

Handling COVID-19 **Crisis** Communications

Introduction

The **COVID-19** pandemic has escalated faster than anyone anticipated, with the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring a global emergency and various countries and governments taking drastic measures needed to contain and limit the inevitable spread of the coronavirus. As the world mobilizes to counter this dire situation, businesses also need to be prepared to safeguard their reputation, and this includes having solid corporate communications strategies in place.

In a globalized economy that relies on an interconnected ecosystem of international trade and supply chains, business leaders are already feeling the grunt of cascading economic disruption and are having to brace themselves for the scenarios that may play out in their own organization due to the consequences of the spread of the virus. The reality of the matter is that every business and organization has been affected by **COVID-19**; and the question is, how are they communicating with their stakeholders during these tough times?

The challenges for companies in affected countries include a drop in business activity, disruption in global supply chains, curtailment of travel, cancelled events, employees infected with the virus and in the worst case, business shut-down. Your stakeholders, employees and customers are all aware of **COVID-19** and will want to know how your business intends to navigate the crisis. It is therefore vital your external and internal communications is timely, realistic and decisive, providing the corporate leadership that installs ongoing trust in your organization as circumstances change.

With a crisis such as this one, in full progress, the spread of misinformation can lead to fear and distrust, unless a company communicates effectively and demonstrates its preparedness to deal with the situation. Employees need to know that they are protected at all times, and that the safety precautions and internal actions being taken not only have their best interest in mind, but are also fully aligned with the guidance, healthcare advice, and instructions of their respective country's government, and the WHO. Effective crisis management is the ability to successfully manage the escalation of events. Businesses with crisis communications strategies and plans in place, are well-equipped to respond to such situations, proactively. Preparedness in managing the **COVID-19** crisis enables an organization to lead by example of best practice, thus safeguarding, even enhancing, their corporate reputation. Governments and public sector organizations need to constantly reinforce public trust via their communications on how they are successfully managing the rising complications of the **COVID-19** issue.

How to Handle

COVID-19 Crisis Communications



- 1 Establish a guiding task force of decision makers,** led by the CEO and to include your communications, HR, IT and legal function. Rapid decision making is critical as each day brings new information to light that may impact your business practices and operations. Formulate a crisis management plan and assign responsibilities, so every member of the **Covid-19** response team knows who is doing what. Your communications team will be responsible for developing and delivering the organisation's messages internally and externally.
- 2 Create an internal communications plan.** Pre-empt and provide answers to questions your employees will have. These will relate to changes in working conditions, travel restrictions, job security, health, safety, welfare and business continuity. Define a two-way process for reaching employees through emails, intranet, company meetings, FAQs or a website situation room.
- 3 Create an external communications plan.** This needs to reach external stakeholders, customers, the media, shareholders, suppliers and the local community. Use all communications channels available to you to engage, including social media, press conferences, shareholder meetings, website, web conferences and email. Tailor your messages to your audiences to maintain trust and avoid the spread of misinformation.
- 4 Prepare for a media crisis** in case your organization is named in the news by being directly linked to the spread of the virus. Ensure you have a dedicated company spokesperson in place who can address any concerns and provide reassurances to the media. Have a targeted media list ready to reach out to with company information.
- 5 Create a central information hub** as your company's reliable source of truth where the workforce and stakeholders can find all the information they need. Always support the efforts of your respective government and the World Health Organisation (WHO), referencing only their guidance, healthcare advice and rules. Your employees need to know they are protected and understand the reasons for any safety precautions and internal actions you are taking.

6 Be realistic and ready to address the risks your business may face as the world prepares for an increase in **Covid-19** cases. Your crisis management plan needs to address questions such as how your organization will continue to deliver if the crisis escalates, how will you handle employee illness, will your supply chain be disrupted, how is your business affected by local government directives and policies.

7 Demonstrate Corporate Social Responsibility. Consider how your company can support local or global **Covid-19** response efforts with services, equipment or expertise and seek out opportunities to be part of the solution to the crisis.

