

As communications leaders on the front lines of your organization's coronavirus response, you need relevant and timely information, including best practices from other companies. Page Up is committed to providing this sharing platform and distilling takeaways into a useful format. This is the first in a new series of Issue Briefs designed to help you stay on top of emerging issues and what other members are doing to address them.

State of play

During the week of March 1, U.S. government and business responses to coronavirus accelerated and the situation became more unpredictable and volatile. One thing is obvious: the crisis is entering a new phase as more companies are taking action to limit potential exposure for employees. Yet more complex questions loom around business continuity, transportation, manufacturing, and retail enterprises - as well as the impact of the virus on the whole economy.

Page Up and Page convened two conference calls late last week for members to share information about their own organization's actions, and to examine the longer-term factors.

Insights:

- Some employees, and some in the general public, **think corporations are overreacting** in their response to the coronavirus threat. Policy questions provide communications leaders an opportunity to explain the company's values and priorities.
- 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**.

Securing employees

Here's a summary of what many members said is taking place within their own companies:

- Office closure when any employee or contractor is diagnosed.
- Internal issues-management teams are meeting routinely, including operational representatives from a cross-section of the enterprise.

- Offices outside central virus zones typically remain open, but many employees are being encouraged if not required to work remotely. IT teams are working to ensure remote workers have secure access to company systems and documents
- Employees are asked to reveal travel to China, Italy, South Korea, Japan, and other virus-concentrated areas, and to self-quarantine for 14 days.
- Employees register their commuting patterns with HR, especially when it involves travel between cities and/or mass transit.
- Non-essential business travel is suspended at a quickly growing list of companies.
- Additional cleaning of the office, providing hand sanitizers.
- Banning or screening external visitors to the office.
- Education on hygiene as well as avoiding routine habits such as handshaking. Some companies and conferences formally instruct people to use fist bumps, elbow taps or slight bows.

Countering misinformation

Hot baths do not prevent coronavirus, and masks - unless you are caring for someone who is sick with the virus - are not effective. Batting down rumors and misinformation is an ongoing task for communications leaders.

The World Health Organization's site includes a [Myth Busters](#) page to counter misinformation that includes shareable graphics like the one to the right:

Companies are using a range of digital platforms to spread the word, including microsites, Slack channels, and weekly email updates.



Insights:

- **Communications should be regular**, even if only to report there is no meaningful new information, so that employees are not left waiting for news. Updates need to be regular so that the company is seen as a reliable and trustworthy source.
- 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.

Leadership in a time of uncertainty

For many members of Page Up and Page, decisions made by their companies will resonate far beyond their own business. For example, many industry events have been cancelled or postponed, as sponsors and attendees have decided not to attend, including SXSW, Shoptalk, and Google's I/O conference. Prior to SXSW's cancellation, Twitter had [already decided to pull its CEO](#), Jack Dorsey, from his headline speaking slot. In cancelling, Twitter CCO Brandon Borman told Page and Page Up members that they did not want to participate in an event that might attract large crowds "that could create a vector for spreading the virus."

As the crisis continues to unfold, corporations will be confronted with more decisions that have wide-ranging consequences. Companies will also set examples for others in their community.

Ongoing questions

Though not a major topic in the public realm yet, companies are working through contingency plans for delivering on business goals, knowing that even the best plan cannot anticipate every eventuality. And with no end in sight to the current situation, there is an unprecedented level of guesswork and pressure adding complexity to this evolving situation. An [article](#) from the *National Law Review* underscores how critical communications leadership is during this time. “The tools you use to communicate, maintain situational awareness, and provide current and accurate information will also have a major impact on the execution of the [business continuity] plan.”

Insights:

- A global bank headquartered in New York has tried to anticipate disruption by **staging cross-functional groups of employees at various locations** in the region, in anticipation that if one area is forced to close, another will be able to scale up.
- If existing tools are inadequate, companies need to **source additional collaboration platforms** as soon as possible. Some companies, like Google and Microsoft, are enabling [free access to conferencing platforms](#) to more afflicted territories around the world.
- Full-time employees have a certain amount of protection that others will not, and **uncertainty about continuing employment** may negatively impact their lives, as well as business operations. Health costs will also be of concern to anyone not covered by an employee health plan. Microsoft, Twitter and Amazon all stated they will continue to pay hourly workers at average rate of pay even though hours may be reduced or eliminated with closures.
- While office workers face the prospect of remote working, **manufacturing, transportation, and retail sectors** face an extra layer of uncertainty.
 - Many retailers had to close locations in China, underscoring the complexity of businesses that deal with the general public, perhaps foreshadowing what will happen in the US.
 - Manufacturing is dealt a double-whammy with supply chain issues out of China and the looming threat in U.S. shops.
 - Trucking, healthcare, and food services are other industries that will have to adapt to fast-changing situations.
 - Amtrak has suspended the Acela nonstop service between Washington DC and Boston, and airlines are seeing an acute decline in flight bookings on a global scale. Gary Kelly, CEO of Southwest Airlines, [said on CNBC](#) that the company has seen a noticeable decline in bookings and compared travel fears now to post-9/11.
- China’s economic activity demonstrably slowed in February, with companies like ABInBev reporting revenue declines in China of \$285 million in January in February.
- Sequoia Capital published [a memo](#) calling coronavirus the “Black Swan of 2020,” a term used for **an unpredictable event that causes a sea change**. While Sequoia’s audience is primarily start-up CEOs and founders, its memo included advice that is relevant for companies of all sizes, including insights about marketing strategy, headcount, and capital spending. An excerpt points up the differentiating importance of leadership during this time:

“A distinctive feature of enduring companies is the way their leaders react to moments like these. Your employees are all aware of COVID-19 and are wondering how you will react and what it means for them. False optimism can easily lead you astray and prevent you from making contingency plans and taking bold action. Avoid this trap by being clinically realistic and acting decisively as circumstances change. Demonstrate the leadership your team needs during this stressful time.”