

CONTEXT

As some Asian markets—notably Greater China and Korea—are among the first to rise out of what we hope is the worst of the health crisis of COVID-19, we forge onward to get past the worst of the economic crisis as well. The challenging rebound to life in a new world reveals some lessons on how to best move ahead, and on pitfalls to avoid. Not only for business, but for society broadly, there is an imperative to seize upon positive momentum and both fuel it and feed off it toward a better tomorrow.

At the same time, we know there will be further disruption and damage from the ongoing economic repercussions, and there remain many among us who have been put in a difficult situation and who may need help to recover.

How are Asian businesses articulating their contribution and their role in this rebounding and rebuilding and how do they strike the right tone that both fuels the positive while also supporting the need to cope with continuing strife? The answer is of course unique to each situation, but as communications practitioners with our focus on reputation – whether corporate or brand – there are specific situations where communications is essential to the task at hand. Issues that will challenge corporates include:

- Explaining operational reconfigurations, consolidations and closures to enable necessary transitions and protect company credibility
- Clarifying workforce realignments, retrenchments and other impacts to employees of the migration to new business models and market realities
- Navigating rising nationalist tensions and geopolitical confrontations affecting cross-border trade and supply chains
- Re-positioning businesses to seize opportunities created out of the disruption of the pandemic including accelerated adoption of digital technologies in the workplace and in the marketplace; new partnerships, mergers or acquisitions; or entry to new markets

All these situations, if communicated poorly result in unnecessary distraction at a minimum and may inflict incremental pain or burden on the recovery. They might even result in failure or backlash against a company. Each week, we see fresh examples and they suggest several priorities that communications should address including:

- Sustained demonstration of a **priority focus on the security of employees**
- **Active listening** and **agile realignment** to roiling changes in expectations, anxieties and values
- Thirst for **positivity and innovation** contributing to hope and resurgence
- **Responsibility and caution** about excessive or irresponsible resumption
- Implications to both corporate and brand reputation of **changing attitudes toward business purpose**

EMPLOYEE SECURITY: PRIORITY ONE

Ongoing actions that demonstrate the company is maintaining priority focus on the security of employees are vital. Even as the communication of temperature checks, wearing masks and social distancing have become pervasive, it is important to continually reassure employees, customers and the wider public that employers are maintaining vigilance on safety in the workplace. Precisely because they are becoming pervasive, some of these measures benefit from creative ways to help them stand out so their impact sustains.

- An emphasis on heightened attention to social distancing, increased hygiene, temperature monitoring, contact tracing and related virus prevention measures will remain for months, perhaps indefinitely.
- In markets where these measures are controversial or others where they are limited by cost or availability, getting the tone of this communication correct is further complicated.
- Communicating attention to these concerns also becomes a useful tool for reassuring customers that the business remains safe and responsible for resuming their patronage. Further, the interdependence of suppliers and distribution channels makes this vital throughout the supply chain. It is effectively a prerequisite to rebuilding both supply and demand flows for many businesses.
- In addition to security from the virus, concerns about mental health and well-being, family and childcare concerns and financial security and stability are equally important and challenged.
- Research indicates that people are increasingly attuned to how businesses are supporting their employees during this crisis and this implies a lasting impact on corporate and brand reputation which communications should strive to support.

Questions to explore on Employee Security:

1. How has the pandemic affected the workforce model and benefits and how must this be explained to be well understood?
2. How will employees be negatively affected, and has the company provided sufficient transparency on how its decisions have been guided?
3. What are the risks of accusation that the company has not acted fairly? Compared to competitors, other industries?
4. How is the company aligned to political narratives on employment responsibility?
5. What is the sentiment among customers/supply chain partners regarding the company's decisions about employment?

ACTIVE LISTENING

With all the changes in stakeholder emotions and priorities, we have seen the propriety of communications has shifted dramatically, rapidly and frequently, and it remains unstable. We strongly advise clients to be actively listening to a variety of feedback channels and assessing the implications on their communications.

- Witness the strong enthusiasm in China to reopening of Shanghai Disneyland or resumption of domestic air travel. This provides opportunity for business to resume marketing communications that yesterday would have been inappropriate or even irresponsible.

- Audiences understand that companies didn't create this pandemic, and they understand they are dealing with massive uncertainty as they manage through it. By demonstrating this listening, corporate and brand representatives signal their effort and attention to coping with the uncertainty as they strive to push ahead. Communications can create audience empathy in this way that both drives support of the endeavor and increases tolerance if the communication hits a wrong note.
- Consider also the strong political overtones of messaging on emanating from governments globally. Unlike business, governments are being held accountable early on, and they are driving the narrative in many markets. That becomes a vital consideration in the context of resuming operations, employee safety and particularly related to the redefinition of the purpose of business.

Questions to explore on Active Listening:

1. How often should you be communicating what you are doing to secure/resume business?
2. How are you collecting feedback and ideas on what your stakeholders want to do better or differently in the post-COVID era?
3. Are you sufficiently communicating what and who inform decisions on what to do?
4. Which voices are most influential on your stakeholders and how does your messaging align to their agenda?
5. What is the relevance of political rhetoric to your messaging and particularly how does that conflict between your various stakeholders?
6. What part of your customer base is ready, or will first be ready for engagement? How are you listening to them and how quickly are you able to engage them?

