

All Eyes and Ears on Communications During the COVID-19 Crisis

How corporate affairs and communications leaders are steering organizations through a pandemic

By Charlie Beasley, Lena Kilee, Artemio Garza, Helen Crowley, and Gizem Weggemans

On March 23 and 24, Egon Zehnder convened 30 of the world's leading Corporate Affairs and Communications executives to discuss the central role they are playing in helping their organizations navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. While widely acknowledged that communication in a crisis is vital, this unprecedented global situation continues to throw unique challenges to those leading their organization's communication efforts. What do you say to your teams, customers, shareholders, and other stakeholders who are all experiencing this crisis in different ways and at different times? When do you say it? And how do you do it effectively when the traditional channels, interfaces, and cadence of outreach are no longer appropriate and are constantly changing?

The following themes emerged from the conversation:

Prioritizing for the Crisis and Beyond

Given the high demand for both internal and external communications in a crisis, as the stewards of their organization's corporate reputation and brand, corporate affairs and communications leaders must split their attention between crisis and long-term corporate reputation and communications objectives. They need to ensure that communications across all channels are striking the right tone, coming out at the right time, and are reinforcing the organization's reputation in the eyes of its key internal and external communities. Adding to this complexity is the sheer volume and pace of communications activity, the sensitivities of the issues involved, and the fact that communications and corporate affairs teams are now largely working remotely. In this challenging and fluid environment, the executives who joined our virtual meeting suggested the following:

- **Establish a clear set of COVID-19 communications principles for the communications team and the business and adhere to them.** One chief brand and communications director suggested that companies should establish and distribute to the business (particularly marketing and business teams) a set of principles and criteria on what they should communicate, the channels to use, and the tone, approach, and style to adopt (aligned with the overall corporate position). Getting the mood or sentiment wrong and being seen to capitalize on the current situation is likely to result in a major customer and stakeholder backlash. Having a clear set of “what, why, how” principles around communications at this time also enables the communications teams to distill and prioritize the key work among all the noise and minimizes distraction of the business. “We have 2,000 people giving us ideas about content and marketing, and we need to focus on two or three ideas that we can really execute on well,” she said. “Without the criteria and principles, it would just be a proliferation of activity.”
- **Engage external agencies as your eyes and ears.** An executive from a communications agency suggested that their clients are turning to them for help with the getting the right tone in messaging, as well as to provide a lens as to what competitors are doing. “It helps to get someone who is removed from the daily stresses of your situation to give an outside perspective.” In addition, external agencies have been showing themselves to be helpful when it comes to picking up the extra responsibilities in the team that come with crisis communications and adjusting long-term communications strategies.
- **Develop new partnerships—internally and externally.** Some communications executives who attended the virtual gatherings pointed to the importance of creating new partnerships across the organization that will be essential both in crisis mode and in the new normal post-crisis. In addition to working closely with HR and teams that they regularly engage with such as marketing and sales, communications executives are also working closely with IT and other functions. “I personally don’t feel like we can tackle this alone,” one global head of communications said, adding that he and his team are proactively exploring new partnerships both across the organization and with new external partners, particularly as the concept of what are essential and business critical services has changed.

It is also an opportunity to strengthen partnerships between local and global communications teams. As the COVID-19 outbreak spread from Asia across the world, leaders in different regions are documenting how they are handling the crisis locally as a playbook to help those who will navigate it after them. “All of our initiatives are documented, and we are producing

toolkits so anyone can adapt for their markets,” explained the head of corporate affairs whose global team has been working closely with the management of local operations who have been switching production lines to make hand sanitizer.

- **Reinforcing the value that Corporate Affairs and Communications can bring to an organization.** This crisis has once again highlighted the vital role that the Corporate Affairs and Communications function can play in quickly resolving critical business issues in an evolving crisis. For many on the calls, particularly those working in multinational companies, a key business challenge has been how to develop consistent positions and communications strategies in the face of different and evolving government advice around the world, particularly as countries are learning from each other through the stages of this crisis. This has seen business leaders lean heavily on their Corporate Affairs and Communications functions to distil some clarity out of complexity for the business. The teams are also being utilized extensively to facilitate much needed two-way engagement with government where companies have been able to share the insights and lessons they have learned from other markets in which they operate and are further ahead in managing the crisis. This dialogue and information sharing been vital in helping governments shape their response to the crisis to enable critical industries and essential services to continue to function.

One corporate affairs leader noted that her team was being relied on for two main purposes: acting as the trusted conduit for government advice to the business and driving an aligned and consistent response to the multiple requests being received from governments around the world. Others noted the key partnering role they were playing with authorities disseminating key public health information related to the products and services they sell. During the calls, one executive discussed the role his team had played, working at pace, to quickly address fears about transmissibility of COVID-19 from pets arising from a news story in Hong Kong. In 24 hours, his team marshalled leading scientific advice in partnership with government authorities that was then mass communicated both internally and externally via videos, published FAQs, and guidance material across multiple platforms providing comfort and guidance to their global teams and millions of pet owners globally.

