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# IMPLICATIONS OF CORONAVIRUS: HOW TO COMMUNICATE IN TURBULENT TIMES

COVID-19, better known as the coronavirus, has caused unease across the globe. Millions of people are on lockdown, travel is being restricted, and markets are responding unkindly as the virus continues to spread.

It's a challenging time for broader society, which means it can be a challenging time for marketers and communicators. In issues and crisis management, there's a saying that goes, "You cannot control what happens to you, but you can control what you do about it." As marketers and communicators, what we can control is how we communicate both internally and externally in a time of crisis.

First, it's crucial that communicators make sure they are dealing with accurate information. Times of crisis can be confusing and frightening, resulting in an amplification of speculation, conspiracy theories, obfuscation and censorship. Communicators must ensure that they are dealing with facts and not fiction, real information and not rumor.

Second, it's crucial to have an understanding of the ultimate goals of the communications being delivered. This is not a time to try to market or sell, but rather it is a time to reinforce the values that define leading organizations. What can be done given the various objectives we are working to address? It all comes to down communicating effectively.

And last, communicators need to properly place the ongoing crisis and issue in a greater context. What does it mean for globalization, economic growth and more—and how does that play out as the world works to get through the crisis together?

## **Deal in facts, not fiction**

In any crisis, it's crucial that communicators deal in facts and good information. Brands and companies cannot be seen as gullible or reactionary. Building any type of communications off of speculation or unverified claims can be damaging. Thus, it's important to have an intimate knowledge of which sources of information are trustworthy and which are not.

*Implications of coronavirus:  
How to communicate in  
turbulent times*

This can change depending on the specific situation. So it's good to have a broad base of knowledge of which sources to trust in certain situations over others. As a baseline, it is always advisable to consult three to five sources to for a point of view or recommendation, so that when it comes to COVID-19, we're ensuring that we lean on alerts and information coming from the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and the New York Times to begin with. It's also valuable to follow local governments' points of view throughout crises as well.

# COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY IN CRISIS TIMES

If there is one positive outcome of the challenges presented by the spread of the coronavirus, it is the heightened importance we have as communications leaders to develop the message and get it out quickly. As the aphorism goes: "a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its shoes on."

We have created five steps to consider for managing communications during a crisis.

These steps, which we have called DRIVE, represent the actions needed at each phase of the communications process. Specifically, they refer to Determine (audience), Refine (messaging), Inform (constituencies), Values (focus) and Evaluate (impact). We are recommending that we, as a communications community, DRIVE the communications instead of letting the issue define how we respond. Here's an explanation of what we suggest at every step of the process. This approach reflects much of what we are doing for clients now.

# STEP ONE: DETERMINE WHO NEEDS TO KNOW WHAT

As people scramble to make sense of the world around them when issues or crises arise, determining who needs to know what is so often lost, despite it often coming across as common sense. The first audience every organization should reach out to is the **employee** community. (We find this particularly true in addressing the challenges presented specifically by the coronavirus.) Regularly communicating with staff can put employees at ease while also ensuring that critical business needs are still being addressed through an upheaval. This is where having a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) is paramount. Companies believe they will never use these plans, and, ideally, they will be used sparingly. They are like having a good insurance policy. Effective BCPs do a few things:

- **Lean on technology** — Utilize some form of technology platform to manage day-to-day communications. These can be internal or external platforms, whichever best allows your company to consistently and clearly communicate with staff and whichever has the easiest barrier of entry for employees to check in and keep up, especially for larger organizations.
- **Demonstrate your value proposition to your staff** — There is no better time than a critical issue to “show not tell” how important your staff is to your organization.

Staff will judge the company and management on the steps you take to ensure their safety. We have witnessed some companies going the extra distance by providing additional insurance, offering emotional support hotlines, and even providing physician consultancy over the phone. Externally, many companies see crises as a time to pump up, expand, or introduce corporate social responsibility initiatives. This can be valuable. However, it's always good to ensure that what you're doing for people outside your four walls is something you've ensured for your staff, as well. Specifically, we have heard of one company caught in crosshairs because they made a huge donation of masks, while many of their staff are doing without.

- **Include the whole organization and tweak on the go** — Throughout the last few weeks, many companies have been tweaking their BCPs, making sure teams are aligned. We have found the best BCPs have a distinct leader that leads and coordinates the company's response and includes HR, communications, marketing, finance, legal and technology in the decision making. This person is not the CEO but is closely linked to the CEO and keeps them regularly abreast of the company's response and ongoing business needs.

Of course, customers are another audience that are critical to communicate with. As companies use technology to communicate with staff during a crisis, they should when interacting with customers, too. Whether it's to arrange non-contact meetings with customers or to address customer concerns from afar rather than up close, it helps knowing which technology can be best deployed in a given situation. Times of crisis are periods of time when being present with your customers is critical. It's your chance to show them that you intimately care about them and are operating in the same reality as they are. You're not isolated off in another place caring only about profit while they worry about their safety and the world around them.

Government is another important stakeholder. We have had many clients — both domestic and international—demonstrate their citizenship through offers of monetary, product, and even personnel support. These moves go a long way towards showing that a company or brand takes its role in a larger culture and society seriously.

