

COVID-19 CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

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THE OUTCOME RELATIONS AGENCY™

I. INTRODUCTION AND MARKET INTELLIGENCE

At [N6A](#), we've fielded an increasing number of questions from clients and employees about COVID-19, known by many as the coronavirus.

In recent days, as reports of the virus have reached the United States market, we felt it was important to offer our insights and perspectives on communication best practices for companies that are seeking counsel on how to effectively prepare to communicate with employees, customers and key stakeholders.

It is important to note that this is a guide on **communication** best practices, and not other areas of an organization that might be affected by the virus, including human resources, IT, administration, and others. We recommend seeking counsel and advice from specialists in each of those areas for any questions pertaining to those functions. It is also important to note that we are just beginning to learn and understand about the effects of the virus, and consequently, recommendations and strategies on effective communication practices will change as more facts about the virus become public.

Lastly, the practices outlined in the pages ahead are intended to offer general best practices that will apply to many organizations. However, it should be assumed that specific tactics, approach and implementation of the practices may or may not apply to certain organizations based on size, location, industry, and other variables that are specific to an individual organization.

Here are some guiding principles based on current market intelligence and what is available in the public domain on COVID-19.

- **Prepared, not panicked:** We recommend organizations take a "prepared, not panicked" approach to guide them through their communication decision-making regarding COVID-19. It is important for organizations to understand that the virus is still in its infancy, many data sets in the public domain are still in question, and the true effects are unknown. Consequently, organizations should be prepared – studying market trends, understanding the economic impact of the virus, analyzing health and patient data as it becomes available – but never panicked.
- **Validate data:** There is a lot of disinformation circulating. Before you use data to make any important business decisions, validate the data sources. As a general rule, we wouldn't advise clients to make any business decisions based on data unless the source has been validated by at least one other credible party.
- **Let empathy guide your decision making:** There are certain times when everything is not black and white, and it is appropriate for an organization to exercise discretion based on special circumstances – i.e. flexible work arrangements, work-from-home accommodations, unconventional logistics set-ups, and more. COVID-19 is a prime example of this. Companies that successfully navigate through the COVID-19 communication cycle will be the ones that exercise empathy and leave proper room for discretion based on the needs of each individual employee.

II. EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

- 1. Always proactive, never reactive:** Many organizations continue to take a “wait and see” approach to COVID-19, delaying or deferring employee communications until they feel it is absolutely necessary to engage employees. We would advise taking the opposite approach. Employee communications should always be on offense, with the organization’s internal communications lead taking a proactive approach. Even if it’s a simple memo informing employees that you are monitoring the situation and meeting as an executive team to gather facts, it is important that employees see that your organization is taking a proactive position to communicating with them. It would be a critical mistake, and a poor message to send to employees, if your organization is reactive and waits too long to address the issue. This would give employees the perception that your organization is trying to pretend COVID-19 is not an important issue.
- 2. Study larger competitive set:** Several major organizations, such as Google and Twitter, have advised select employees to work from home. Other organizations, such as Goldman Sachs and Amazon, have implemented new restrictions on work-related travel. You can learn a lot about effective practices for employee communications and protocol by studying your competitive set, particularly larger competitors that have a global footprint and more experience having navigated through similar issues in the past.
- 3. Establish communication transparency channels:** Set up employee communication transparency channels that enable employees to ask questions openly and have their questions answered in an expedient fashion by the appropriate internal leads. One practice that we have found to work effectively in this regard is to establish a COVID-19 email alias that gets directed automatically to your human resources team. In addition to providing employees with a transparent platform to receive answers to questions regarding the virus, this will also reduce the risk of conjecture and misinformation spreading around the office by ensuring the appropriate subject matter experts are answering questions.
- 4. Create a master employee Q&A archive:** Once you establish a communication transparency channel, you might want to consider creating a master Q&A archive that employees can access on-demand. This way you can keep a running list of questions and answers that employees can refer to whenever something is on their mind. It will also help avoid redundancies and cut down on excess time your team spends answering repeat questions relating to COVID-19.
- 5. If you don’t know, don’t answer:** So much is still unknown about COVID-19. Many questions you will receive will be impossible to answer. The worst thing you could possibly do is answer a question for an employee without having the proper facts or data by your side. This also underscores the importance of Practice #3. By establishing communication transparency channels, you will have the opportunity to seek guidance and expertise from the appropriate subject matter experts before closing the loop on an employee’s question.
- 6. Verbal communication is key:** While it’s important to document communications via employee memos and written deliverables, verbal communication methods are even more critical when it comes to COVID-19. Employees should see that your organization is as empathetic to the issue as they are. This is typically accomplished in a more effective fashion when it’s communicated verbally as opposed to in writing. Employees should feel that your organization is taking proper steps to update them and answer questions in team meetings, video conferences, and company-wide events. This doesn’t need to be a distraction from your day-to-day operation. It can simply be as a quick addition to pre-existing meetings your organization already has in place.

