicted. Mayor de Blasio stated in an interview, “the number of city workers on unpaid leave as of November 1 is 9,000, well short of the more-than-22,000 number that had been discussed over the last week. That amounts to less than 6% of the 378,000-member workforce” (“NYC issues warning,” 2021).

Additional news coverage came when protesters took to the streets of New York City in opposition to the mandate. Later, FDNY voiced their opposition when more than 2,000 New York City firefighters stayed home “sick” in an act of protest.

November 1, 2021, showed an uptick in coverage as the vaccination mandate hit its deadline and tensions ran high.

Other acts of opposition were shared across social media and major news networks. Three-hundred people attended a rally in downtown NYC, and a video taken at the protest went viral on Twitter with more than 126,000 views. Public officials elected not to take a stance against the protests but noted instead that citizens have the right to their own opinions (Clare, 2021). Meanwhile, protesters threatened to become violent in future iterations of their gatherings.

On November 4, New York City’s largest police union sued the City of New York, stating that the mandate did not allow for reasonable exemptions, garnering further press. (As of November 4, 2021, Mayor de Blasio announced agreements with four labor unions regarding the City’s vaccination mandate, including on exemption requests and leave policies) (City of New York, 2021e).

More controversy erupted when city workers were reported to have created and/or stolen vaccination cards. Several New York City sanitation workers were found to be using fake vaccination cards, which may have resulted in three weeks suspension without pay. A sanitation department spokesperson stated that the department would not tolerate the behavior and the accused will face serious consequences ("NYC investigates allegations," 2021). Fire department workers were also accused of forging vaccination cards, and the DOI is investigating these claims on behalf of the city. Mayor de Blasio responded publicly, noting that falsifying an official document could "result in prison time, as much as seven years" (City of New York, 2021d).

Earned Media

Media coverage on the topic was comprehensive. Numerous news outlets covered the issue over several months. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *TIME Magazine*, and major television news networks, such as CNN and NBC (and local affiliates), published hundreds of stories on the city workers' mandate alone. Local news affiliates pushed city messaging, sometimes framing the mandate as controversial. One source noted, "New York City's controversial vaccination mandate for its entire municipal workforce takes effect Monday—and despite concerns tens of thousands could be on unpaid leave, leading to critical staff shortages, Mayor Bill de Blasio says no disruptions to city services are expected" ("NYC issues warning," 2021). The coverage continued daily as the vaccination mandate continued to drive responses from stakeholders. One local news station, Pix11, posted COVID updates multiple times a day, including the most recent vaccination numbers (Cook & Chasan, 2021).

Owned Media

The New York City Mayor's Office released several statements, online (through the city-run website) and across corresponding social media channels. Prominent figures closest to the mandate and the resulting communication strategy, including Mayor de Blasio and New York City Commissioner of Health and Mental Hygiene, Dr. David Chokshi, publicly commented regarding the mandate, issues and exemptions, and vaccination data.

Dr. David Chokshi commented, "And so I was a strong supporter of the vaccination or testing mandate that we have rolled out (for city workers). We have to continue to watch the situation as it evolves. And it may be the case that a full vaccination mandate is warranted in the future. But right now, I would say that I support the vaccination or testing mandate and moving toward full vaccination mandates in specific segments as we have seen for health care workers and for Department of Education staff" (Oreskes, n.d.).

Paid Media

The City of New York launched multiple advertising campaigns promoting vaccination. These campaigns were widely distributed, and numbers indicate that they directly impacted constituents. According to one local media outlet, the “city is spending millions of dollars on ads to target communities who have not been vaccinated” with some areas showing “a 20% increase in vaccinations, on average, per neighborhood” (Krauth, 2021).

Similarly, a Yale University School of Public Health study reported that the city’s campaigns were “estimated to have prevented about 250,000 COVID-19 cases” (Order of the Commissioner, 2021).

FALSE:
~~I'VE ALREADY HAD COVID-19, I'M FULLY PROTECTED.~~

TRUE:
Vaccination offers strong and long lasting protection against severe illness, hospitalizations, death and new variants.

