

## REPORT BRIEF

# Leadership Perspectives:

## Leading and Looking Ahead Through COVID-19

The full e-book features 30 profiles and interviews with communication executives about the impact of COVID-19; the increased importance of internal communication; return to work; future of business and the industry; diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; impact of Black Lives Matter protests; and corporate purpose. **This brief focuses on one specific theme in the ebook.**

### Theme: Internal Communications

#### Key Findings of How Internal Communications Was the Primary Focus during COVID-19

- Since employees are the most important stakeholder during COVID-19, companies have increased the frequency of their communication to their employees focusing on authentic and transparent messages. Some said their internal communication has never been better.
- The most popular employee communication channels encouraged two-way communication with the CEO as the core messenger. Video messaging (some encouraging employee feedback), town halls, intranets, face-to-face communication, and email were most frequently cited for their effectiveness.
- Due to the differing needs of employees, organizations had to think of the best ways to reach their employees who may not be as digitally connected.
- Most executives said they employee productivity increase; some were concerned about potential employee burnout and mental health.
- Leaders conducted focus groups and surveys to capture employee sentiment and engagement, allowing them to better understand employees and their needs.

“For many in the marketing and communications industry, the biggest shift in our day to day work has been the pivot from supporting external promotion to internal engagement. In lieu of cancelled events and product launches, agencies with diversified offerings were the best prepared to make this remit change, shifting client resources to the greater, more urgent need. Corporate leaders are now directly facing the challenge of finding the best ways to be transparent, informative and authentic in communications to their employees in a time of great uncertainty.

In the coming months, we will of course see the slow swing back to “normal” promotion and campaigns for many clients, but we believe this pandemic has shown the necessity of effective internal and crisis communications for an organization – and why these solutions should remain part of a company’s engagement strategy in the years to come.”

**-Barbara Bates, Global CEO, Hotwire**

“We have not seen a lack of productivity at all. In fact, we see people spending too much time online and are encouraging colleagues to “step away from the computer.”

The most effective channels have been virtual CEO town halls and day-to-day email communications – given how quickly things evolve. Employees are appreciative of the increased cadence of communications as well as the transparency of those communications. There are a lot of difficult topics to discuss!”

**-Matt Bianco, Head of Corporate Public Affairs, Novelis, Inc.**

“To understand what we’ve learned and how we’ve used communications during this pandemic, we must first talk about the makeup of our colleague population. Macy’s, like any brick and mortar retailer, is an in-person business when it comes to our stores. The majority of our 125,000 colleagues work in our stores and, when all locations are safe to re-open, we look forward to continuing to serve our customers in-person. Our store colleagues are working efficiently with our enhanced safety procedures and, in the process, have figured out new ways of working to provide the best experience for our customers, including curbside pick-up, which was implemented quickly and has been a well-received option for our customers.

Our distribution centers have been running our fulfillment efforts for our digital and store replenishment and have been working efficiently through this pandemic to serve the needs of our business. This team has led the way in enhanced safety procedures that we’re using throughout the organization.

Our corporate colleagues who support these teams in Marketing, Digital, Merchandising, Finance, HR, Legal, Communications, etc., have primarily worked remotely through this pandemic. The shift from office environment to remote workplace happened basically overnight and shifted how we work, collaborate, communicate and engage. We discovered that we became highly productive in this new environment. Our virtual meetings start on time, everyone is prepared, and, to foster connectivity and engagement, we have a culture of keeping cameras on, which includes seeing work and personal lives come together.

Within all colleague groups, we've learned a lot about how to get the work done through this pandemic, using formal and informal communication as a powerful connection point. We use internal communications constantly to update our colleagues on operational information, and use weekly CEO updates, webcasts and virtual town halls, to drive our culture and to keep colleagues informed. Our internal messages are also shared externally on LinkedIn, from both our CEO's and company's profile. We also encourage our managers (who we call People Leaders) to check on their teams regularly, set up scheduled check-ins and open their virtual doors for those impromptu conversations that matter the most. We need to be good listeners, lead with empathy and care for the colleague beyond the work. This approach is already intuitive to who we are and has served us well through these challenging times.

We worry about the burnout caused from virtual work in the current environment. It's so important to foster downtime and separate work from personal, when many of our colleagues are doing both in the same space. It would be helpful to learn how other companies are creating this balance with their virtual workforce."

