Responding to the Coronavirus Crisis: Selected Ideas and Learnings for Asia’s Communications Leaders

As the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis continues, communications leaders in Asia face the expanding challenge of supporting the safety of staff, the reputation of company, and the viability of operations. And, all the while, the risks of misstep are significantly compounded by both social media activism and the critical gaze of international observers. The following assemblage of insights on communications practices – gathered from our internal experts and member network – will be helpful as you formulate, adapt, implement and manage your crisis response strategy.¹

Key Must Dos and Get Rights

- **Stay grounded on the company’s values.** In times of clear threat to the health and safety of all – such as the crisis presented by COVID-19 – be certain to base your planning within the company’s longstanding framework of values. Refer to your company’s Vision, Mission and Values statement, which lays out the mind, heart and soul of the company. Use it to substantiate the principles that guide your words and actions, and those of leadership, staff and associates. Articulate the principles, position, and priorities of the company through the lens of those values as the foundation for the discussion and planning of all actions. The tone of all communication should reflect the company’s value, as well as its established style.

¹This list is not arranged in any order of priority.
- **Update your stakeholder inventory.** Don’t risk neglecting a key stakeholder group. Walk through the stakeholders one by one: employees at every level, suppliers and customers, media that face Chinese and international audiences, government at all levels, investors and shareholders. It is the responsibility of the company to communicate effectively with each group to provide needed assurances and help reduce their anxiety while ensuring they do not get swayed by inaccurate or spurious information.

- **Activate a cross-functional crisis team.** Because the Coronavirus crisis affects the entire business, all functions should have a voice in planning and coordinating responses. Some initial tasks for the team may include:

  ✓ **Quick impact audits** – A daily cross-check of information to ensure that the organization’s facts on hand are current and accurate. Focus on the number of staff members and staff family members who are sick or have died, the status of customer and supply chain disruptions and their impact, and infrastructure disruptions and their impact.

  ✓ **Scenario planning** to project the hypothetical trajectories of the outbreak and plausible, possible and likely business impacts over the mid- and long-term so that communications teams can develop corresponding messaging strategies.

- **Establish a centralized crisis communications team.** A high-functioning communications hub is the best way to ensure that the company can stay engaged with its numerous stakeholders and media channels. Key functions of the crisis communications team include:

  ✓ **Social media monitoring and policy updates**, where anyone connected with the company can contribute content.

  ✓ **Reputational risk assessment**, through monitoring news and stakeholder feedback.

  ✓ **Stakeholder engagement** to address and counteract the effects of scandals, fake news, manias, and other behavioral challenges.

  ✓ **Consistent and cohesive communication** on a *regular* cycle of frequency which is decided by the team, and which assumes a sustained crisis narrative in the 24/7 news cycle.

  ✓ **China-based messaging hub** to ensure that, even in a US or European headquartered operation, key messaging is created by the local team “in China for China” as may be needed – *and can do so fast.*

- **Seek out and support hardship cases.** To an appropriate extent, maintain robust situational awareness of the hardships being faced by your people, their families, and those of all your partners, including suppliers and providers of critical services and infrastructure. Ask what your company and your industry can do to help. Work closely with HR, finance, logistics and other key departments to identify and communicate support measures that are impactful and meaningful.
Carefully deploy tactical CSR activities. Leverage the company’s past and on-going CSR initiatives as a foundation for planning new, tactical CSR activities that contribute to COVID-19 crisis relief. For example, companies may consider donating to victims or their supporting agencies in-kind or in-cash in regions or fields where the company operates, directing resources to support family care, and donating and/or operating company services and equipment that assist in crisis relief. Staff may be invited to help define programs as a morale building exercise. Industry-wide initiatives can be especially powerful. (For example, the Bank of China Hong Kong announced that it will allow homeowners 6-12 months of relief on mortgage principal payments and is calling upon other banks to follow suit.)