COVID-19 VACCINES SAVE LIVES. GET VACCINATED.
FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [NYC.GOV/COVIDVACCINE](https://nyc.gov/covidvaccine).

NYC VACCINE FOR ALL: SAFE, FREE, EASY

DON'T MISS OUT SHOW US YOUR VAX

You have the Key to NYC. Being vaccinated is the best way to protect our city and each other. People 12 and older must provide proof to enter.

Proof of vaccination includes:

- CDC Vaccine Card
- NYC COVID Safe App
- NYS Excelsior Pass
- Other Official Vaccine Record

PROOF OF VACCINATION IS NOW REQUIRED TO ENJOY INDOOR:

RESTAURANTS BARS GYM MOVIE THEATERS MUSEUMS OTHER INDOOR VENUES

For more information on Key to NYC, visit nyc.gov/keytonyc.
For more information on COVID-19 vaccines, including where to get vaccinated, visit nyc.gov/covidvaccine.

NYC VACCINE FOR ALL: SAFE, FREE, EASY

GET BACK TO FAMILY

GET THE FACTS. GET THE VAX.

NYC VACCINE FOR ALL: SAFE, FREE, EASY

To get the facts about COVID-19 vaccines, visit nyc.gov/covidvaccine. Visit nyc.gov/vaccinefinder or call 877-MAX-4NYC (877-828-4692) to find a vaccination site to get your COVID-19 vaccine.

NYC | City of New York | Mayor Eric Adams | First Lady Chirlane McCray | City Council | NYC Health + Hospitals

NYC Vaccination Campaign, 2021

Shared Media

Public response to Mayor de Blasio's October 20 mandate was extensive. From concerned citizens to city staffers, multiple sources publicly shared their thoughts and experiences. Twitter was a popular platform for communications, utilized by de Blasio and his team of city officials, public figures, and everyday citizens. Indeed, the Twittersphere exploded with facts, opinions, rants and raves.

Social media responses from various publics and stakeholders were often politically charged, and countless Twitter threads cropped up, both in support of and against the mandate. Official New York City social media pages pushed updates on staffing, positive messaging regarding the mandate, and information on city services.

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread. The first tweet is from Mayor Bill de Blasio (@NYCMayor), posted at 8:08 AM on Nov 19, 2021. It reads:

When New York City leads, the nation follows! The FDA has joined us in authorizing **#COVID** boosters for every American over 18! Don't wait, get your boost TODAY: nyc.gov/vaccinefinder

Below this tweet is a retweet from AP (@AP) dated Nov 19, 2021, which states:

BREAKING: Pfizer and Moderna say the FDA has opened up COVID-19 booster shots to all adults, letting them choose another dose of either vaccine. The CDC still must OK expanding the government's booster campaign to get ahead of rising coronavirus cases. apne.ws/WxMQyZq

At the bottom of the thread, there are three replies:

- Erie (@NYCDemocrat318) - Oct 20: Do you even know what that means? Vaccine mandates for employment isn't communism.
1 reply, 4 retweets, 4 likes. Link to reply: [Show replies](#)
- DL (@dipanoramix) - Oct 20: Replying to @nygov and @NYCMayor
We are all responsible for each other's health and safety. **#LawAndOrder**
5 replies, 3 retweets, 2 likes. Link to reply: [Show replies](#)
- David Lion (@TalksSoMuch) - Oct 20: Replying to @nygov and @NYCMayor
The law suits will come in from escalating side effects, especially as there is not tests given for susceptibility to covid-19 vaccines damages Before being forced to take those vaccines
1 reply, 2 retweets, 2 likes. Link to reply: [Show replies](#)

Shared media, Twitter, 2021

Consequences & Impact



NBC News New York, 2021

Local

Mayor de Blasio's vaccination mandate for city workers provided incentives to all NYC employees receiving their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine on or by October 29, 2021 (specifically, vaccinated employees were set to receive \$500 in addition to their regular pay). Alternately, beginning November 1, 2021, city workers who had yet to receive at least their first dose of the vaccine were to be placed on unpaid leave.