Changing the Face of Internal Communications

With the mass disruption to organizations, concerns about health and safety and rapid changes in government guidance round the world, effective internal communications

has never been more valued and appreciated. Communications leaders who joined our virtual meeting highlighted the need for the following:

- **Develop authentic messages that are widely accessible to the entire workforce.** All-staff emails alone won't cut it in this environment, and many companies are finding that more informal messages from leaders are resonating because they have a more authentic tone and feel. However, many executives are unaccustomed to these less structured ways of communicating and are looking to their communications team to advise how best to reach the workforce in this crisis—particularly when you need some key messages to be heard. “We doubled down on visual and short-form, less structured communications,” said one global head of communications. Others discussed the move to more frequent, short-form videos from senior leaders across the business to personalize messages, alongside the use of tools such as virtual “coffee huddles” interspersed with more light-hearted and positive communications. This is vital if teams are to feel engaged about the “business as usual” activities that still must go on during this extended period of disruption. This is considered particularly important for companies who have frontline or essential workers, not able to self-isolate, who are being put at a higher-risk than others, ensuring that they feel supported and the work they are doing is valued is vital.

A challenge noted by many on the calls was the importance of getting the tone right in these leadership messages. One communication leader noted the temptation to be too generous and not realistic about the crisis: “We are learning as we go along that this is a very uncertain world...leaders need to provide reassurance but also be realistic in terms of the messages to their teams.” Corporate Affairs and communication leaders will be vital in helping their CEOs and senior executives get this message right.

- **Repurpose external communications channels internally.** As the type of messaging changes, so does the communications channel. Some companies are turning to channels they normally reserve for external communications and repurposing them to engage further with employees—particularly where they have employees on the front line of this crisis less able to access internal communications platforms. One organization is using its in-house broadcast capabilities to engage with its workforce. “We are using our systems to host closed radio shows to talk about staffing, how we are keeping operations going, and allow people to ask questions,” the communications leader said. Another executive explained how his team uses a cascade of WhatsApp messages to distribute up-to-date communications. They have arranged for senior leaders to disseminate daily updates to their immediate

teams via WhatsApp with the content prepared and shared by the central communications after the daily crisis management meeting. Others noted the success they had been having using LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram as a ways to engage with their teams.

This changing communications mix is also seeing a realignment of teams and responsibilities. One executive explained how they had changed the responsibilities of their communications team members to reflect these new priorities. “We have shifted our teams away from media relations to focus on social channels and our team members who usually focus on town halls or events are now helping our salesforce with their communications and supporting the business with alternative platforms like Zoom and WebEx.”

- **Establish and stick to a communications cadence.** In addition to the message and channels, the cadence of communications is important. Some organizations have determined a set number of messages that will come from the C-suite each week and have designated the channels upfront so people know where to look and expect the information. Others have a more informal approach utilizing channels such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams to allow different groups within the organization to communicate in an ongoing, less structured environment. Some of the communications leaders at the virtual meetings underscored pace over the medium. “It’s the regularity and rhythm of communications,” explained one global corporate affairs leader.

Redefining Leadership Visibility in a Newly Remote World

How do leaders ensure employees are able to feel their presence without being physically near anyone? Executives are finding themselves needing to “walk the floors” in a remote way—through video chats, virtual coffee breaks, team huddles, and sometimes just picking up the phone instead of sending an email. However, not every executive feels comfortable in these new channels. “I had my first virtual executive committee meeting last week, and the CEO complained, ‘Damn, I can’t look you in the eyes,’” explained one executive. In these instances, communications professionals are playing a key role offering guidance to the CEO and other leaders about how to cultivate an authentic executive presence and achieve while not being face-to-face.

This need for visibility also extends to employees in the form of recognition, which is especially important for essential employees who have no choice but to still work on-site and may more acutely feel the stress of the potential health risks they face. “We’re using Facebook and other channels, and finding ways to emphasize appreciation for colleagues and recognize people who are going the extra mile,” said one call participant.

A communications executive noted the importance of ensuring people understand that the work they are doing matters and is valued. He added, that in their case, “We need to let people know that their everyday work is having impact and that people are doing a good job. They need to know that they are providing a service that makes a difference.”

Keeping Tempo and Saving Your Sprint for the Finish

Many leaders have been repurposing the old adage of “It’s a marathon not a sprint,” when it comes to addressing the COVID-19 outbreak. However, marathons have a designated start and finish line and the coronavirus crisis does not yet have a known finish line. For many corporate affairs and communication leaders, managing the crisis to date has also felt like a sprint.

For this reason, it is vital that communication leaders actively look for ways to maintain their own energy and that of their team – particularly where real value comes where communications leaders step back and take the broader strategic view, something that is incredibly hard to do when you are in thick of it.

From the conversation, it is clear that ruthlessly prioritizing where corporate affairs and communications teams spend their time, providing clear and simple consistent guidance across the business, and leveraging both internal and external relationships will be key.

Equally important, however, is looking after the individual and self, particularly where this is going to be a long journey and where it will be unsustainable to be “on” all the time. Amid the chaos, it is vital that all corporate leaders, including the Corporate Affairs and Communications leaders in the middle of this, actively take a break, stop focusing on the “doing” for a moment and ground themselves. This can be done in small acts or routines—a daily walk or exercise routine, an afternoon cup of tea, or a video chat with friends—but is ultimately critical if leaders are going to sustain the personal energy and sense of perspective that will be needed to be a true leader in this time of crisis.

For more information, contact:



Charlie Beasley
London
charlie.beasley@egonzehnder.com



Lena Kilee
Berlin
[lena.kilee@egonzehnder.com](mailto:lana.kilee@egonzehnder.com)



Artemio Garza
Miami
artemio.garza@egonzehnder.com



Helen Crowley
London
helen.crowley@egonzehnder.com



Gizem Weggemans
London
gizem.weggemans@egonzehnder.com

Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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