Coronavirus:
5 Things All Communicators Need to Know

Top of mind for billions globally, the rapidly evolving respiratory disease has caused outbreaks in 50 locations internationally, including 15 confirmed cases in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as of Feb. 28, 2020.

> The virus, originally named 2019-nCOV, and in the media known as the coronavirus, has been renamed COVID-19.

A question of 'when'

At a news conference on Feb. 25, Dr. Nancy Messonnier, director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said, "Ultimately, we expect we will see community spread in this country. It's not so much a question of if this will happen anymore, but rather more of a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illness."

On Feb. 26, public health officials announced the first "community transmission" case of a U.S. patient who contracted coronavirus with no clue as to its origin.

Donald McNeil Jr., a *New York Times* health reporter who has covered multiple epidemics in his career, said in *The Daily* podcast, "Prepare. It's not just prepare, as in stock up on food and buy masks. It's more like, mentally prepare yourself for what would happen if you and all of your friends had to stay home for a month, or not be able to ride the subways, or supermarkets ran low on food."

Dr. Messonnier agreed, "The disruption to everyday life might be severe."

Less deadly than other outbreaks

This virus is contagious, but it's not as deadly as other outbreaks. Media reports indicate this coronavirus appears less deadly than other human coronaviruses spread in recent years. For example, in China, more than three quarters of the recent cases have been classified as mild with symptoms including a low-grade fever and a cough. Some affected experience fatigue, headaches and, less frequently, diarrhea.

Helpful Resources for Communicators

- Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary from the CDC
- *Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers to Plan and Respond to Coronavirus Disease*
- Free communication tools from the CDC (graphics, videos, traveler resources)
- U.S. State Department's Travel Information Center – Current Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019
- Coronavirus 101: What You Need To Know To Prepare And Prevent – NPR Podcast
- World Health Organization's Latest Update

How communication pros are responding

With growing health concerns about coronavirus, many of our clients with global operations or in healthcare have been planning and communicating with their key audiences for the past month while others are ramping up efforts now.

During the past 24 hours, we've been working and connecting with many clients to help keep employees informed and prepared. Here are five practical communication insights, aggregating best practices from our client base.

5 internal communication best practices

1. **Partner & Plan** – Most of our clients have detailed crisis communication plans in place with a wide variety of possible scenarios.

   Proactive planning includes refining your internal and external audiences and identifying channels and your organization's response. With the communications team leading the charge, collaboration and partnership with key departments such as Human Resources, Information Services, Legal, Security and Operations are critical to ensure alignment.

> The coronavirus crisis is an emerging and rapidly evolving situation requiring proactive, clear and timely communications.

If you haven't done so already, your communications team should regularly be pulling together a rapid response team with representation from each core function. A strong communicator must have a seat at the table, and ideally this person will be not only the voice of the employee but also the glue to hold this collaborative team together.

Many clients are building virtual and in-person communication command rooms to deploy resources as needed. This approach ensures the right players are together to quickly make decisions. The initial coronavirus communications plan doesn't need to be exhaustive yet, but rather a living and fluid working document including:

- Key messages

- Standby statements

- FAQs

- Draft messages (so they're 90 percent ready to go)

- Timelines

As the situation unfolds, so should your plan. For example, if employee absenteeism spikes, this team needs to respond. If State Department travel advisory levels change, this team needs to communicate. If suddenly your company needs to have 15,000 people connecting to your network remotely, can your tech team handle the volume?

These foundational elements will help employees understand how your organization will respond if there are significant disruptions to your operations such as requiring employees to work from home for extended periods of time or not work at all.

Segmenting small groups with special needs and considerations within your larger employee population will be critical to ensure everyone is aligned. Communications and accommodations must be flexible, because one-size doesn't fit all employees.

As the core communications plan comes together, quickly solicit additional feedback from key leaders and cascade details of the company's response to leaders and employees.

2. **Communicate Clearly, Early & Often** – Tell employees what you can as early as possible and as often as you can. Many healthcare organizations already have well-defined protocols in place for patient or employee risk factors, but some public-facing organizations don't.

Streamline communications to focus on three to five key messages across multiple channels. Shorter is better. Don't speculate. Be realistic. Avoid jargon. Be helpful. Point employees to credible public health resources such as the CDC website and your local health departments.

From our past work on flu vaccination programs for clients, we know that employees don't want to be reminded of common-sense things – like handwashing, respiratory etiquette or staying home when they're feeling ill. However, communicators need to balance the practical and the bigger picture to provide just the right information at the right time.

3. **Be Empathetic & Understanding** – Remind employees that their safety and well-being are top priorities.

Be empathetic and think through the potential challenges of your employees at their various life stages. For example, a working parent who has multiple kids out of school or an aging parent in frail health in a nursing home that they can't visit, is going to face some challenges. Think of the individual employee first and encourage your leaders to do the same.

Work-life flexibility has never been so important. With virtual private networks, video conferencing and smart phones, many employees can work from anywhere. However, not all employees can work at home. Many hourly, frontline or bedside employees are unwired.

Working remotely or in a quarantined environment is not an option for everyone, so acknowledge that these employees have special concerns and communication needs. Share what you can about how your organization plans to respond in such cases.

If you have union employees, work with union leaders now to address concerns and ensure clear communications.

4. **Listen, Monitor & Adjust** – Build in feedback opportunities with your employees. Identify one clear path for employees to get answers to their questions. This could be a separate email address or call center number to field questions from employees.

Incorporate employees' questions and the organization's responses into a living FAQ document for your Intranet and other channels.

Monitor social media. Tell managers to dial up their personal communications with their teams.

Keep adjusting your communication plan and outreach to clarify and address communication gaps.

5. **Build in Redundant Channels** – With channels, think mobile first. Then, ask yourself these questions:

- Can you access your email distribution system from a remote location?

- Can you call all employees at home with special messages?

- Can your conference call provider accommodate all of your employees on the line at once?

- How will social media factor into how you communicate with employees?

As Dr. Messonnier shared with reporters in late-February, "I continue to hope that in the end we'll look back and feel like we are overprepared, but that is a better place to be in than being underprepared."

Being prepared for all contingencies will position your business to communicate in a timely and knowledgeable way. If Rhudy & Co. can help in any way, please contact us.