NAVIGATING COVID-19

Our thinking and counsel to help navigate the communications imperatives during the COVID-19 crisis
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Dear friends

In Asia, SARS caught us by surprise back in 2003. Masks. Temperature checks. Lift buttons coated hourly in fresh plastic film. Hand sanitizers big, small, on the wall. Working away from the office at a moment’s notice. Shifts so sudden and surreal. Just as swiftly, that fast-tracked uptake became fixtures in our lives ever after. Lessons are earned. Habits change. Contingency strategies multiply. SARS is just one of the jags that have abruptly paused Asia’s steady hum of progress over the past 20-plus years I’ve been blessed to live here.

Yet, however staggering, nothing compares to what everyone everywhere is experiencing now. The impact to life, livelihoods, businesses, economies is unimaginable. In the face of it, people the world over are meeting this crisis with incredible grit and resilience, especially in Asia.

While dealing with the unfiltered reality of the situation, there’s every reason to look to the future with optimism. The outlook may be wildly uncertain, but it’s not out of our control. In fact, there is much we can do to chart what the future holds for success and happiness.

Necessity is still the mother of invention. I believe we are on the threshold of the greatest wave of creativity and humanity the world has ever seen. We will emerge stronger in more ways than we know; some to be discovered later in life. As a mother, I already see my children gaining resourcefulness, independence, and self-awareness through this experience, far beyond their years. Less rush-rush running around has given us the gift of time to focus and connect more deeply. Even though we have to keep our distance, I’ve never felt closer to family, friends and colleagues than now.

As a leader of a network in Asia poised to address the weighty issues and demands of change when the stakes are high, we’re busy doing what we do best -- strategic communications that matter -- with our heads and our hearts, in service to corporates, governments and society. Our crisis, issues, public affairs and reputation teams have been in perpetual overdrive. Front burners are crowded with employee and stakeholder communications of every kind. Our healthcare sector experts are answering calls around the clock from growing needs and opportunities to address public safety and well-being solutions. We continue to partner with governments on new initiatives and field the onslaught of media enquiries at the pace of epic changes.

All the while, a number of our top advisors have also made the time to impart their expert points of view to help our clients and communities contemplate ‘what now’ and ‘what next’. Feedback from these series of articles, blogs, webinars and panel sessions has been so positive, we decided to compile them here for you to reference. We hope you find them inspiring and useful and will pass them on, too.

As always, please let us know how we can help you. And remember, despite wearing masks, we still see it in each other’s eyes when we smile.

Take care, stay safe and strong.

Lynne Anne Davis
President & Senior Partner, Asia Pacific
A ONE WORLD CRISIS

Chinese Consumers Show All-Critical Resilience on the Road to Recovery

“May you live in interesting times”

“May you live in interesting times” is purportedly an old Chinese curse used ironically to indicate times of trouble. For me – and I suspect for many comms professionals – the COVID-19 pandemic potentially represents the most “interesting” project of a lifetime – both personally and professionally.

From a Hong Kong perspective, it was interesting to see how rapidly people in early February united in the fight against the virus, coming off the back of six months of civil unrest. The muscle memory from SARS 17 years earlier was quickly activated, with the masks coming out en masse almost instantly and the rules of social distancing etiquette dusted off with barely a blink of the eye.

Today, schools are still out but most businesses are endeavoring to find some mode of normality – either at their workplace or WFH. Brands are on to the next phase with questions like: When do we return to the market? And what tonality and channel is appropriate? There is recognition that full economic recovery is not likely in the near-term, but a cautious optimism that rebuilding may now be possible. There is also a realization that there will be setbacks as the virus takes hold for a second wave. But Hong Kongers are known for resilience and this pragmatic fighting spirit is probably why its COVID-19 numbers are still relatively low, despite the city’s density. Long may it last.

Globally, the road to recovery will not be a straight line so resilience will be critical. And it’s not just physical resilience but emotional as well. Nurturing this mental resilience will place a significant demand on leaders to paint a realistic picture while continuing to inspire hope. New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Adern is winning plaudits globally for her ability to reassure New Zealanders while making it clear what needs to be done to fight the virus. Another leader gaining praise for her courageous decisions is London Breed, San Francisco’s mayor, who declared a state of emergency in late February – earlier than her counterparts on the East Coast. This decision, which was politically unpopular...
the time, is being heralded now as the reason for San Francisco’s flattening curve.