Successful crisis management is the ability to effectively manage the quick succession of events. Businesses that are equipped with a corporate crisis communications plan can respond proactively, leading by example of best practice in the way they manage the **COVID-19** crisis and enhancing their reputation. Governments and public sector organizations need to constantly reinforce public trust by being clear with their communications on how they are managing the complications of the **COVID-19** issue.

COVID-19

in the Middle East



Middle Eastern governments have been quick and responsive in dealing with the **COVID-19** public health crisis, providing solid direction and transparent communication. GCC health ministers have taken joint precautionary measures to ensure cross-border preparedness and coordinate efforts. Follow-ups are ongoing with the health ministries of the council who are monitoring the situation and have stepped up public health information.

There is experience in the region, having learned important lessons from battling the SARS epidemic and the MERS-CoV crisis. Surveillance of epidemics, preparation and communications have improved since then, providing a GCC-wide transparent and combined approach to ensuring the public are reassured and kept informed about the infrastructure and policies that have been established.

There is a risk that the impact of the spread of **COVID-19** could increase and lead to a drop in economic growth in the region. GCC local governments have introduced various support measures for enterprises to mitigate any negative impact on the economy, whilst protecting public health. Businesses across the region will need to act fast and adapt their operations and services in line with the steps taken by their government to contain the spread of **COVID-19**.

Certain business sectors are already negatively affected, such as tourism, hospitality, food services, retail, entertainment, manufacturing, construction, investments and commodities. All members of the GCC - Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait - stand to suffer from the travel restrictions that are in place, but the business hub of Dubai could see the biggest impact. However, the outbreak will bring about accelerated growth and demand in other business sectors including healthcare, technology, e-commerce, new media and online services such as education, remote office and video conferencing activities.

Saudi Arabia

Covid19- Spread

In Saudi Arabia businesses have been hit by the current temporary travel ban to and from almost all of Europe and countries in Asia and Africa as part of the Kingdom's efforts to contain the spread of **Covid-19**. Other measures taken include suspension of tourist visas for visitors from virus hit countries, as well as individuals embarking on the Umrah pilgrimage. The pilgrimages are a major source of revenue and the move reflects the precautionary approach to cancel mass gatherings. All sports competitions will be held behind closed doors until further notice and schools and universities are closed, including public and private schools and vocational training institutions.

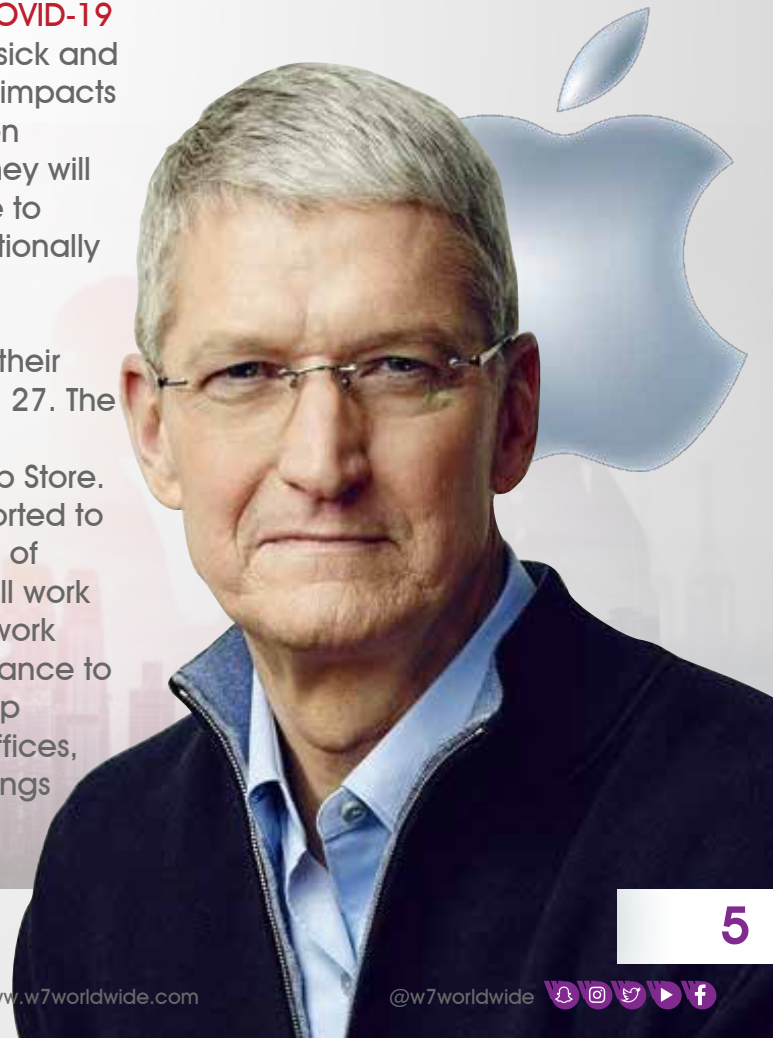
This is the moment when great communicators and leaders come to the fore. Be prepared and set standards of best practice with your responses to this global health emergency. There are excellent case studies of businesses that have taken a solutions-oriented approach to the **Covid-19** crisis.