According to NBC New York, the vaccination mandate proved to increase vaccination rates across all departments (Lin, 2021). As of November 1, 2021, 91% of New York City's 378,000 city workers were vaccinated (Lin, 2021). Among the unvaccinated, approximately 9,000 employees were put on unpaid leave, 12,000 filed for exemptions, and roughly 2,300 firefighters "called in sick." According to FDNY this amounted to 21% of the city's firefighters (Lin, 2021).

Mayor de Blasio said the unvaccinated would be allowed to return to work following their first dose (Lin, 2021). Those who have filed for exemption are permitted to remain at work until their request has been approved or denied but will be subject to weekly COVID testing (Lin, 2021).

NYPD has 55,000 employees, civilians, and officers and [...] reported a vaccination rate of 85%, up from 70% before the mandate (Lin, 2021). FDNY reported a vaccination rate of 81% (Lin, 2021). This includes 77% of firefighters, up from 58% (Lin, 2021). Moreover, 88% of emergency medical technicians (EMTs) (up from 61%) and 91% of the city's civilian employees were vaccinated as of the deadline (Lin, 2021). The Department of Sanitation showed an increase of 21% in 12 days, from 62% to 83% (Lin, 2021).

National

A November 2021 report from NBC News showed similar upticks across several major U.S. cities in which vaccination mandates were introduced. “NBC News compiled employee vaccination data from 20 cities that are mandating the shots and found that the rates for city employees—a group that includes health care workers, police officers, sanitation workers and firefighters—are about 15 percentage points higher than for the rest of the general populations of the cities or counties they work in” (Ramos, 2021).

Notably, approximately “79 percent of municipal workers in cities surveyed are fully vaccinated,” outpacing the country’s overall rate of 58 percent (Ramos, 2021). Seattle and San Francisco, with city worker vaccination rates at 95 and 97 percent respectively, led the pack, while Chicago and Los Angeles, at 71 and 74 percent, trailed NYC’s rates (as of November 2021).

Unexpectedly leading the way

Covid-19 vaccination rates for public employees are higher than that of the general public in several cities with mandates.

City	City worker rate	General population rate	Difference, percentage points
Chula Vista, Calif.	84%	52%	32
Seattle, Wash.	95%	72%	23
Boston, Mass.	88%	65%	23
San Diego, Calif.	74%	52%	22
San Jose, Calif.	94%	73%	21
San Francisco, Calif.	97%	76%	21
Portland, Ore.	92%	71%	21
Sacramento, Calif.	79%	58%	21
New York, N.Y.	86%	67%	19
Raleigh, N.C.	80%	63%	17
Irvine, Calif.	80%	63%	17
New Orleans, La.	77%	61%	16
Tampa, Fla.	70%	55%	15
Charlotte, N.C.	70%	57%	13
Baltimore, Md.	66%	55%	11
Milwaukee, Wis.	63%	56%	7
Philadelphia, Pa.	65%	60%	5
Long Beach, Calif.	71%	68%	3
Chicago, Ill.	71%	69%	2
Los Angeles, Calif.	74%	79%	-5

City mandates and vaccination rates, NBC News, 2021

Impact on Financial Performance

The mandate’s monetary incentive, mentioned earlier, came at a significant cost to the city, clocking in at approximately \$23 million, an amount representing roughly .26% of the city’s annual \$88.2 billion general fund budget (Chen & Akinnibi, 2021). The 2021 FY summary reports that over 6.1 million doses were administered across 600 vaccination sites throughout the city (Jiha, 2021).

For leadership, Fiscal Year 2022 focuses on recovery. Their FY 2022 summary shows continued support for the “Vaccine for All Campaign,” with overall projected costs coming in at roughly \$700 million (Jiha, 2021).