**-Jill Carapellotti, Group Vice President, Corporate Communications, Macy's Inc.**

"We've always struggled a little bit with communications into our manufacturing operations because they're not as digitally connected. They mostly get information through word of mouth from their frontline leader. We've had to do a lot of work to get the right messages to them and respond to their needs, to keep people motivated, and to assure them that we're doing everything we can to make them safe in the workplace, particularly in some areas in the world where our operation facilities are in virus hotspots.

So, it's been an ongoing challenge to get the right information to people. We've also added additional health care services for our employees in those countries. Getting those services set up, communicated, and getting people enrolled and participating has been probably the biggest challenge from an employee communications perspective. We have more than 40,000 people in an operations environment around the world."

**-Rob Clark, Chief Communications Officer, Medtronic**

"While we didn't directly address productivity in our first employee survey, all signs point to stable or increased productivity. Employees are eager for credible information and transparency and our CEO has created a safe, transparent space for employees to actively participate and engage, which will further galvanize our already strong culture moving forward. The communications team has learned a lot about executive communication frequency, cadence and overall engagement during the COVID-19 response and will continue to evaluate how those learnings will impact future planning.

Most effective channels have been CEO communications, particularly the virtual all-employee meetings. I have one specific example to share that illustrates the power of CEO communication, particularly from a CEO who has already created an environment where employees are willing to share as well as is always open and transparent in his communication.

In May, Horizon received a Great Place to Work announcement and we decided to do something extra for employees as part of the announcement. The communications team quickly settled doing a video message to make a splash and our CEO filmed a quick iPhone video. The catch was that in the video (after making the special announcement) he made one request of employees – send him a note to let him know how they and their families were doing.

The power his consistent transparency resulted in almost all 1200 Horizon employees sending our CEO an e-mail, some even writing novels going into great detail about families, friends, etc.”

**-Geoff Curtis, Executive Vice President, Corporate Affairs and Chief Communications Officer, Horizon Therapeutics**

“We did not see any degradation in productivity, which is a testament to the Stagwell team. In fact, we had a solid 1Q, including significant organic growth in the PR/communications sector, and we continued to do major acquisitions throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

The most effective strategy is to offer a suite of channels so you meet employees on their terms versus yours. At Stagwell, we value face-to-face communications – and we were a major user of Teams and Zoom before it was cool – as well as frequent, direct connection with every team member. This is how we ensure an ongoing two-way dialogue and continuous feedback loop.”

**-Ray Day, Vice Chair, Stagwell**

“All of our employee survey scores have sustained or improved. Productivity has also sustained for the vast majority of the organization.

Virtual Town Halls have been the most effective mode of internal communication because employees can ask questions and hear responses real-time. In times of crisis, two-way communications with leaders is critical. We have an anniversary survey for each employee, and their responses provide rolling, real-time feedback.”

**-Paul Gennaro, Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer, Voya Financial**

“Leaders are finding out two things about internal communications.

The first is that it’s working. The content, cadence, platforms, connections, tonality and frequency are moving employees across a spectrum of learning allowing them to make the arguments themselves and strengthening trust and confidence. In our firm, silos have been broken as people operate seamlessly in a virtual environment. Similarly, we are seeing the same in many of our large global clients. This is due primarily to effective, strategic internal communications. Important elements of internal communications during this time are - empathy; facts; timeliness; feedback; actions; and depth. Secondly, in other organizations, internal communications have been woefully ineffective. Much of it due to years of neglect. No investment. Tactical. Lower level staff in charge. A key take-away in this regard is COVID is

elevating internal communications to a strategic area with the requisite funding necessary to keep ahead of a changing workforce.

A key insight from COVID from an internal communications standpoint is that **organizational confidence** must be a focus for leaders even more so than productivity. Productivity is an outcome of confidence. Confidence is an outcome of information, trust, and positivity about the future. We are witnessing leaders in a variety of organizations including our own operate with humility, emotional awareness, and calmness never making predictions or judgements but dealing with events rationally.”

**-Gary Grates, President, W2O Group**

“As expected, the Communication team has seen increased productivity. Survey and anecdotal feedback indicate that employees appreciate the added tactics put in place to keep them engaged and connected.

Email is still the most effective way to reach all employees, although we do have a portal with a channel that focuses only on COVID-19 related messaging. We garner feedback through weekly surveys.”

