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Topline Strategic Communications Guidance

Purpose of this document

As organizations evaluate the potential impact of Coronavirus on business operations and stakeholder trust, this document contains:

(1) general communications considerations for responding to COVID-19; and

(2) a SAMPLE general communication for internal stakeholders about the outbreak

Strategic Considerations and Recommendations

- **Keep your corporate values at the core of your approach**. This is a global health issue, and the way that your organization responds to it should feel authentic to your business and culture.
    - For example, modulate your tone and communiques to reflect your employee health and wellness (EHS) sentiments and policies and double-check your empathetic statements and messages of concern to ensure they are interpreted as authentic to the voice of the company or leadership.

- **Travel guidance must be a cost-benefit analysis.** After this global event concludes, your stakeholders will look back and pass judgement on whether you took the appropriate action and steps to protect your stakeholders. In order to make this cost-benefit analysis, organizations need to align and provide razor sharp clarity on what is and isn't critical travel.
    - For those organizing or hosting major industry events, we'd suggest following the same guidance. While the opportunity cost of cancelling an event is guaranteed, the costs of hosting a poorly attended event is likely greater and may result in a price paid elsewhere, such as your reputation.
    - For those who decide to cancel their attendance or participation in a major event, be certain to provide the proper notification to event organizers or participants in advance

- **Be transparent.** Acknowledge your responsibilities to employees, customers and public health, including addressing what you know, what you don't know, and what you're doing; admit changing information; and commit to updates.

- **Keep your organizational style at your core**. For example, if your employees are accustomed to work-from-home flexibility, lean into that. If your employees travel regularly, consider further integrating video conferencing.

- **Carefully consider your role.** When thinking about the role your organization plays and which stakeholders you can be a credible messenger with, consider how and to

whom your organization would communicate with following a hurricane or earthquake. If a hurricane hit a region where you had a facility, which stakeholders would you make a priority?

- o If you don't have a crisis plan that covers a major medical, natural disaster protocols are a good place to start. However, you should avoid communications tactics that involve congregating large groups of people in one space.

- **Internal stakeholders are priority**. At present, the highest-need stakeholders tend to be employees with concern about health and safety. While it's beneficial to be prepared with an external strategy if there were to be an incident, all organizations, at a minimum, should be making internal audiences a priority. It is also critical to be hyper-aware of community-level decisions such as announcements and guidance from surrounding school districts and local government bodies to ensure messaging is in sync.

  - o For example: If a school district circulates a plan for potential school closures, does your work-from-home policy support such childcare emergencies?

- **This issue is evolving rapidly.** Unless your business is a healthcare organization actively working on the Coronavirus issue, you should be very careful not to communicate medical or healthcare information (e.g., incubation, transmission, at-risk populations). Instead of speaking on behalf of public health experts, organizations should include materials and guidance from credible organizations and refer people to those third parties.

- **Offer facts.** Share clear, credible, and accessible sources of information (e.g., WHO), touching on topics such as transmission, signs and symptoms, risks of exposure, preventative actions, etc., via email communication and on the company intranet.

- **Avoid communicating "facts" not directly confirmed by WHO or local Departments of Health (DoH).** Do not rely on media reporting to define the "facts" around this issue in their communications. Use what has been confirmed directly by the WHO or local health departments.

- **Plan to speak about Coronavirus at a regular cadence**. As the fact pattern is continually evolving, and as facts change, stakeholders will expect to hear updates from leadership.

- **Make sure business continuity and communications teams from the center and across business units or marketing organizations are attached at the hip.** Establish an internal task force to oversee preparedness and response efforts. Task force should reflect:

- A small, but empowered task force that can take decisive action and ensure leadership teams within matrixed organizations are fully synched with messaging and timing of any announcements
- Members from executive leadership, communications, HR, finance, facilities, operations, legal, etc.
- Operations intelligence, including business continuity plans/risks, ensuring an integrated response
- Determine protocols and strategies for case investigation, prevention and spread

- **National Health Authorities and Departments of Health are facing extreme challenges.** For instance, should your organization have an employee that is being screened for the virus, it will take longer than expected to get those results back, and you will not likely receive direct contact from the health authority for days if not weeks. Best practice is to raise awareness with employees to take extra precautions and isolate that employee's workspace as best as possible.

Planning Scenarios

As your organization plans for potential risk around the issue, there are several key scenarios that should be discussed and planned for. These include:

- Employee is exposed to virus; is suspected of having the virus; is confirmed to have the virus
- One of your business' local communities is affected by an isolated case or larger outbreak
- Business operations are directly impacted (e.g., product shortages, facility shutdowns)
- Your business is hosting an event, plans to attend major industry congresses, or is planning to send large population of employees into a high-risk or escalating risk area as defined by the WHO or other authorities
- Local schools or day care center(s) close based on suspected or confirmed case
- For each of the above, some initial steps/considerations may include:

  - Monitor public officials' channels to track evolving fact pattern.

  - Engage government affairs colleagues or contacts to support information gathering and public sector engagement.

  - Identify a liaison to the public health department to collaborate on mitigation tactics.

  - Identify a spokesperson to handle media inquiries.

  - Draft and distribute internal communications and tactical guidance.

- o Prepare additional key stakeholder communications (consumer, customer, investor, etc.).

- o Monitor traditional media and social conversation to track whether your organization is becoming a part of the broader conversation about the virus.

Additional Communications Considerations

Below are additional considerations and recommendations for planning and preparation purposes.

- **DOs** for communications tone and themes:

  - o Ensure all functional areas that should play a role in front-line defense have a shared understanding of company plans
    - For example: facility management, on-site health services, security, travel coordinators and event management, etc.
  - o Use your existing crisis planning materials and processes to guide issues response
  - o Put people at ease, with attention paid to minimize chaos or mass fear
  - o Say only what WHO, or the National Health Authority/ Department of Health have said about the virus
  - o Urge anyone with symptoms to seek medical care
  - o Use communiques as an opportunity to reinforce good preventative measures and share FAQs
  - o Practice proactive flexibility on travel policy, sick time, and work from home policies
  - o Direct employees with concerns about the workplace to your human resources department, and educate your human resources employees on proper handling of such inquiries

- **DON'Ts** for communications tone and themes:

  - o Gather people together in an in-person meeting to discuss the virus
  - o Make assumptions about when or where the disease was contracted
  - o Question or make assumptions about employee symptoms – severity or authenticity
  - o Disclose personally identifying information about employees, customers or consumers potentially impacted

CORONAVIRUS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Third-Party Resources

Additionally, below are several resources that could be helpful to your organization and stakeholders as you consider and share information internally:

- Information about 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) can be found here
- Advice for the public from WHO can be found here
- Technical guidance from WHO can be found here
- Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) from CDC can be found here

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Prepared by Edelman's Coronavirus Task Force

For informational use only; should not be considered medical advice
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