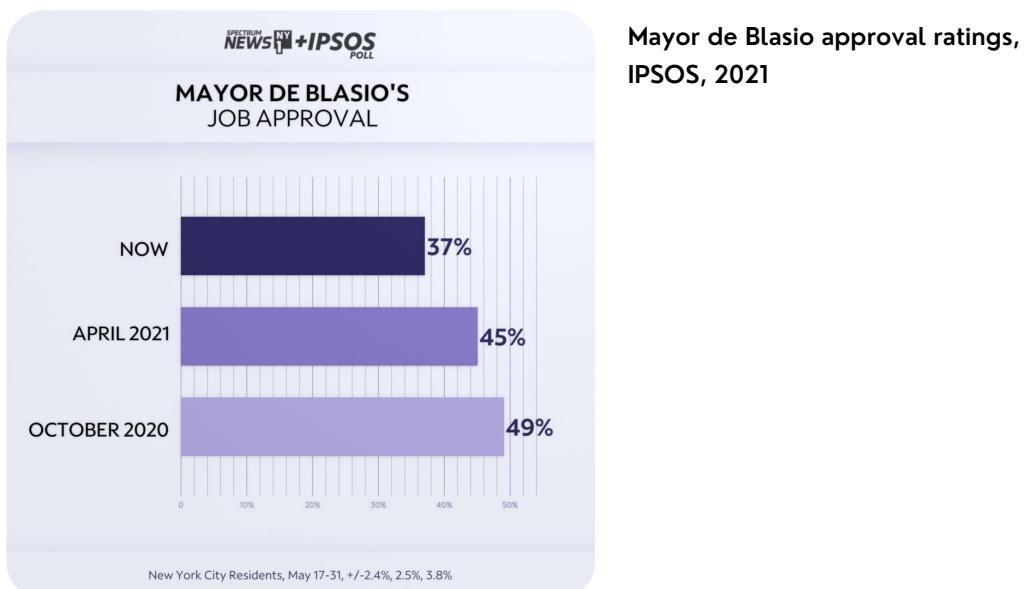
Impact on Reputation

Bill de Blasio has served as Mayor of New York City since 2014, to mixed reviews. De Blasio himself said, “I have a long, rich history of being an underdog” (Hart, 2021). The chairman of the Suffolk County Democratic Committee asserted, “Osama bin Laden is probably more popular in Suffolk County than Bill de Blasio” (Hart, 2021).

Mandate or no mandate, de Blasio’s approval ratings have been sinking for some time. “Nearly half of New Yorkers disapproved of de Blasio’s job as mayor. Increasing crime in New York City is a top concern among voters. [...] His approval rating was 45% in April and 49% in October [2020]” (Kim, L., 2021). That said, it is unclear as to whether his administration’s vaccination mandate has impacted his reputation either positively or negatively and, having met his term limit at the close of 2021, there is little risk to his local political ambitions (though he does have plans for a gubernatorial run) (Hart, 2021).

On November 2, 2021, one day after the vaccination mandate took effect, Eric Adams won New York City’s mayoral race. As reported by the *New York Times*, mayor-elect Adams takes a more center-left approach than his predecessor (Glueck, 2021). Adams was endorsed by Mayor de Blasio, as well as de Blasio’s predecessor, leading one to believe that, perhaps, New York’s citizenry still has some respect for the opinions of their longtime mayor (Glueck, 2021). Adams won in a landslide victory.

On the campaign trail, mayor-elect Adams said, “we need to revisit how we are going to address the vaccine mandates” (Woods & Raskin, 2021). For now, resident voters are left to speculate on the conditions of the mandate and what may change as Adams enters office. Until then, de Blasio will continue implementing the mandate and its corresponding communications strategy according to the city’s action plan (Woods & Raskin, 2021).



Social Impact

The municipal worker vaccination mandate has had mixed reviews, with workers and residents both in favor of and in opposition to the new restrictions. Days after Mayor de Blasio announced the mandate, 5,000 protesters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge in opposition ("NYC workers protest," 2021).

More than 20 people were arrested during the protest that included the greater New York City community and municipal workers. Firefighters like Sofia Medina expressed frustration, pleading with the administration: "Leave us alone and let us work, get out of the way of those who want to work and show up on time" ("NYC workers protest," 2021).

One NYPD officer in attendance directed their anger toward Police Commissioner Dermot Shea, saying, "We have always been prepared to lay down our lives in defense of yours, will you run to our aid or stand idly by" ("NYC workers protest," 2021). Police Commissioner Shea has publicly supported the mandate.