7. **Establish a communication lead or leads:** Ideally, there should be one lead on internal communications regarding COVID-19 to your staff. Depending on the size and geographic construct of your organization, this might be difficult. If this is the case, try to reduce the number of internal communication leads by assigning leads by office, department or division.
8. **Equip employees with information toolkit:** You should already be assembling a COVID-19 toolkit to help you and your executive team stay updated and make informed business decisions. Provide employees with a similar toolkit so they have access to the most pertinent information regarding COVID-19. This could include anything from a shortcut to the CDC.gov homepage to subscription alerts to your organization's healthcare provider.
9. **Communicate economic impact to employees:** COVID-19 has already had a significant impact on the global economy. In many cases, this has had a trickle-down effect to all types of industry. Your employees should understand the economic impact that COVID-19 could have on your business. Without causing panic or stress, they should understand in a clear and concise way how COVID-19 could stand to impact your customers, your production and your operating disciplines.
10. **Don't make kneejerk changes:** Just like any organization, your company likely has events, gatherings and programs that are unique tenets of your culture that your employees look forward to – happy hours, meals, recurring meetings and celebratory events, and so on. Don't make kneejerk changes to any of these out of fear. Continue to study the trends and stay informed, but you want to send the message that it's business as usual at your company. You shouldn't make overhauling changes to core events that build camaraderie unless you get counsel from an expert.

III. CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION BEST PRACTICES

1. **Ask how you can help:** All customers should receive a proactive communication from relationship leads asking about the potential impact and risks that COVID-19 presents to the customer's business. Your customer success team should then ask how you can help.
2. **Offer solutions:** Once the customer shares their potential business concerns regarding COVID-19, offer a consultative recommendation – something that shows the customer that you have thought about their business and that you can be a part of the solution. Perhaps COVID-19 might restrict the customer from reaching prospects in a certain geographic market where you have coverage. If that's the case, perhaps you can lean on your team's local market expertise to help the customer address their short-term concern in that market.
3. **Be flexible on logistics:** Offer alternative ways to meet, engage and interact with customers. If your relationship is typically dependent on face-to-face meetings and presentations, offer the customer alternatives such as video conferences and webinars.
4. **Share market trends:** Be proactive and share market trends with customers on how COVID-19 is impacting their industry. Establish regular touchpoints and systems such as weekly updates and reports.
5. **Run scenario tests:** Work with your customers to have communication plans in place for different scenarios that could materialize as a result of COVID-19 and how each scenario could impact their business. Run best, worst and likely case scenarios, and have a plan in place for each. Ideally each plan would consist of supporting collateral so that you're prepared to execute alongside the customer as soon as any scenario materializes.

IV. COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST AND TOOLKIT

Here are some of the deliverables your communications team should have at their disposal and ready to share with employees, customers and key stakeholders.

- ✓ Employee memo template
- ✓ Customer memo template
- ✓ Designated internal lead(s) for COVID-19 communications
- ✓ Email alias to field COVID-19 related questions
- ✓ COVID-19 informational resource toolkit
- ✓ Competitive intel chart
- ✓ Master Q&A document
- ✓ Updates from healthcare provider on COVID-19 policy changes
- ✓ Instructions for employees on how to field customer inquiries
- ✓ Data validation system

V. N6A EXECUTIVE TEAM POVS

Here are some communications insights and perspectives from [N6A executives](#) as it relates to COVID-19 within each of their respective departments.

Nina Velasquez, EVP of Talent Development (Recruiting POV)

"While COVID-19 could delay candidates' plans to interview onsite at a company's office if they're unable or reluctant to travel, recruiters can and should leverage remote communications to overcome any logistical hurdles of the interview process. At N6A, we always do our best to make adjustments and to accommodate employee candidates in the event of an extenuating circumstance such as this one. We recommend companies make necessary adjustments to the interview process so hiring managers are still equipped with a solid foundation to identify the top talent for the team."

Al DiGuido, President (Customer Comms POV):

"When communicating with customers, your organization cannot be silent regarding the omnipresent awareness of COVID-19 in the world today. It's important that you demonstrate that your organization will not engage in activities that stimulate unwarranted fear and anxiety, however that you understand the concern that many have about the virus and its potential to spread to others. Most importantly, it's paramount that your organization demonstrates that you are genuinely committed to providing your customers with any and all relevant facts and verified data regarding the virus, as well as the real potential it may have on the business relationship between you and your customer, and between them and their customers."

John Hannaway, Chief of Staff (HR POV):

"Your organization should project confidence and calmness when it comes to communicating with your employees and key internal shareholders. The discussion around issues as unnerving as COVID-19 is best absorbed by your employees when you maintain a calm but direct style. You set the tone for your workplace, so maintain confident and calm delivery when discussing the steps your organization and employees can take to be more prepared. Acknowledge the situation, share only the information you know to be certain and give concrete recommendations to your staff about how they can limit their exposure. You can expect your employees to take their behavioral cues from you in this regard. How they respond will depend on your delivery."

Matt Rizzetta, CEO (Executive POV):

"Proactiveness is key. You always want to manage the flow of communications from a position of offense, never on defense. Questions should be anticipated, pre-empted and addressed proactively. Hopefully it never gets to the point where you have to put your plans into action, but employees and key stakeholders around your company should feel like you are taking proactive measures to communicate, prepare and ensure that everyone is properly equipped and understands the company's protocols and positions regarding COVID-19."