Employers should take note of these leaders’ strategies – as well as China’s “road to recovery” transition approach – as they start to consider back to work options. They should plan not only for ways to minimize health and safety risks for their employees but also provide them with realistic perspectives of the future, while recognizing that so many unknowns continue to exist. It will be a tough balancing act but those who do it best will be well-placed to reopen, reposition and reimagine in whatever recovery scenario they find themselves in.

So, what are cultural differences – and similarities – in global consumer sentiment as people grapple with the reality of this virus and what new restrictions on their lifestyle really mean? First, the similarities.

View of the world, their country and companies

According to a six-country study just released by FleishmanHillard’s TRUE Global Intelligence (TGI) COVID-19 Mindset: How Pandemic Times Are Shaping Global Consumers, the virus, in a few short weeks for some markets, has changed consumers’ view of the work, our country and companies as employers. It has upended our world views, reshaping our perceptions, behaviors, values and societies. In China, this is also true with 87% of people saying their view of the world had changed and 86% saying their view of their country had changed.

Belief in government and schools

The study revealed that consumers globally are most impressed with the response of government and schools (59% and 41% respectively) and least impressed with major corporates and employers (37% and 33% respectively). Chinese consumers had most faith in their government and local schools – 79% and 67% respectively. They also had more faith in employers than other markets, although they still rated them the lowest at 58%.

However, there are differences in attitudes and perspectives.

Chinese consumers trust each other more

According to the TGI study, Chinese consumers trust each other as individuals more with 61% believing their fellow individuals are doing “excellent” or “great” in fulfilling their role in this crisis. This is far above the global average of 34%. However, while they trust each other, they do not think their current environment is conducive to major life decisions such as adopting a pet or having a baby. Ten percent of Chinese consumers said they were postponing adopting a pet because of the virus, more than the global average of 5%. In addition, 11% of Chinese consumers also said they were postponing having children, the second-highest group after South Korea at 28%.

Chinese consumers are also eager to get back to some semblance of normal

This perhaps is not surprising as the China government has been encouraging “back to work” since the end of February, a month after the virus really started to grip the nation. The TGI study revealed fewer Chinese consumers were practicing social distancing (44% versus global average of 74%), fewer postponing or cancelling medical or dental appointments (18% versus global average of 37%) and fewer not leaving the house except for necessities (48% versus global average of 74%).
BEYOND THE PANDEMIC
HOW TO POSITION BRANDS FOR THE NEW NORMAL

Here in the Philippines and beyond, we’ve entered uncharted territory. As COVID-19 continues its spread across the world, many brands still find themselves not knowing exactly what to do. Many are confused and are virtually walking on eggshells. Questions abound on whether releasing an article or social content will be seen as opportunistic or be perceived as virtue-signalling. And while a lot of brands would rather err on the side of caution, many are also diving head-first into coronavirus-related content, sometimes with disastrous and cringe-inducing results.

In these hard-to-fathom times, it’s worth noting that the audience is rapt and have nowhere to go. They are glued to every move any brand or personality is making right now and are taking mental notes. More so in a country like the Philippines, where its citizens spend an average of 10 hours on the internet and which has been dubbed the social media capital of the world, brands have an opportunity to make an impact to a largely captive audience.

But how can brands ensure that what they do now will build towards more brand love? How can they avoid being perceived in a negative light? Here are some ideas that can help recalibrate and fine-tune brand messaging while the world settles into a New Normal.

**Audit**

This is a good time to assess the situation and measure the health of the brand. FleishmanHillard’s Authenticity Gap methodology is a great barometer that can help brands and companies understand and proactively manage the gap between audiences’ expectations and actual experiences with the product or service. This allows for rich results which organizations can use to create and strengthen true relationships with audiences and authentic engagements that result in opportunities.

Now that stakes have ramped up and audience priorities and expectations have shifted, how can brands and companies evolve to meet these changing needs? There are many tools now available that give insight as to what audiences think and say online. Social listening, for one, can help shine a light on online chatter about particular brands, personalities, and topics—including competitors of brands. Does the audience agree with what the brand is communicating? If this can be measured, it can be managed.

