

COVID-19 Top 10 Considerations for the Next 90 Days

July 23, 2020

1. The Near-term Impact of the Pandemic.

As COVID-19 infection rates break records daily, companies need to adapt to the pandemic's day-to-day impacts on operations – whether it's an employee testing positive at your location that requires a temporary facility closing or fast-moving government orders to shelter in place.

- a. 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? What might have worked during the outset may not be as relevant today.
- b. Tracking and tracing includes identifying precise locations where infections occur. Do your plans account for your facilities/ locations being referenced as infection venues in news stories and social media?

2. Employees.

Clients tell us they see increased tension around employee health and wellbeing. There are growing employee dynamics ranging from burnout and stress of working at home, managing uncertainty around childcare and back to school issues, to frontline workers adjusting to their new identity as an “essential” worker, and coping with health risks from interacting face-to-face with customers. The shift to remote work, for many workers, has highlighted the ways in which the old normal didn't work for them. In fact, 75% of respondents in a recent TGI survey say that working from home has helped them realize things they were missing before. With the potential for ongoing dramatic changes in their relationship with employees, as well as permanent changes in the workplace, employers are shifting to more collaborative tools like Google Docs and WebEx. They're also looking at new ways of directly communicating with employees, such as performance reviews over video chat and information sharing moving from Intranet to newsletters.

- a. Have you surveyed employees in the last month to truly identify what they need right now? What they expect in the next 12 months?
- b. How are you communicating? Intranet or email? Conference call or video call? Which is most effective?
- c. Have your executives, especially your CEO, been sufficiently present in your communications? How well are you equipping managers to communicate with their teams?
- d. Are you in tune with employee needs and do they vary by role, level or market? What tensions might exist across those designations (employees working from home vs. those on the frontlines)? What about employee needs segmented by outside-of-work designations: parent, caregiver, those concerned with their own health or the health of others in their household?
- e. Are you prepared if your lower-paid essential workforce tries to unionize? Do you have the resources needed to communicate the benefits of your direct relationship?

3. Your Story.

The world is radically different than it was at the beginning of the year. The pandemic and racial inequity focus has shifted consumer expectations for companies. Now, more than ever, companies must better reflect the sentiment of their customers and stakeholders. During a recent survey, 42% of those who responded said companies should show how their corporate values support the values of their communities, customers and employees. It's time to revisit your story and see whether it's still relevant in today's context.

- a. Does your story resonate in today's media landscape?
- b. Have your values served as a resource in responding to recent events? If not, do you need to revisit them?
- c. Have you articulated your rebuild narrative? How have you grown and adapted as an organization?
- d. Have you reviewed stakeholder messaging in context of COVID-19 and racial equity issues?
- e. Have you audited your COVID-19 response to the initial phases of your return-to-workplace and customer-engagement initiatives? What are the lessons learned?
- f. Have you reviewed your efforts in context of your competitors' and considered your best practices for industry awards programs?
- g. Have you considered a new corporate narrative?

4. Media.

COVID-19 and the current social justice movement in the U.S. have dominated traditional and social media over the past several months and media strategies need to include evaluation about what's appropriate to share in the current climate. The trend of smaller newsrooms and reporters doing more with less has accelerated, making it harder than ever to get coverage of your story. In addition, the media and stakeholders are keeping a close eye on what companies are doing to address the current issues, increasingly holding companies accountable and even creating websites that rank corporate actions (such as Did They Help?). Companies not doing the right thing are being publicly called out.

- a. Have you recently evaluated your stakeholders and what they are saying in the news?
- b. Is your list of key media updated and are you tuned into what they are covering? Are there new stakeholders, influencers or media (e.g. TikTok) that you need to evaluate?
- c. Local media relationships and hyper local strategy is growing in significance again. How does this fit into your communications plan?
- d. Does your media monitoring and reporting need to be refreshed? Do your search terms need to be updated to reflect current events?
- e. Do you want to look at hosting a small virtual media event to keep close to your key reporters?

5. Executive Visibility.

Executives are increasingly called on to speak out and act on issues affecting their customers, employees and the communities where they do business. And it should be done with compassion and empathy. Executives who have been successful in drawing attention to issues need to evaluate whether those issues remain relevant in today's environment. Ensure that your executives are engaging in topics of most interest and that drive your brand and reputation forward.

- a. What's your current CEO narrative? Does it need to be reset given economic, social and political environment?
- b. Have you recently reviewed industry event engagement plans and revise based on new and changing event landscape?
- c. With live events and conferences unlikely for the foreseeable future, have you considered conducting media training to ensure executives show up well in virtual events?

6. Today's Politically Charged Environment.

The most recent results from TGI polling show that 73 percent of people in the U.S., and 85 percent across six countries, believe it is important for companies to go beyond mandated regulations and actively work to respond to social issues. Response to COVID-19, availability of health care, racial and gender equity, data privacy and climate change are among the top issues people say are important to them and raise the stakes for client communications.

Even the most basic facts about COVID-19 have become political in nature, where wearing masks could lead to a heated debate. Similarly, sides are polarized regarding Black Lives Matter and the resulting issues surrounding demonstrations. This creates a unique environment that may lead to potential divides among your employees, customers and other stakeholders.

- a. Have you assessed your risk to unintentionally getting caught in the debate around economic outcomes versus health outcomes?
- b. How will you resolve employee disputes about social distancing and wearing masks in the workplace? How will you respond if a customer or visitor refuses to comply with safety measures you've set in place?
- c. Is your social media policy up to date? How would you handle posts from an employee that might offend others? What about posts made by employees before they were hired? What would you do with a post from a customer who is looking to make you part of a political statement?
- d. 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?

7. The Election.

The 2020 presidential election promises to be the most polarizing of our lifetime 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 one’s identity and is largely correlated to the media they consume.

- a. Have you updated your social media policy to reflect the current landscape and new levels of social activism?
- b. Could a candidate visit any of your locations or comment on your actions? If so, have you created a contingency plan?
- c. Have you evaluated how your PAC or candidate donations will be viewed by stakeholders on either side?

8. The Economy.

Expiring programs may significantly impact businesses as expectations for more bankruptcies, furloughs, layoffs, state and local budget pressures and relaxing of grace periods impact the economy, unemployment, and capital markets.

- a. Do you have the right communications plan developed to adequately and empathetically explain rationale for any business decisions that could be considered a sign of a deteriorating economy?
- b. Do you have the right social media monitoring in place to quickly identify negative sentiment of former employees, business partners or other stakeholders when expanded benefits expire on July 31 and we reach an “income cliff?”

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 up to date and relevant with the latest potential scenarios is critical.

- a. 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?
- b. 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. 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
- b. Take a fresh look at your communications team and functions, determining whether you have the right fit for key roles.
- c. Conduct a culture assessment to determine how well your organization is living its values and beliefs, 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.