

Top 10 Considerations

1. The Election. And Aftermath.

The 2020 Election already appears to be the most polarizing of our lifetime, kicking off with an 89-point partisan gap – the highest polling firm Gallup has ever recorded. Further, the selection of a “side” has become a statement of identity and is largely correlated to the media consumed. Enthusiasm on both sides is heating up, creating potential for conflict. As Americans turn to other methods of voting during the pandemic, expectations are that the winner won’t be decided on Election Day. Seeds of doubt have already been planted about the efficacy of the election results, with likelihood for litigation and other uncertainty that could rival Bush v. Gore and delay a final decision until as late as mid-December.

- Have you updated your social media policy to reflect the current landscape and new levels of social activism?
- Have you evaluated how your PAC or candidate donations will be viewed by stakeholders on either side?
- Could Trump or Biden visit any of your locations or comment on your actions? Do you need a contingency plan?

2. The Economy.

Government support mechanisms enacted in the early stages of the pandemic have for the most part expired, with optimism for additional measures unlikely to pass Congress. Many smaller businesses have closed or are struggling to stay open while the unemployment rate continues to be significantly higher than average.

- Do you have any business plans (layoffs, closures, divestments, etc.) that could be seen as contributing to the downturn in the economy? Do you have the right communications plan developed to adequately and empathetically explain the rationale for your decisions?
- Do you have the right social media monitoring in place to quickly identify negative sentiment of employees, business partners or other stakeholders who might focus blame on you?

3. The Inequity Debate.

The racial justice demonstrations that began in May continue, but the debate is more polarized as the election heats up. The Trump Administration is taking action against anti-bias training in government agencies and criticizing the 1619 Project on the U.S.'s history with slavery, further complicating the landscape. While companies navigate their support for eliminating racial inequities, many struggle to communicate effectively to demonstrate their support.

- Has your company taken a public stand on social inequities? Are any of your employees actively engaged in either side of the debate?
- FleishmanHillard True Mosaic, our team of advisors skilled in helping companies effectively engage to address Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) issues, can help your team develop an effective plan that balances responding to improve your diversity strategies and communicating effectively and appropriately.

4. Second Wave of COVID-19.

As winter months and the flu season approach, people start to stay indoors more and schools return to campus, there's little doubt among the scientific community that a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic will occur in many regions. While the severity of subsequent waves is undetermined, further shelter-in-place or other closures may contribute to business uncertainty and negatively impact your workforce. Now is the time to revisit your story and see whether it's still relevant in today's context.

- Ensure that your COVID-19 plans are updated to reflect subsequent waves of the pandemic.
- Are you reevaluating your communications plans for managing the various orders that state and local governments are mandating? Do your current plans reflect today's environment, stakeholder sentiments and what other organizations are doing?

5. Vaccine.

Several vaccine candidates are in late-phase trials, with expectations for availability for various groups ranging from before the end of 2020 through mid-2021. However, the efficacy of vaccines is still undetermined and there are concerns that approval for the vaccine has been politicized, which is weakening the public trust in the vaccine. Recent polling suggests that less than half of the U.S. population would get the vaccine if it becomes available, while another poll suggests that 2/3 of respondents would "wait to see" whether the vaccine is safe before being inoculated. Further, the vaccine will be limited in availability for several months, so it's not a panacea for a quick return to normality.

- Once a vaccine is in place, will you require a declaration of vaccination from employees and visitors? What about employees and visitors who are immune?
- How will you respond to those who oppose vaccinations for various reasons?

6. School/Child Care.

Schools and childcare are critical for parents who also need to focus on work during business hours. With schools reopening for in-class instruction, there is potential that local outbreaks could force closures and leave parents with few options to care for their children. Further, there may be a “fluid” nature of school openings as infection rates fluctuate, leaving more unpredictability for work.

- Ensure that you’re up-to-speed on the local situations where your stakeholders live to determine whether any closures will take place and have contingency plans in place for any closures.
- Communicate ahead of time and regularly with employees to detail any relevant leave or time-off policies that might help them manage through unpredictable scheduling that results from closures.

7. Mental Health.

Your stakeholders have been suffering from fear and unpredictability for the better part of a year by now. Not only are they concerned about their own health and the health of their loved ones, but even a brief visit to a store can be a stressful experience. Moreover, many are feeling more isolated amid shelter-in-place orders as regular interaction with others is less frequent than in the past. Couple this with the uncertainty of the economy, a polarized political environment and general unease, and many of your stakeholders are likely to experience anxiety, fear and isolation.

- Do you have any programs to identify and assist employees and family members who are struggling with any mental health symptoms?

8. The Holiday Season.

Autumn is when many look forward to celebrating some of our favorite holidays with friends, family and co-workers. This season, it’s going to be different as gatherings and travel will be limited. The CDC provided guidance for Halloween that recommends against Trick or Treating and large family gatherings may fall during the height of a second wave of the pandemic. Stores also won’t be packed as in prior years as 40% of consumers don’t want to shop in-person.

- Have you developed any guidelines for employees who are planning to gather with others during the holidays and return shortly thereafter to work?
- Work holiday parties are common during this time; have you developed alternate plans?

9. Your Crisis Plan.

“Plan for the worst, hope for the best” is the motto for any crisis counsel, so ensuring that your plan is updated and relevant with the latest potential scenarios is critical.

- Was your crisis plan developed prior to the pandemic? Does it reflect the current context? Have you evaluated it with the context of the past several months to identify what worked and what didn't to position your organization for success when the next issue hits?
- Have you planned scenarios with the new health perspective, political climate and focus on social issues, such as racism and inequity, in mind?

10. Your 2021 Planning.

While we're only halfway through 2020, many proactive plans for the year have been set aside. With this capacity, now is a great time to reassess and plan to come out of the gate strong in 2021.

- A Virtual True Self exercise can unearth new ways to think about your brand, reputation and story that best represents where you want to authentically take your company
- Take a fresh look at your communications team and functions, determining whether you have the right fit for key roles.
- Conduct a culture assessment to determine how well your organization is living its mission and values, identifying the organizational attributes that will help you emerge from this environment stronger, as well as the cultural elements that need more attention from your team.