Alignment between what a brand says and what its audience experiences have to be solidified and strengthened. Misalignments can give competitors an opportunity to take advantage and gain a lead, for untruths to define the brand narrative, and for crises to happen more frequently. In the Philippines where slip-ups become magnified in mere seconds and where the audience is more sophisticated than ever, this relationship presents an even greater importance. By aligning the brand and its reputation in a way that is grounded in its values, it ensures that business is managed through all
of today’s social currents. Values are important—the more aligned a brand’s values are to their communications, the easier it will be to build and strengthen and protect reputation. The closer this gap is bridged, the more authentically the communications, the easier it will be to build and the more aligned a brand’s values are to their values to be juxtaposed with the pulse of the apart world, one strategic opportunity for brands to seize is how they can still provide authentic human connections.

Connect After auditing and building, brands can then focus on connecting. In this increasingly stay-apart world, one strategic opportunity for brands to seize is how they can still provide authentic human connections.

With more Filipinos spending time online and consuming videos, it is only right that video content become one of the ways to engage with a brand’s target. But not all videos will make it through. If TikTok is any measure, the attention span most people can spend on video content is now counted in a mere seconds, rather than minutes. Something brands must then remember is that their video content must show more than it tells.

Videos fail to engage because many creators do not take into account that there is an opportunity to converse with their audience and not just tell a story from their point of view. Successful video content does not just speak from a place of truth nor merely take opportunity of social relevance—they also give an opportunity for the audience to participate and provide feedback. Those who spend a lot of time on YouTube know this all too well: the channels audiences go back to again and again feature content that is not just talking down to an audience, these channels allow for rich engagement through comments and sharing.

There are many ways for brands and companies to take advantage of video, apart from many video editing apps being intuitive and easy-to-use. Depending on the platform and the objective, videos can run the gamut of educational to entertaining, informative to illustrative, much more so than static posts and captions.

As simple as A-B-C

These are unchartered and scary times and it is completely understandable for many marketers and brand stewards to feel at a loss on what to do next. But hopefully these steps provide some guidance on what to do in the interim so that they can look beyond the pandemic and find a guiding light at the end of this tunnel.

What can definitely be concluded is that the world will continue to change and as evidenced by almost everybody in it adapting quickly to the change forced upon them, it is not as difficult to adapt along with it as previously thought. As long as brands remain agile and flexible, in-tune with their audiences and stakeholders, and guided by their brand truth, successful communications can continue to be planned for and achieved.
Lest We Forget: Learning the Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis

While it may be too soon to talk about recovery, we will return to Business As Usual (BAU) from COVID-19, whatever form that BAU may take. So it is the right time to be capturing the lessons learned from this unprecedented global event for the next time we are faced with a crisis.

Every company has a Business Continuity Plan (BCP), right? Perhaps not. Research suggests that up to a third of companies globally still don’t have a BCP. For those that do have them, they would take reference and tell everyone – staff, customers, suppliers – that they have a specific BCP. For those that do have them, they would take reference and tell everyone – staff, customers, suppliers – that they have a specific BCP. For those that do have them, they would take reference and tell everyone – staff, customers, suppliers – that they have a specific BCP. For those that do have them, they would take reference and tell everyone – staff, customers, suppliers – that they have a specific BCP. For those that do have them, they would take reference and tell everyone – staff, customers, suppliers – that they have a specific BCP.

A strong BCP would specifically rule out a management team physically coming together to meet and agree the company’s response to COVID-19, instead opting for virtual meetings and decision-making. For those strong-minded teams that insist on meeting in person, the consequences can often lead to even slower and ineffective responses.

In one actual case of this happening, the President of a large organisation was admitted to the local infectious diseases ward with a high temperature the day after meeting his team. The management, while waiting on the results of the President’s tests, had to self-isolate too. In the end, the tests were negative, and a bad curry was named as the culprit. The lesson was learned, but almost the hard way.

While BCPs focus on keeping a business running or getting back up and running again after an incident, even the best BCP does not concern itself with the important art of reputation management.

Yet again, surveys show that between 30% and 50% of companies globally do not have even the most basic Crisis Communication Playbook. They are totally unprepared.

