

Research on COVID-19 Communications

March 24, 2020

Below is a compilation of research by large PR firms around the country about communicating about the pandemic. Valuable tips here on what to say and how to say it.

Executive Summary

- Americans are taking this epidemic seriously, especially high earners and Millennials. The youngest and oldest are least worried.
 - The vast majority are taking precautions to protect themselves.
- People are worried about losing their job or making less money.
 - As a result, they are changing their life plans, such as delaying having a baby or getting married, as well as putting off major purchases.
- Employees expect their employers to do what they can to take care of them, like:
 - Keeping the workplace clean/sanitized.
 - Accommodating remote working.
 - Implementing reasonable leave policies.
 - Cancelling non-essential events.
 - Banning business travel.
 - Preventing at-risk employees from coming to work.
 - Letting them know if a co-worker is sick (without identifying the person).
- They also expect employers to keep them informed.
 - Most importantly, they want to hear from their employer at least daily about this issue – even if there is nothing to report. They want to be assured company leadership is on top of this issue.
 - Confidence in employers by employees is much greater when company leaders communicate regularly about the crisis.
 - And they want the message to come from the CEO.
 - The trust their employer more than any other institution to tell them the truth about COVID-19.
- Low-income employees see their employer as less prepared.

- National and international health organizations, such as the CDC, NIH and WHO, are most trusted sources of information on COVID-19.
 - People heavily rely on national news media for information, but do not trust it, with a majority feeling the seriousness of the crisis is being exaggerated – even though most also fear contracting the virus. Mostly, people are confused and scared.
- Most believe U.S. institutions are prepared to deal with COVID-19.
 - They see local and state governments as more prepared than the federal government.
 - They have faith in the preparedness of the health care system.
 - They feel their local school system is least prepared.
 - They are divided on how prepared business is.
 - They want to see business and government team up to address the problem.
- The most effective messaging focuses on how one's actions affect others.

Communications Insights from Page Up

March 9, 2020

- Some employees, and some in the general public, **think corporations are overreacting** in their response to the coronavirus threat.
- CDC [published interim guidelines for companies](#) dealing with potential infections, aimed at **avoiding stigmatizing or discriminating against employees** when determining risks. “Do not make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin,” the report states, “and be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed COVID-19.”
- Remote working under quarantine, or as part of an office closure, can be [disruptive and lonely](#). Companies should **consider platforms that help workers connect with each other**, share advice on telecommuting and to check in with each other regularly.
- **Cybersecurity is a risk factor** with people working from many locations, including public areas. Employees need to be reminded about protocols for protecting information.
- Culture should be top of mind from the beginning. If remote working becomes more widespread over a long period of time, it will become a greater challenge to **maintain values and connection to the company’s mission and purpose**.
- **Communications should be regular**, even if only to report there is no meaningful new information, so that employees are not left waiting for news.
- No matter how often you repeat information, messages take time to sink in. Don’t be afraid to **repeat obvious guidance** so employees will make good decisions.

APCO Worldwide COVID-19 Research: Week 1

March 5, 2020

- **Most Americans view coronavirus as being serious**, with a majority worried about contracting the virus.
- **Highest-income Americans see coronavirus as most serious**.
- The **national news media is the leading source** of information about COVID-19 (58%).
- **Employers are among the least common sources** of COVID-19 information now (8%), on par with the White House (10%).
- The American public is **already taking action and generally willing to make sacrifices** to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- **Employers are seen doing things** to address the spread of COVID-19 by a 3:2 margin.
- The most common **expectations workers have of their employers** is that they **provide sanitation materials** (47%) and **instructions about precautions** (43%).
- Only about a quarter of workers **expect to hear messages from company leaders** (27%) related to COVID-19.

APCO Worldwide COVID-19 Research: Week 2

March 13, 2020

- **Millennial Americans are the most worried** about contracting COVID-19, with **younger and older citizens expressing notably less concern.**
 - Just 29% of those under 25 years old said they are “extremely” or “very” worried and only 24% of those 65 years old and over feeling these levels of concern.
 - Whereas 56% of millennials (those aged 25–44) are worried about contracting the virus.
- Most people **believe U.S. institutions are prepared** to respond to COVID-19, but **businesses are viewed as least prepared.**
- 56% of people will begin to **save more in preparation for wage or job loss** in 2020.
 - Employment matters are mixed, with most **neither more nor less likely to change their retirement plans** (44%) or **look for a job** (36%).
 - Long-term life decisions are being impacted too, with nearly half of relevant respondents saying they will **delay plans to have a baby** (46%) or **get married** (45%).
- 57% of Americans are **stockpiling household supplies**, and 53% are **putting off major purchases** in 2020.
- **American businesses** are seen as institutions that are the **least prepared** for COVID-19 (58%). They are also more likely to be seen as **doing what is good for their own business** (53%) **than what is good for their employees** (11%).
- **Lower income and part-time workers generally feel their employer is less well-prepared** to support alternative work arrangements to respond to COVID-19.
 - Only one in five of those earning \$50,000 or less (20%) and part-time (18%) workers see their employers as “extremely” or “very” prepared with technology that enables flexible or remote work.
 - Contrasted by three in four of those earning more than \$150,000 (75%) and half of full-time (53%) workers.
- Despite skepticism in business preparedness and motivations in general, **three-quarters of workers believe their own employers are prepared** (74%) to respond to COVID-19.
 - Workers feel their employers are prepared to:
 - **share information** with all employees (79%)
 - **implement leave** or sick pay policies (72%)
 - **deploy technology** solutions (71%)