In the 12 days since the vaccination mandate was announced, nearly every city department affected by the mandate saw an increase of at least 15 points in vaccinations. Moreover, following the vaccine deadline for city workers, Mayor de Blasio reported, "We're not seeing disruptions to any city services" (Barron, 2021). Other city officials disagree.

Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican representing Staten Island said, "No matter what shell game the mayor is playing, the reality is these firehouses are short-staffed and not operating at full capacity, and it's putting the public at risk" (Barron, 2021).

The UFA Union for Firefighters, a non-profit advocacy organization representing the health, safety, and interests of New York City Firefighters, said they don't support using medical excuses fraudulently in protest of the mandate. However, they believe that the mandate is illegal because it has forced some trucks to operate understaffed (Lin, 2021). UFA President Andrew Ansbro said, "We have it in our contract, we must have fully staffed rigs. They are violating the contract" (Lin, 2021). In another story from the *New York Post*, Ansbro noted, "Every time any single company is out of service, the response time in that area is affected" (Fenton & Raskin, 2021).

Public health officials have spoken out in support of the mandate, noting it could not come soon enough. Denis Nash, professor at CUNY School of Public Health, says vaccination mandates "tend to work and have a big effect on increasing vaccine uptake" (Goldstein & Otterman, 2021b).

Strategic Communications



Pavilion Learning, accessed 2021

When considering applicable frameworks, the Research, Planning, Implementation and Evaluation (RPIE) process can be logically applied when exploring the City of New York's communication strategies, as described in this case study. RPIE "informs a public relations plan with qualitative and quantitative data and lifts the public relations function from tactical to strategic" ("The four step process," n.d.).

Dr. Kaye Sweetser, a respected public relations expert with more than 20 years of PR experience, emphasizes the importance of *research*. According to Sweetser, research is so important that it happens twice—once during the initial research phase and again during the evaluation process.

For leadership within the City of New York, research indicated a need for vaccinations, and their messaging worked to emphasize this need: "Vaccines are a critical tool in protecting you and your community from severe COVID-19 illness, hospitalization and death. They are proven safe and are now protecting millions of vaccinated New Yorkers from COVID-19" ("COVID-19: Vaccine," n.d.).

Following the city's mandate, between October 20 and November 1, 2021, 187,859 doses of the vaccine were given ("COVID-19: Vaccine," n.d.). Through a combination of heavily distributed and highly funded city-wide advertising, targeted communications directed at city workers, and careful negotiations with key stakeholders, the city effectively issued and implemented its mandate, despite some initial blowback.

Conclusion

With more mandates expected across the nation and beyond, federal officials, city officials and corporations can review the City of New York's RPIE strategies to better understand where the city went wrong—and how to make it right.

One takeaway for future leaders launching a mandate or similar initiative? Listen to stakeholders. Mayor de Blasio's strategic communications with city workers' unions were integral to the program's efficacy. Without the support of key union leaders, buy-in from individual workers across fire, police, and sanitation can be difficult to garner. Following negotiations, union leaders collaborated with the Mayor's Office to iron out the details surrounding unpaid leave, for example.

Other critical elements of the city's strategic efforts were transparency and thoughtful marketing. Mayor de Blasio and his communicators rooted the mandate rollout in disseminating facts, strategic timelines, and detailed announcements. They aimed to tell the truth and to do it at scale. From the official website, to live appearances and social media shares, the Mayor's Office went beyond simply informing the city workers directly affected by the mandate. Instead, communicators chose to address the city as a whole, with ample support from their "Vaccine for All" ad campaign, leveraging existing marketing efforts to better communicate strategic messaging.

Given the sociocultural and political implications, organizations proposing COVID-19 vaccination mandates should expect resistance. For some, the COVID-19 vaccine is considered too new or untested. Others are ideologically opposed to mandates. As the pandemic landscape continues to evolve, communication will be crucial to organizations as they work to implement vaccine policies. Transparency, solid research, and effective communication strategies will be their best first step when fielding questions and concerns from stakeholders.

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