Of those that do have Playbooks, research tells us that only a third run drills to simulate potential crises and often these simulations are box-ticking exercises rather than a real test of management’s ability to respond and lead in a crisis. On-the-job learning can be a real career-defining challenge.

Now is the time to capture the lessons from COVID-19 and build that BCP, that Crisis Communication Playbook and commit to running simulations around other highly probable crises, such as a cyber breach. A modern Crisis Communication Playbook is also built around the power and opportunity offered by technology and social media.

It was recently suggested to a global manufacturing company that the CEO go on video to talk to the workforce, to offer support, compassion and, more importantly, confidence that the company would come through the situation, while prioritising the health and safety of their staff. This would add to the power and authenticity of the company’s commitment and message.

Two members of the management sniffed that their factory floor workers don’t have access to computers, so we needed to stay with emails, notices and posters for the noticeboard. They added that their sales representatives are always on-the-road and are infrequently in the office.

The modern-day obvious response is that everyone has a mobile phone, with WhatsApp/WeChat/Telegram/Yammer and many other platforms offering the opportunity to reach all employees in real-time in various ways, including by video.

In other types of crises (earthquakes, tsunamis and other natural disasters) these technologies can allow companies to account for staff. As a side note, even in poor areas of regions in Africa, where people are lacking basic services and are malnourished, they still have mobile phones. People march to their own beat.

Everyone is on social media and accustomed to consuming visual information, so the challenge for companies is to use infographics around the issue and videos of the company leaders talking about it. This is a far more powerful way of management teams presenting themselves as being authentic in their care for staff and their families.

The COVID-19 issue demanded that companies focus on internal communications, internal communications, internal communications – and only then other stakeholders. In times of fear and uncertainty, communicate regularly but not always from the CEO – cascading communications through team supervisors remains very powerful.

Another key learning is to centralise decision-making on policies and outgoing communication and enforce it – you can’t have managers telling their staff in their office/geography that they can do something different to company-wide policy (such as travel for business when the rest of the company is not).

Employees will have lots of questions and one central body needs to be reviewing and answering them – for all company employees to see and understand. Listening also remains a critical skill to understanding the motivation, worries and agendas of your key stakeholders.

The final lesson is that while people crave BAU and want to return to work, we cannot become complacent. We are seeing in parts of Asia already, even though the crisis is not over, that there is a second wave underway (imported cases), and who can rule out a third wave?

If people are to return to their communities soon – their work community and their social community – both business and society need to be alert, responsive and precise now. Nobody wants the reputation of having done too little when it truly mattered.

Brian West
Global Managing Director,
Crisis Management - A.R.C.
The current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic crisis has held Thailand and the whole world captive. The overall impact of the pandemic continues to evolve across a range of health consequences, economic effects, political exposure, and personal concerns reflecting social impact and family concerns. Should current trends continue, companies and organizations will need to plan accordingly for a variety of scenarios representing escalations in this situation.

The 5 Crisis Communications Considerations during the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

1. **Take a stakeholder-centric approach.**

2. **Defer to global and local authorities, and do not underestimate the situation.**

3. **Use values, empathy, and accountability as decision-making guides.**

4. **Accept imperfect information. Decide quickly and communicate clearly.**

5. **Recognize the potential for complications and opposition.**

**Vaccine 1: Take a stakeholder-centric approach**

When communicating during this ongoing outbreak, companies must understand the diverse, and sometimes conflicting, needs and concerns of their stakeholders. These stakeholder groups include employees, contractors, customers, partner organizations, local communities, public health authorities, community leaders, policymakers, and others.

**Vaccine 2: Defer to global and local authorities, and do not underestimate the situation**

Because this situation is bigger than any one organization or institution; Companies should embrace the reality that everyone is facing this situation together. International, national, and local health authorities, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Public Health Ministry, Department of Disease Control, the Cabinet, the Government, and any strategic announcement can be relied upon for the most accurate and up-to-date guidance on how companies and individuals can prevent potential infections.

**Vaccine 3: Use values, empathy, and accountability as decision-making guides**

As in any situation that puts the interests of an organization and its constituencies at risk, values are a critical element of decision making. More than ever before, organizations are expected to operate with a sense of purpose, balancing the interests of all stakeholders. It is important for management teams to demonstrate empathy and accountability as they make decisions that will potentially affect health and economic outcomes.