- implement voluntary policies (66%) to enable **flexible or remote work**
- **Local sources of information are trusted more than national sources**, with the CDC being the notable exception (95% trusted).
 - Nine in 10 trust their local news (89%) and state governor (89%), compared to slightly lower (but still high) trust in national news (85%) and U.S. federal government (84%).
- Most people **believe the United States is prepared** to respond to COVID-19, with **least confidence in the U.S. federal government** (66%) and **local school districts** (63%).
 - When it comes to government preparedness, seven in 10 say state (73%) and local (69%) governments are prepared, but slightly less say the same for the U.S. federal government (66%).
 - Near the bottom of the list, only three in five believe local school districts (63%) are prepared.
 - **Four in five Americans say their own households** are prepared (83%).
 - Three-quarters or more **believe the health system is prepared**, with local hospital (79%) and primary healthcare provider (77%) seen as being slightly more prepared than American hospitals (76%).

Edelman Trust Barometer: COVID-19

March 10, 2020

1. The Most Credible Source Is Employer Communications

- “My employer” was the most trusted institution by 18 points over business in general and NGOs, by 27 points over government and media.
- Over one-third of people said they would never believe social media if it were the only place they had seen the information.

2. The Most Relied-on Source of Information Is Mainstream News Organizations

- The major news outlets are relied upon nearly twice as much as global health organizations (WHO) or national health organizations (CDC).
- Young people rely evenly on social media (54 percent) and mainstream media (56 percent) while older people 55+ rate mainstream media as nearly three times more reliable than social.
- There is definite concern about fake news and false information being spread about the virus (74 percent).

3. The Most Trusted Spokespeople

- **Scientists and MDs are the most trusted**, along with **WHO and CDC officials** (scores range from 68 percent – 83 percent).
- **Government officials and journalists are at the bottom** of the rank, at under 50 percent trust.
- The CEO of **“my employer” is at 54 percent, squarely in the middle** of the ranking.
- Nearly 60 percent of respondents worry that the crisis is being exaggerated for political gain.

4. **The Need for Frequency**

- Seven in 10 respondents are following coronavirus news in media **at least once a day**, with 33 percent saying they are checking several times a day.
- Employers are expected to update information regularly on COVID-19, with **63 percent asking for daily updates**, 20 percent wanting communications several times a day.

5. **My Employer Better Prepared Than My Country**

- In eight of 10 countries surveyed, **“my employer” is seen as better prepared for the virus than my country**.

6. **Government and Business Expected to Team Up**

- Neither business nor government is trusted to go it alone.
- There is twice as much trust in a combined business/government effort than in government combatting the virus alone (45 percent versus 20 percent).
- Business alone is one-quarter as trusted as government alone in fighting the virus.

7. **High Expectations of Business to Act**

- Seventy-eight percent of respondents expect **business to act to protect employees and the local community**.
- Seventy-nine percent **expect business to adapt its operations**, including **remote working, cancelling non-essential events and business travel bans**.
- Business is counted upon (73 percent) to **adapt its HR policies, to give paid sick leave or prevent at-risk employees from coming to work**, among other things.

8. **Employers Must Share Information**

- Employees want clarity on everything from **how many colleagues have contracted the virus** (57 percent) to how the virus is **affecting the organization’s ability to operate** (53 percent).

- Employees want to be informed beyond the effect on the company, including advice on travel and what can be done to stop the spread of the virus.
- They want to get the information **via email or newsletter** (48 percent), posts on the **company website** (33 percent) and **phone/video conferences** (23 percent).