Practices to Learn From

Apple

Apple's committed donations to the global **COVID-19** response — both to help treat those who are sick and to help lessen the economic and community impacts of the pandemic — today reached \$15 million worldwide. They have also announced that they will be matching employee donations two-to-one to support **COVID-19** response efforts locally, nationally and internationally.

Apple announced that it will be closing all of their retail stores outside Greater China until March 27. The company instead will be serving its customers through its online store (apple.com) or the App Store. In all of Apple's offices, the company has resorted to flexible work arrangements worldwide outside of Greater China. That means team members will work remotely if their job allows, and those whose work requires them to be on site should follow guidance to maximize interpersonal space. Extensive, deep cleaning will continue at all sites. In all their offices, the company is rolling out new health screenings and temperature checks.



Emirates Airlines



The airline sector has been particularly challenged by the coronavirus outbreak with travel bans affecting not only their passengers, but also the operating crew. Emirates Airline has adopted a proactive approach that puts people at the center of its strategy. The company activated a crisis management center and has made regular corporate announcements of the operational steps taken to provide customers and employees with a peace of mind. These include waiver policies on tickets, special flights for stranded travelers, enhanced disinfection on all aircraft and thermal screening on US-bound flights.

Combating COVID-19

Through Technology: a Working Example

Avaya Technologies



AVAYA has been leading the way in its immediate response to the **COVID-19** crisis, demonstrating their corporate social responsibility. As early as January, **AVAYA** teams and partners in China were on the frontline in Wuhan, where they donated audio and video equipment to help medical personnel perform remote consultation and video diagnostics. The company also decided to provide its **AVAYA** Spaces collaboration software for free, to all educational institutions, including colleges and universities along with non-profit organizations worldwide.

AVAYA continues to explore opportunities to help during this global challenge. The company has put a customer crisis team in place to work with public and private sector customers in the GCC and has been working to enable work-from-home readiness. **AVAYA**'s solutions ensure that vital citizen and business support services remain unaffected during the effort to contain the spread of **COVID-19**.

Moving Forward

These are exceptional times and we all have our parts to play in the management of the **COVID-19** crisis. Is your organization ready to provide the strong leadership required to overcome the challenges we are facing? Now is the time to affirm your capabilities and communicate with your employees and stakeholders to reassure them that they are being looked out for. Your communications should address medical aspects, business continuity, and people planning whilst retaining a genuinely empathic tone of voice.

About W7 Worldwide



W7 Worldwide is an independent marketing communications consultancy based in Saudi Arabia. Our understanding of the local market converged with our global reach and knowledge enables us to bridge our clients with their audiences effectively. We are aligned by the objective of filling the gap in communication that exists in the local market. Therefore, our specialty lies in building bridges that sustain relationships and create brand reputation and value through innovative approaches. Our array of services includes, but is not limited to:

- 📞 Reputation Management
- 📞 Stakeholder Mapping
- 📞 Crisis Management
- 📞 Media Relations
- 📞 Public Relations
- 📞 Social Media
- 📞 Marketing & Brand Solutions

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