**Vaccine 4: Accept imperfect information. Decide quickly and communicate clearly**

Inconsistent, delayed, inaccurate, contradictory information has been and will continue to be, a characteristic of this situation. Clarify your organization’s decision-making process and participants, with local, regional, and global grants of authority. It is often true that communications needs drive management’s choices in critical situations. However, beware of fake news, or rumor during the rush of decision making, as the consequences could be adding panic to the already constant uncertain situation. Anticipate that the demand for information and announcements about changes in travel policy, operational schedules, sick day and family leave policies and other developments that affect the Business Continuity Plan will compress decisions.

**Vaccine 5: Recognize the potential for complications and opposition**

Even though humanity is “all in this together” in the face of this new global health threat, some opponents or special interests will take advantage or act defensively. For example, organized labor unions may wish to speak directly to the public on behalf of your employees’ health risks. Competitors may spread rumors about your supply chain or service capacity. Business partners or governments in affected locations may disagree with your characterization of their situation or health response. Where possible, consider previewing communications with other parties in the spirit of cooperation. If not, at least play out the potential reaction of your traditional opponents or other interested parties. How can what you are saying be taken the wrong way or out of context? Don’t make it easier for them.

Sophis Kasemsahasin
Senior Vice President & Partner, General Manager, Thailand

As one of the global leading communications agencies, FleishmanHillard is advising clients in several major industry sectors on how to evaluate expectations and communicate in this evolving global situation. Through a ‘COVID-19 Crisis Communication Taskforce’, its crisis counselors from more than 80 offices around the world have continuously updated their clients with updates and recommendation on the ever-changing situation. FleishmanHillard Thailand’s Senior Vice President, Partner and GM, Sophis Kasemsahasin urges companies to take on these five strategic vaccines for their Crisis Communications.
The Power of Sport
Can Move the World Even in the Dark Times

2020 was supposed to be a big year for sports. With the coming of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, and the two-year countdown to the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games, the mass sports market in Asia was developing at a particularly rapid pace. But the outbreak of COVID-19 delivered a hard blow to this expanding market, and that hit is now being felt around the world as the global sports industry experiences firsthand the impact of the virus.

However, as China becomes the first to shift to the recovery phase, we see that COVID-19 has also propelled the local sports industry to new levels of innovation, cultivating what may be a new era in sport and signaling what could come next for the rest of the world.

While there is much that remains unknown about whether China’s experience with the novel coronavirus will be replicated in other countries, there are also good learnings that will be universal and inspiring to sports business leaders and marketers today.

1. Home fitness as the new lifestyle in response to “social distancing”
In the midst of China’s months-long quarantine, home fitness has become a social phenomenon. Fitness applications and online fitness content platforms grew incrementally. The popular social platform Sina Weibo released a number of social topics such as “home fitness plan” and “home fitness sports award”, encouraging people to do sports with their families and share home sport videos. Led by Olympic champions, celebrities and fitness enthusiasts, the campaign created a trend in China and these topics achieved a total reach of more than 2 billion on Weibo.

2. An explosion of online sports content consumption
Also due to the quarantine, both the number of daily active internet users and average time spent daily online reached record highs. Inspired by this increase in online consumption, traditional sports enterprises in China have actively embraced digital solutions to reach their audiences. As a result, China has seen an uptick in online sports engagement and spend – both by the younger generation and the super-aging population.

3. Sporting goods and apparel brands turn to “Social Commerce”
To make up for losses in bricks-and-mortar sales, sporting goods and apparel retailers have recalibrated their efforts around a retail strategy that digitizes their marketing operations around e-commerce solutions. In addition to focusing on efforts to boost sales via traditional e-commerce channels like Alibaba-owned Taobao Live, sports retailers are stepping up their game within social media livestreams, turning them into opportunities for e-commerce traffic and sales.

This is supported by innovations from social media platforms. For example, Tencent launched a live audio and video broadcasting tool for WeChat Official Account (OA), leveraging its WeChat fanbases, to drive e-commerce sales. Without having to download the App, consumers can just click the mini-program in the brand’s official WeChat OA to push subscription and watch ByteDance’s Douyin (known as TikTok globally) launched the “Cloud Shopping” project, providing one billion live streaming views from the platform and zero cost for brands to insert their shopping cart function. The e-commerce feature in the app also allows users to participate in the challenge and buy products related to sponsored brands.