Institute for Public Relations Research: How Businesses Are Handling the COVID-19 Crisis”

March 17, 2020

- Employees were the top priority for communication executives as 81 percent said they were a “high” or “essential” priority for the communication function.
 - Companies made efforts to increase sanitation practices, including, in some cases, thermal/temperature scanning to detect illness.
- International Health Organizations (e.g., World Health Organization) and federal agencies within countries (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or National Health Service) were trusted “a lot” by nearly three-quarters of respondents.
 - Social media, online health websites such as WebMD, and country leaders such as presidents and prime ministers were the least trusted sources of information.
- When using words or phrases to describe how the media is covering the COVID-19 crisis, 60 percent used variations of terms such as “hype” or “sensational.” Only 16 percent praised the coverage as being “accurate” or “balanced,” while the remaining sentiment was neutral or mixed.
- The CEO was identified as the primary communicator about the COVID-19 crisis by nearly half (49%) of respondents. Significantly fewer respondents noted other C-suite executives in this role: CCO (12%), CHRO (10%), and COO (8%).
- If the communication team is part of the cross-functional team, three functions were identified by more than half of the participants to also be on that team: Human Resources (77%), Operations (67%), and Legal (52%). 3 percent of respondents said the communication function was not part of a cross-functional team, and 6 percent said their company did not have one.

Weber Shandwick/KRC Research: Perceptions about COVID-19 and the Employer Response

March 18, 2020

1. **More than half continue to feel coronavirus fears are overblown.**
 - Younger people (18-44) are more likely to feel fears are overblown (62%)—Gen Z in particular (70%).

2. **The number of Americans who feel they are at risk for coronavirus has increased to about a third.**
 - A higher proportion of people living in urban areas feel at risk (36%) than in suburban (29%) or rural areas (31%).
 - About a quarter (24%) of the adult population say they have elderly parents or friends they are checking on.
3. **Increasingly, Americans are feeling informed about the coronavirus. Roughly 1 in 10 or fewer say they do not feel informed.**
 - Most say they are at least somewhat informed about the coronavirus—what it is, and how it is transmitted (92% very or somewhat informed, 52% very).
4. **A large majority say they are taking precautions—9 in 10 are taking at least one of the following precautions:**
 - 70% are regularly washing hands and avoiding touching their face or surfaces,
 - 67% are staying home as much as possible and avoiding groups—76% 55 and older; and 75% Baby Boomers,
 - 55% are practicing “social distancing,”
 - 41% have stocked up on groceries and other essential items,
 - 28% have cancelled or postponed personal travel—35% of those employed, and
 - 31% of the employed say they are working from home.
5. **Confidence in medical and healthcare facilities and employers remains high, confidence in local schools and the federal government has increased, and confidence in the federal government is now at 62%.**
 - 79% are **confident** (33% very) that U.S. **medical and healthcare facilities** will be able to handle an outbreak of the coronavirus—up from 75% in two weeks.
 - 70% are **confident** (27% very) in **local schools** can handle an outbreak —up from 48% in two weeks.
 - 63% are **confident** (22% very) in **businesses** to handle an outbreak.
 - 73% of employees are confident (34% very) **their employer** can handle an outbreak—up from 60% in two weeks. **Confidence is much greater (81%) among employees who have received information from their employer compared to those who have not received information (36%).**
 - 62% are **confident** (23% very) **the federal government** can handle an outbreak —up from 55% in two weeks. **Confidence is greater in the Midwest (69%) and South (67%)** than in the Northeast (52%) and West (56%).

6. **Trust in the CDC has increased and remains at the top of the list of sources people trust A LOT to provide accurate and honest information about the coronavirus, followed by their doctor.**
 - 70% have a lot of trust in the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** to provide accurate and honest information—up from 62% over two weeks. Women (77%), seniors 65 years and older (79%), and Baby Boomers (77%) have most trust in the CDC.
 - 54% trust in the **World Health Organization (WHO)**—up from 42% over two weeks. Gen Z (65%) has more trust in WHO than other age groups (similar for CDC).

7. **A much higher proportion of people employed full- or part-time have received information from their employer—and this is accompanied by a greater proportion feeling their employer puts safety of workers above profit.**
 - Employees **who received information from their employer on the coronavirus which explained its policies and actions** increased 39 percentage points from 42% two weeks ago to 81% now.
 - 79% say their employer **puts safety first**—up from 54% over two weeks. Those who received information are more likely to feel their employer puts safety of workers above profits (88%), compared to those who did not receive employer information (43%).
 - 77% feel their **employers’ response is exactly what it should be**. Those who received information are more likely to feel their employers’ response is what it should be (88%) compared to those who did not receive employer information (33%).
 - **But workers are nervous:** 50% are concerned they will lose their job or income. The concern is higher among men (56%) than women (42%); younger people than older (67% Gen Z), and Hispanics (65%) more than others.