## STEP TWO: REFINE YOUR MESSAGING

Once you know who you need to communicate with and what the desired outcomes are, your focus can shift to messaging. Ideally, you want to communicate your actions while avoiding any controversial or political hurdles. In a situation such as COVID-19, you don't want to fuel panic, but you do want to take the necessary actions to be prudent. British Airways was very careful in how it communicated its temporary cessation of flights to China:

*“Following Foreign Office advice against all but essential travel to mainland China, we have cancelled our flights to and from Beijing and Shanghai with immediate effect, until 29 February, while we assess the situation. Flights to and from Hong Kong remain unaffected. This situation will remain under review, and we will continue to provide regular updates. If you have a booking with us, please make sure we have your contact details. We'll do everything we can to help customers affected.”*

The Beijing Olympic Committee was also factual and responsible in postponing its post-Chinese New Year test event for the Alpine Ski Venue:

*“After paying close attention to the growing health and safety concerns surrounding the coronavirus outbreak in China,*

*we have made the difficult decision to cancel the upcoming FIS Alpine Ski World Cup in Yanqing. The health and safety of our athletes, staff, and fans is our top priority. Therefore, after careful consideration of recommendations provided by Chinese public health authorities and the World Health Organisation (WHO), we have determined that cancellation of the event is the best course of action to minimise any health and safety risks to participants. We will continue to monitor the situation and follow the advice of the relevant authorities as the situation evolves and provide updates regarding the event if and when possible.”*

Neither of these statements are politically charged and are responsible, given the circumstances. It is the role of the communicator to understand the sensitivities to communicate what is needed, necessary, and responsible, to manage all risks involved in external communications.

## STEP THREE: INFORM YOUR CONSTITUENCIES



Nothing builds trust throughout an issue or crisis better than a steady flow of responsible information that keeps everyone involved. Companies want to stay close to all aspects of the response to a crisis that's taking place and make sure they are relaying the most recent and relevant information to all their stakeholders. To stay in front of the many questions and concerns that stakeholders will have, it's important to establish a channel to communicate indirectly and employ a cadenced approach to providing updates.

We have been helping. Many clients stay close to all aspects of the response taking place in China and elsewhere, as well as documenting what companies are doing about it. This is helping leadership teams make decisions on what is necessary for their companies. Our clients are staying in front of their stakeholders by establishing a channel to communicate indirectly and maintaining a cadenced approach.

## STEP FOUR: FOCUS ON THE VALUES



None of us want crises to happen. But when they do, there is no better time to demonstrate what you stand for as a company. What are the values that define you? And if those values don't shine through at this time, are they really indicative of how your company operates and what its purpose is in the world? Crises can represent a "show not tell" moment in your corporate reputation process. We've seen companies like Intel, the NBA, Shiseido and Carlyle step up to provide monetary support along with medical and other supplies during this crisis.

UPS, the global logistics leader, is a good example how to use your core competence to help during a crisis. On January 31, 2020, the UPS Foundation announced that it had mobilized its global network to provide free air transportation of more than 2 million respirator masks, 280,000 pairs of nitrile gloves and 11,000 protective coveralls to China to help combat COVID-19. The cargo arrived at its Shanghai International Hub on February 2 and reached healthcare institutions in need of these items.

We have heard of technology companies offering what they do best to help people communicate, battle the virus, share medical information and more.

Dell Technologies has also been looking to contribute in the ways it knows best by striving to ensure the IT infrastructure and operations of medical, financial and government institutes in Hubei Province. All the while the company's technical support team has continued to provide 24/7 service.

What is central to all such actions is this: using your expertise or brand capital to help during a crisis is not about commercial advantage or profit. It is about doing the right thing for society and showing a company's true values and citizenship.

## STEP FIVE: EVALUATE THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

The whole process of communicating during issues and crises is fluid. The final step is to evaluate how you're doing through such means as surveys, engagement reviews and responses, and actual endorsements by key constituencies. Answering this one critical question should be your guide: "Have the steps you have taken demonstrably improved your standing as an organization in your stakeholder's eyes?"

If the answer is anything but yes, that doesn't mean that everything you've done up until now has been wrong or totally useless. It just requires taking a holistic look at how you've accomplished the previous steps and iterating or going back to make sure you've developed the right communications, established the correct channels to communicate them, and insured has been girded by the true values of the organization.

Following these steps will not only help your organization manage a crisis, it will also help establish your organization as proactively *DRIVING* the agenda.

# UNDERSTAND THE BROADER CONTEXT

While governments, businesses and people throughout the world work to contain this virus, it reminds us that we live in an increasingly global world. Most certainly, economies near and far will be severely affected. Based on the impact of the virus so far, consulting firm Oxford Economics conservatively forecasts Chinese GDP growth to fall 0.5 points to 5.6% this year and the knock-on effect for global GDP growth to be a fall of 0.2 points to 2.3% in 2020.

Although supply chains have been disrupted and many industries severely affected, we have seen people and organizations world-wide rally to support those who have been impacted the most. Hopefully, as we gain better control of this virus and understand its impact, the trade war that defined China's engagement with the world will subside, and we will see reforms take root in the areas of healthcare, social services, communication, and more.

In the process, what we can do as communicators in times of crisis is support our organizations to DRIVE communications and become valued members of society who have the ability to improve lives far beyond the profits we derive.

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