Among the new users of these social e-commerce apps, the proportion of the middle-aged and elderly increased the most and users from lower-tier cities also expanded greatly.

The impact of COVID-19 on the global sports industry as a whole is as yet unknown, but this crisis also puts forward a new direction for sports brands and business, ultimately spurring the sports economy to innovate further and faster.

A month ago, FleishmanHillard client TOKYO SKYTREE sent good vibes to Wuhan, China and the Chinese people via a special lighting display from the world’s highest broadcasting tower, with the blue light symbolizing “hope the epidemic will end soon” and the red light to cheer for China. People in China appreciate this friendship with Japan. I hope to pass on this blessing and support.

Writing this from home and sending some positive vibes #StayInspired.
Business Continuity Planning and Communications during Critical Moments

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) at the start of 2020 has been a harsh reminder of the importance of being prepared for unexpected crises, and how interconnected our world is today.

As companies across the globe respond to this epidemic and implement practical measures to avoid business disruptions, communications professionals have an essential role to play both in supporting business continuity and ensuring organizations can survive both the current crisis as well as other potential crises.

The novel coronavirus is a rapidly changing situation. While the full extent of the tragic loss of life and global threat is not fully understood yet, some indicators give us reason to hope the crisis will soon recede.

As the crisis continues across the world, the safety of employees, customers and the community must be the priority. But every organization has to manage and prepare for the operational and financial risks that could be associated with any sustained disruption to supply chains and their markets caused by an epidemic.

Being informed and aware of possible scenarios, the broader implications of an epidemic and devising new communications strategies is a practical step to prepare during uncertain times. Some organizations can draw on the hard-earned lessons from similar crises caused by deadly illnesses such as SARS in 2003 and the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, or natural disasters such as Typhoon Mangkhut.

What these past crises have taught all of us is that preparation is essential, and we can never be complacent.

As we react to the current coronavirus crisis and implement our crisis management plans, it is essential to simultaneously review all our crisis management and business continuity planning by focussing on communications in the following areas:

- Re-evaluate crisis management plans
  When a crisis occurs, there is a danger of operating solely in reactive crisis mode and becoming too focussed on immediate issues. Now is the time to plan and consider new scenarios.
  Is the existing crisis preparedness and management strategy working for both external and internal communications? What needs to change and which new scenarios should be considered in light of the current crisis?
  It’s important to be vigilant and reassess previous crisis scenarios as plans may now be outdated or need to consider the impact of the current crisis. How will you plan an extended or changing crisis or for recovery after the crisis has receded?

- Review stakeholder communications
  Now is a good time to refresh any existing stakeholder mapping to get a clearer picture so you can identify priorities and tailor messages to each group of audiences. It is important to update plans and communicate effectively with stakeholders, by listening and responding to their issues and concerns.
  Are you able to address customers’ concerns about current and future operations? Will you be able to fulfil regulatory requirements, especially any new regulations? Meanwhile, as the situation evolves and changes it is still important keep business partners fully informed about pre-arranged meetings, events and commitments.

- Maintain employee communications
  During a crisis, regular communications with all employees help maintain morale and ensure business continuity. It’s natural for people to feel concerned and isolated, especially when working from home, so it is more important than ever to communicate with team members well and often.
  Smartphones and apps come into their own for instant communications during a crisis, but also give us all access to a sometimes overwhelming number of rumours and fake news. Make sure you amplify correct information and advice from government and public health bodies to counteract fake news and reassure and empower employees.

- Become more agile
  Just as necessity is the mother of invention, being agile and flexible during a crisis could be the key to survival.
  Because agile models emphasize local knowledge and a lack of bureaucracy, they can empower more people in an organization to resolve problems and find solutions rather than relying on top-down decisions. Good communication planning can support and amplify an agile approach to business.
  By working together, we can overcome any challenge. And by being proactive, communications professionals can enable organizations to respond effectively, ensure business continuity and continue to support employees, serve clients, customers and stakeholders so we can all look forward to recovery.