Coronavirus: Corporate Leaders Grapple with Major Disruption by Putting Employees First

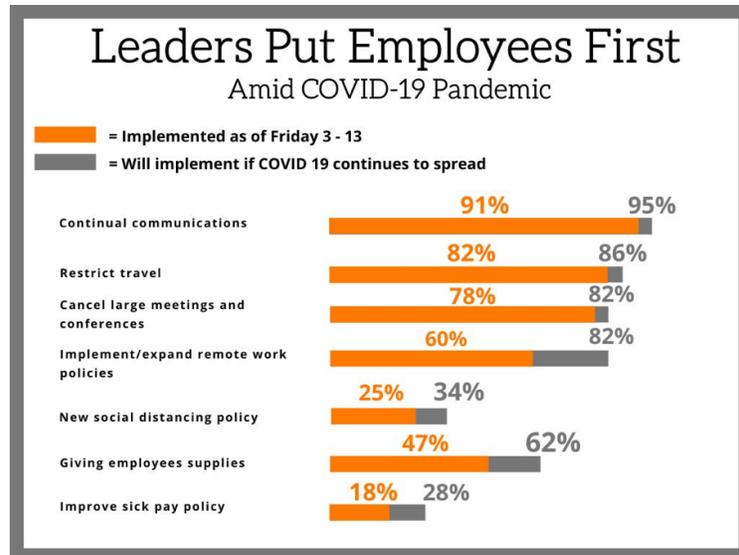
March 19, 2020

Surveyed 51 gatekeepersSM—CEOs, C-level executives, talent executives, and C-level advisors within companies ranging from \$100 million to \$125 billion in annual revenue.

When asked, “What are the most important concerns for leaders amid the crisis,” our gatekeepers shared their four most important concerns:

1. **Prioritize employee health and well-being**

They have taken many definitive and rapid actions to keep both their employees and the community safe. Some of the steps have directly impacted their financial results—like eliminating travel, canceling conferences, and increasing sick pay. But leaders are more concerned with the health of their employees and greater community.



Other tactics:

- Creating a custom application that employees can use to access real-time information, policies, FAQs, and important contacts.
- Parents who need to take care of school-age children while working from home will be paid for caretaking time.
- Implementing quarantine paid time off and special anxiety-reducing services onsite.
- Understanding the worries and concerns employees are feeling is paramount. “We closed our office for the wellbeing of our employees, but they can come in if they prefer, and we are paying for their rides if they do not want to use public transportation in NYC. We want everyone to do what they think is best to feel healthy and safe.”

2. **Communicate effectively and frequently**

Unanimously agree that the last thing you should do is stay silent—regardless of what the circumstances are.

“Messages must be delivered frequently and consistently—with candor and honesty. That means speaking with more assurance than authority. People would rather know the truth than dwell on the worst-case scenarios residing in their imaginations.”

“Right now, for leadership, it is all about communication. The level of media attention is creating widespread fear, and the role of leadership is to present the facts in the context of our business, so employees know what to expect.”

3. **Be prepared to navigate all waters**

In a fluctuating environment, it’s important to think strategically on matters, and the gatekeepers have already utilized new methods for cash conservation, transporting employees, utilizing the workforce in creative ways to reduce the loss of jobs, deploying unique communication approaches, and implementing tech-enabled services to forestall business disruption. They’ve also found unusual sources of supply and have been shoring up business partners to sustain their operations.

It's important to look ahead: "thinking about short-term and long-term consequences and how to manage for various scenarios" is most important for leaders amid this crisis."

4. **Be the calm**

Changes that disrupt employees' lives are necessary for the business and the broader community. Understanding the impact those changes have on your employees' lives—and making sure they *know* you understand what they are going through—strengthens your company's ability to weather the crisis.

Communicating your understanding of your employee's situation and understanding that a crisis brings on fear, rumors, and feelings of panic, many gatekeepers talked about the importance of managing their own emotions by staying calm and remaining focused on their employees, customers, and partners so they may feel reassured by their leadership.

Finally, many leaders emphasized both planning for and talking about the end of the crisis to calm employees and ensure that your company comes out the other side stronger.

Hill & Knowlton COVID Message Testing

March 19, 2020

Stockpiling

- Showing people that others were not stockpiling was found to be reassuring, and meant they were 20% less likely to stockpile themselves, compared to message that merely instructed them not to.

Handwashing

- Impact could be enhanced by using messages that explain how washing your hands helps others as well as yourself (up from 54% to 62%).

Self-Isolation

- The most effective messages on self-isolation stressed how doing so can protect your family. This was ten percentage points more effective than when people are provided more extensive information.

Face-Touching

- For face touching, providing facts – such as advice to touch your face with a tissue rather than hands – is substantially less effective (nine percentage points) in changing behavior than suggesting how to help your family.

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