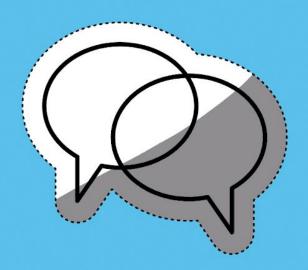# RESPONDING TO CORONAVIRUS

A Marketing & Communications Guide For Business

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Responding To Coronavirus: Marketing & Communications Guide For Business

➢ The coronavirus outbreak will affect all types of businesses — no organization will be immune to its impact.

➢ Marketing and communication teams should take a leading role in supporting their organization's response.

➢ Create flexible response plans and continuously monitor the situation to adapt to changing conditions.

We all know that we should have a plan for what to do in case of an emergency. And yet, we all seem to be taken off guard when an actual emergency arises. Blame human nature, but planning ahead for a crisis is often left until there is no time to plan, and then a hurried and chaotic response may actually make matters worse rather than better.

That's the situation many companies find themselves in with the outbreak of COVID-19 (the coronavirus). Most companies have just begun thinking about changes they need to make to ensure the health and safety of their employees and customers. And with confirmed cases growing by the day, this is an issue of immediate concern.

What role should marketing and communications leaders play in the development of a response? What are the most critical actions to take now? Given the seriousness of the current situation, we're offering this guide for free to clients and non-clients alike.

Our hope is that we can help you quickly develop a response plan — and ideally learn something about planning for future crises in the process. Although the report is designed to support a wide variety of crisis types, here are some of the specific actions you should consider taking for the situation we face today:

1. Create a task force. Except in very large companies or those with specific types of risks, most companies do not have a dedicated crisis response team, and many have never created even a bare-bones crisis communications plan. Now is the time to do so. Bring together functional leaders from across your organization to begin identifying and prioritizing issues, with all major functions and regions represented. The senior communications leader is usually at the helm, and in some smaller organizations, the effort may be led by the CEO. Other participants will likely include human resources, legal counsel, operations/facilities, sales and customer service leaders, and various marketing/communications disciplines that are either directly affected or will be involved in delivering information to audiences. Each individual should have a clear understanding of his or her specific responsibilities.

2. Prioritize issues of greatest urgency. Ensuring the safety of employees, customers, and other stakeholders is obviously the priority, and external guidance from public health experts will be important to understand what these issues are. There will be immediate decisions that need to be made about in-person activities: Should we carry on with our planned events schedule? What about internal meetings? Longer-term impacts should also be considered: How will we enable collaboration between remote teams? How will we support employees if their children are kept home from school? Think about how this crisis will affect your industry specifically and what value you can provide as an organization to the greater community. For instance, Cisco is extending free Webex licenses to help companies maintain collaboration capabilities while many employees will be working remotely.

3. Develop a protocol for emergent situations. Obviously, the plan should lay out a set of actions the organization will take immediately, based on what is known today. However, the situation is fluid, and it's not possible to know with certainty what the situation will look like in a month or six months. That's why it's important to have a protocol for addressing new situations as they emerge. How will new aspects of the crisis be identified? How will team members who need to take action be notified? How will the severity of the situation be assessed? Who will participate in crafting the response plan and communications? The output of this exercise is not necessarily a list of actions but a detailed process for how new developments will be identified and synthesized into the existing plan.

4. Prepare the communications engine. Providing transparent and ongoing communication is the hallmark of good crisis communications. The communications team needs to analyze the types of communication that will be needed to support a variety of scenarios. One of the most challenging aspects of crisis management is the need to create a wide range of critical content, have it vetted by legal, and pushed out through channels as quickly as possible. Create templates for common types of content and stub content that can be built out as needed. Set up an expedited legal vetting process, and work with digital teams to identify how content will be conveyed through the company's owned channels (web site, social, communities). Also, prepare spokespeople — from the CEO to the receptionist — with concise answers that can be given without additional approvals or escalation paths.

5. Map communications strategies to audiences. We recommend starting with an understanding of the audience, and crisis response is no different. Companies that have taken the effort to gather audience insights will have a head start, but for a broader crisis situations, there are almost always additional audiences to consider (e.g., employees and their families, investors and communities, or regions that may fall outside of your normal marketing focus). What is the most important information for the specific audience in question? What is their emotional context? What is the objective of the communication? How should we best deliver it? For regional audiences, what cultural norms do we need to be aware of? Segment the audience in as granular a form as needed to address the specific scenario.

6. Maintain open communications with employees. A large percentage of the workforce will face some kind of disruption to their normal routines or even their income. Companies in the information business will find it easier to carry on than companies in manufacturing or services. These companies may need to temporarily suspend operations, which will produce financial hardship. Companies that have already created a strong internal communications ecosystem are better positioned to communicate effectively in the face of disruption. One of the first priorities should be to plan for how communications will flow internally: the channels and cadence that employees can expect, as well as where to go if the normal channels (which may occur in a face-to-face environment) are not available. Also remember that employees are a channel, and if you enable them with content, they can extend the reach of your information and credibility with audiences.

7. Listen, track, and measure audience response. Use monitoring tools to understand how the audience is reacting to the crisis and your brand's response to it in traditional and social media. Again, the impact will be different across different types of businesses. Understanding what is being said can be the key to containing a negative situation or understanding when the crisis is winding down and business can return to normal. Create a dashboard focused specifically on this issue — with coverage of trending topics, sentiment, impact by geography or channel, and key coverage.

Companies that respond to the current crisis with transparency and compassion will be rewarded by audiences. Companies that fail to rise to the occasion or are late to respond may create uncertainty or damage the confidence they have built. Moreover, use this as an opportunity to flesh out a more complete crisis response plan so that the next time the unexpected comes along, you will be ready.