AGILE MESSAGING REALIGNMENT

With a shifting tone setting the context, businesses are forced to choose between reducing exposure or increase the speed with which they respond. Assisting our businesses to read and react to the market in adapting communications is tremendous value for communications professionals to contribute.

- The rapid re-emergence of marketing opportunities in China noted above was seized by those most prepared to react to it quickly.
- With the necessity of social distancing and pervasive working from home we've seen an acceleration of the shift toward digital platforms (in a market with already advanced adoption) for everything from personal expression to commerce and entertainment.
- The cycle-time required to generate creative communications to seize these opportunities is reduced.

Questions to explore on Messaging Realignment:

1. How much is 'COVID fatigue' affecting each audience, and does your messaging need more creativity to cut through both the noise and fatigue?
2. What stakeholder engagement plans were disrupted across stakeholders—customers, investors, employees and others—and what will they expect?
3. Are your messaging and creative communications assets fit for post-COVID usage, or is refinement required? How can you accelerate refinement of those?
4. How can you accelerate (or simplify) your readiness to engage quickly when opportunity or necessity arises?

POSITIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Brands and corporates are always striving to deliver positivity in their offer or their prospects. That has certainly been challenged during this pandemic, and hard to do with the requisite authenticity given the environment is decidedly negative. If the Asian experience is a guide, two elements of positive messaging become viable when markets turn to the rebuilding or reemerging phase of the pandemic.

- Consumers are thirsty both to see resumption of full life and to contribute to that. In resurgent markets, brands are now invited to contribute to that resumption for the good of the community. Accepting this invitation is obviously helpful to business.
- In addition, the recovery and rebuilding each market faces will present some businesses with the opportunity to shift to a better way. Perhaps this will be accelerated adoption of on-line in lieu of rebuilding off-line operations, creating an entirely new business to serve the needs of an increasingly remote workforce, or merging two businesses with synergies that arise only as a result of the new world. From a communications perspective these situations can and should be positioned as contributing to the resurgence.
- Caution is again warranted due to the potential for backlash from being interpreted as overindulging in this resurgence without due support for those continuing to struggle to get by. For example, if a new business model results in fewer employees or impacts other supply chain partners, has the company found a way to retrain or support displaced workers? Employee care remains important if not most important, and communications plays an important role that it is perceived as such.

Communications in the markets emerging from coronavirus lockdowns have an opportunity to help businesses unleash their energy on the challenge of reinvigorating our economies. In Asia, we're seeing these dynamics in new ways each day.

Questions to explore on Positivity and Innovation:

1. How does your company contribute to your customers resumption of work and lifestyle?
2. How do you ensure that your employees and business partners who engage your customers project the same positive tone?
3. What shifts in consumer behavior or sentiment create new opportunities for your business?
4. How can you adapt or re-imagine your products, services or marketing to the new normal?
5. Are your consumers listening to new influencers and how does your messaging align to their agenda? Is it responsible?
6. How are you involving your stakeholders to identify, create and drive new innovations?

COMMUNICATING BUSINESS PURPOSE

Long before the coronavirus disrupted the world, business was moving toward a broader definition of its role in society. The pace and magnitude of that shift has always differed between various markets and it has always been a communications challenge for companies that span the globe to articulate their purpose authentically and consistently. The current pandemic has not changed that.

What is changing however is the balance of values and expectations of business in each market. Our research has clearly demonstrated that societal values have been affected around the globe. There will continue to be differences, but it seems clear that this dire moment in history has called social purpose of business into question.

How the question is answered will be driven by the actions businesses take. Communications professionals can help inform those actions with astute listening to and empathy for stakeholders. We can further assist by ensuring the communications convey the positive and innovative contributions a business makes through its response.

Questions to explore on Business Purpose:

1. How has your articulation of your business purpose been impacted by the pandemic?
2. Is there a change in expectation, or a more receptive market to your communication of purpose?
3. What actions can you provide of evidence of the company 'living your values' and alternatively where might you be open to criticism (fair or not) by opposing interests?
4. How can you amplify messaging on business purpose, and will that be well received?

ASIA ADVISORY SUPPORT

FleishmanHillard is working with companies worldwide to manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on businesses' reputations. To assist companies exploring the path to recovery, our senior advisors in Asia as well as our global COVID-19 task force are available to advise on market dynamics, consumer attitudes and expectations, business practices and prevailing sentiments.

Many companies will face brand and product launch revisions where the previous plans no longer align with market realities. Target customers may have been displaced, and new or newly relevant competitors may alter the competitive landscape. From bespoke research in these areas to focused executive workshops to quickly inform and galvanize agreement among company executives, we can explore a variety of approaches to align communications to the new strategic and operational imperatives businesses face.

Whether to provide input to board of directors or senior management decisions, or to support communications heads in prioritizing and bolstering communications strategy, having a robust understanding of these evolving dynamics is vital to support effective recovery and resurgence programs.

For further discussion on these imperatives please contact:

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