Patrick Yu
Senior Vice President & Partner
General Manager, Hong Kong
COVID-19 IS A GAME-CHANGER FOR THE PR INDUSTRY AS RAPIDLY SHIFTING LANDSCAPE PRESENTS NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Rumors of the death of news have been greatly exaggerated. Really? Following a week in which two of Asia’s highest-profile finance sector magazines were effectively shut down, and many other publications announced furloughs, pay cuts and layoffs?

Print newspapers and magazines have been reinventing themselves for the better part of two decades against an ever-growing onslaught of digital alternatives. That’s nothing new, as those of us who once made a living from the journalism profession are all too aware. But the shrinkage and shuttering of media outlets whose presence is primarily online marks the crossing of a Rubicon: It’s not only print media that’s feeling the squeeze, but digital media, too.

Does this mean an earned coverage boon for public relations professionals? Hardly. It’s difficult to get an adulatory corporate interview or a client puff piece published in any media outlet whose editorial budget is at breaking point or bust altogether.

Content vs. coronavirus

But one interesting effect of the COVID-19 pandemic that shouldn’t be overlooked is the fact that even though media outlets are struggling financially – online as well as in print – consumption of media content overall is on the rise.

This shouldn’t come as much of a surprise, really: social distancing, lockdowns and the closure of entertainment venues means people are stuck at home with little but each other – and the devices through which they consume media content – for company.

The mainstream media has not disappeared – nor will it – but its ongoing and increasing displacement by media outlets that do not rely primarily on advertisers that take flight at falling circulation figures, media that in fact thrive on such terrible events as pandemics, which keep consumers glued to their mobile devices, presents PR professionals with a clear sign of where they should be focusing their attention: mobile-friendly media in general, and social media in particular.

New norms, tighter targets

These changes are likely to persist even after the current pandemic abates. And the media developments to which they have given rise should show PR firms that it is no longer sufficient to unload in the same old way on the reporters upon whom they have traditionally relied.

PR pitches will need to be more targeted, as the pool of mainstream media attention becomes harder to attract, the bar for coverage is set higher, and exclusive stories become ever-more critical as the means by which such media outlets seek to differentiate themselves from the cacophony of voices in the social media sphere.

For these pillars of the traditional media landscape, getting the right news angle into PR pitches will mean everything. And, increasingly, so too will it for the unstoppably expanding universe of social media as its users become every bit discerning as the print and mainstream media consumers upon whom the industry once relied upon to support its business model.

Reaching reporters

The tools PR practitioners use to reach journalists will also require rethinking. Traditional press releases and interviews could usefully be augmented by blogs and short briefs sent to reporters, likely more often, so the drumbeat of reportable news is ever-present.

Opportunity knocks

And PR professionals’ quest for paid, earned, shared and owned media should exclude no opportunity without a compelling reason to do so.

The transformation we are witnessing in the media environment in which we operate may appear intimidating, but it presents the PR industry with opportunities entirely of its own. Change always includes an element of fear; success entails responding to fear with faith in new ways of conquering the challenges change presents.

Padaric Convery
Vice President, Hong Kong
A crisis tends to bring out both the good and the bad in society. Both traditional and social media in the US is, as always, fascinated with the bad. Empty shelves and grocery store fights over toilet rolls. Spiking unemployment figures, falling share prices and failing small businesses on every block. The struggle to contain the pandemic is also opening a new political front in the conflict between Republican governors resisting statewide action, and many of the largest urban areas, led by Democrats, moving aggressively to limit economic and social activity.

However, amidst the constant 24/7 stream of bad news, there is a growing realization that we’re all in this together, regardless of politics, geography or social status. We’re seeing an outpouring of small acts of kindness throughout America. Neighbors lending a helping hand. Communities coming together.

They don’t make front-page news, but they are certainly there. And amongst the confusion CEOs stepped up and shaped the narrative. They led the way in ensuring the health and safety of their employees and customers weeks before federal government took action. They’ve communicated with empathy and transparency.

As we come out of the crisis, business leaders in the US will play a critical role in reordering and rewriting the social contract between business and society, and building a more resilient economic system for the next crisis. Smart organizations are already learning from the lessons of the last couple weeks – and preparing to emerge stronger and more competitive than before.