Key Mistakes Not to Make

Don’t fail to sufficiently mobilize and project top leadership stewardship. Responses to crises of this magnitude need to be led from the top. Public (or de facto) leadership by department heads lower than CEO – legal, finance, HR – is important too, but will not likely resonate with sufficient amplitude in response to the overarching question, “What can we do to help?” Legal counsel and support from finance and HR are essential, but the paramount goal is to demonstratively do the right thing on the basis of conscience and strong public purpose, not profile or profit.

Don’t underestimate the need to communicate empathy for a prolonged period of time. Accept that there will be long term psychological impacts on your people, organization and customers. Externally, messaging needs to avoid an emotional stance of recovery until it is well underway. Inside the company, put internal communications channels to use for promoting the use of resources such as childcare, counselling, and self-help.

Key Things Not to Overlook

Proactively reach out with soft support to government interlocutors in China. Your government relationships at the local, city, provincial and central level will expect your CEO to contact them with offers of condolence, if not assistance. It’s important to listen and to respond in ways that reflect your unique capability, values, and position. Don’t overcommit, or mis-set expectations in this regard. Rely on your Government Affairs experts to appropriately target, align and calibrate offerings – and orchestrate interactions.

Mobilize cross industry resources if you can. Actions that are carried out across an industry sector or cross-industry, in coordination, can be vastly more impactful than individual company actions. If you are in a position of industry leadership, or hold a position of leadership in an association, do what you can to convene a group of likeminded peers to develop and launch coordinated, high impact projects.
▪ **Enable informal staff support groups and crisis communities.** Do not let employees feel ignored or isolated in this time of great difficulty. Employees can be empowered to set up “mutual support” initiatives on digital platforms like WeChat without undue administrative constraints, albeit certain ground rules should be clearly established around scope, etiquette, privacy, and propriety. Staff support teams, distinct and separate from the HR function, can be set up to aid distressed colleagues, even if only to lend moral support. If needed, psycho-social assistance may be introduced, either via in-house or third-party professional resources.

▪ **Keep your eye on the ball.** As the primary source of information and messaging that affects company reputation and conveys company direction, the crisis communication team needs to take the role of “the calm eye of the storm”.

✓ **Keep abreast of and aligned with government directives.** Stay current and follow government directives on residential quarantine and transportation shutdowns. Monitor official sources of intelligence, such as the information from the Central Leading Group on Battling the Coronavirus, the National Health Commission of China, and the World Health Organization, and advice from the authorities of your home country. As needed, synthesize the tsunami of official information into prioritized short-lists that staff can quickly digest and action.

✓ **Be vigilant about source verification.** The credibility of third-party sources quoted in communications must be rigorously checked for factuality.

✓ **Don’t be tone deaf.** Conveying a calm, empathetic, and supportive tone is key. Avoid patronizing or opportunistic language. Employ double and triple “sets of eyes” to review communications to avoid accidental errors of insensitivity.

✓ **Be egalitarian – show no bias.** No level of the company, from factory floor up to the C-Suite, should ignored in the communications program. Treat the respective cohorts as evenly as possible.

▪ **Keep looking ahead; continually brainstorm to anticipate problem areas.** Be prepared for lingering tensions in the workplace, for example: animus related to the departure of foreign passport holders during the crisis, anti-Chinese sentiment expressed by overseas counterparts toward your in-country team, and the human factor-aspects of re-integrating emotionally weakened teams as the crisis fades.

This is clearly a trying time for communications executives in China and across Asia. The most adept comms leaders will succeed in upholding the long arc of corporate reputation while addressing the daily, sometimes life-threatening adversities posed by the crisis.

We hope that this summary of ideas and learnings will be helpful as you navigate the complexities of this fast-moving situation. For coronavirus guidance for HR leaders, click here. To listen to our series of podcasts on implications of the coronavirus outbreak, click here. Please do not hesitate to reach out to our expert team for a quick chat or meeting – we’re here to help.
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