“The lack of European solidarity poses a mortal danger to the European Union,” warned Jacques Delors last week. The words are harsh, but no less accurate as the current crisis can make or break the future of the European project.

From an EU-wide perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic has reopened old divisions around fiscal and economic solidarity. The most severely hit countries, Italy, Spain and France, are calling for a bailout fund but the northern hawks, Germany and the Netherlands, have proven very reluctant so far. The pandemic also put into sharp relief Europe’s economic exposure to third countries, likely making relicoralisation of strategic industry value chains a top priority post-crisis.

If strong language has been exchanged between heads of state and government, the solidarity test is also hardly felt by Europe’s populations. Italians, first and hardest hit so far, feel abandoned and even unfairly treated by their European neighbours, which may question the future of their EU membership. However, at national level solidarity is quickly being organized and companies are playing their part, mobilising their expertise and scale to support communities.

As most sectors of the economy are focused on how to survive, the EU institutions, while dealing with the crisis, also attempt to further their political roadmap, prioritising the climate agenda. This means advocacy and communications activities continue but must constantly adapt their tone, timing and tactics to a fast-changing situation.

Since most predict that the peak of the pandemic remains ahead of us, the test for European solidarity has probably just started and we are still to determine what the new normal will look like post-crisis.
After India’s entire 1.3 billion population was told to stay at home on the 25 March, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reached a previously unimaginable scenario:

One in four human beings on this planet are currently cut off from all but essential social contact.

Apart from one kind.

While social media has always been a medium that enhanced our global connectivity, the last few weeks have seen it elevated to the principal form of social contact available to isolated individuals and global companies alike.

So how can organisations leverage the power of social to continue their work and communicate with stakeholders in these challenging times?

Review
To establish an appropriate tone across channels, it is important to acknowledge the micro pictures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Content should remain focused on stakeholders, not the brand. We are living through a global emergency that threatens the individual lives and livelihoods of real people who could be your customers or employees.

As a starting point, review any ongoing or upcoming content calendars and think about the help (relevant resources or services), information (reliable education and tips) and leadership (confidence and inspiration) your organisation can deliver through social content.

And don’t forget to provide hope by continuing to celebrate people, whether it’s commending employees or highlighting external stories.

For paid advertising, check the tone is not too salesman-like, or if ads are no longer relevant because of company closures. Remember, as long as you sense-check everything for tone-deafness, not all of your content has to be related to COVID-19.

Adapt
As influencers take on roles as extra household members, consider whether your brand could pivot towards influencer trends borne out of our new living situations (fitness, cooking, entertainment etc.). Executive leadership carries perhaps more importance than ever as stakeholders look for reassurance. Make sure you modify planned strategies to address the matter at hand to remain direct and transparent.

If you’ve had to cancel events, social provides a multitude of alternatives. From simple options such as blog posts or live Twitter chats, to live streaming webinars on Facebook and LinkedIn, explore which digital format is right for the content. With the right strategy you could speak to an even larger audience than the planned in-person event.

Listen
While this situation presents opportunities on social, it also presents pitfalls. When working with a medium that can move at lightening pace, developing risk mitigation protocol is paramount. For instance, your organisation has a responsibility rather than an option to defer to global health authorities on stats, facts and medical advice. Engage daily social listening practices if possible. Evaluate how your audience is reacting to both your and others’ content to locate the seeds of crises before they happen.

Listen to the individual voices of your audiences, too. Community managers should help where they can help. When it’s not possible, avoid opportunism. Genuine empathy and honesty will be valued by users.

Above all, remain flexible with every aspect of your work.

As the situation changes hour-by-hour, social strategies should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are meeting their underlying objective: to authentically communicate with and support stakeholders through this period of unprecedented instability.
KEEP IN TOUCH

Navigating COVID-19: A Test of Reputation and Reality

FleishmanHillard is closely monitoring developments related to the coronavirus in all markets. As our Recovery and Resurgence practice counselors around the world are supporting clients with questions and preparations for ongoing response to the COVID-19 situation, we are sharing best practices, resources, the latest information and opportunities for companies, organizations and brands from around the global FleishmanHillard network at this [page].

Our ongoing thought leadership and news can be found here:

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