**-Jon Harris, Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer, Conagra**

“We are seeing on-going, strong productivity and support for each other. Our employees remain actively engaged and committed to our mission of serving the needs of patients. As the COVID-19 situation evolves, we’ll look to repurpose our internal communications channels, sun-setting some and creating a hybrid approach of both virtual and in-person forums, able to reach employees wherever they’re working.

Videos, virtual sessions and executive communications have remained our most effective channels of communications. We’ve sought employee feedback on a weekly basis through an open-ended question collection tool, open leadership Q&A sessions, our weekly news digest and surveys following our talk show series episodes.”

**-Moyra Knight, Vice President Corporate Communications, Astellas US; President, Astellas Global Health Foundation**

“Our most recent survey of senior leadership indicated that despite working from home, they felt the company was as or more productive in this environment. And it’s fair to say our internal communications team has been at the forefront of taking the pulse of employees and constantly measuring our culture, to ensure our values remain in action and engagement strong.

Hearing directly from our leadership, through a variety of channels, has been the most effective method of communicating to employees. We’ve also held focus groups and surveys on a regular basis to ensure we are capturing employee sentiment and measuring engagement.”

**-Brian Lott, Chief Communications Officer, Mubadala**

“All the things we were doing to support our employees needed to be communicated. There was so much information to share that we created a special section on our intranet, Spark, which is shown above. As part of our regular cadence of communication, we held meetings with our top 150 employees and conducted a global employee town hall that more than three quarters of our employees attended.

As always, we measured the effectiveness of our efforts. We knew how many people were viewing, sharing and liking the communications on Spark, and we could see and respond to their comments. Our Culture & Talent team, with whom we partner closely, also did a survey to assess the effectiveness of the company’s actions. The survey was fielded April 7 -16. About two-thirds of our employees responded and we did well.”

**-Catherine Mathis, Chief Communications Officer, McGraw Hill**

“We know that in times of great uncertainty, when information is unavailable or confusing, people seek transparency, guidance and help to make sense of what has happened. And survey after survey over the past few months has shown that the role of communications has become even more important with the majority of employees telling us that they trust communications from their own organization more than other sources.”

**-Jennifer Mauer, Head of Global Corporate Communications, Merck**

“As the dean (chief administrative officer) of a school, I must give my full attention to this complex and evolving situation and maintain close communication with my leadership team, university administrators, and the campus Incident Management Team. Internally, decision making, actions, and communication have been challenging. Like many academic institutions, my university has been developing resumption plans for fall that have been in continuous flux since activating an emergency preparedness plan in February.

Internal communication at a university takes a two-pronged approach: campus-wide and school/college-specific. Messages sent by the university president, provost, and chief resilience officer are the main streams of information to faculty and staff. At the school level, we have near-daily consultations to determine how to keep the community informed, preserve academic continuity for our students, and encourage behaviors that protect and support us all.”

**-Juan-Carlos Molleda, Edwin L. Artzt Dean and Professor at the University of Oregon**

“Bed Bath & Beyond is in the midst of a strategic transformation, led by our CEO who joined the business only six months ago, around the same time I joined the company. The majority of our leadership team has changed, with many of our executive team appointed within the last couple of months. We were in the middle of radical changes to every aspect of our business, and communications was playing its part in establishing the narrative and building confidence around our plans. In the midst of all this, the world suddenly turned on its head.

We have learned to act with agility and decisiveness, to bring our people with us through more varied and regular communications, and to expand and deepen our network so that we can collaborate with industry partners and other key stakeholders. Our teams have found solutions

to seemingly impossible problems and brought clarity and control through these chaotic times. It's been a privilege to witness our team in action, to harness the power of communications to drive meaningful change, and to celebrate the resilience and power of our people during this most extraordinary time."

**-Dominic Pendry, Head of Corporate Communications, Bed Bath & Beyond Inc.**

"Interpersonal relationships matter in business whether your role is general management, sales, finance, operations, marketing, communications or public affairs. But those relationships can still be maintained even if employees aren't all housed in the same office space. In fact, a Gallup survey showed that employee engagement was highest among workers who spend three to four days a week away from their office. The trend toward remote work forces was already in full swing, but now it has accelerated."

**-Doug Pinkham, President, Public Affairs Council**

"Internal Communications is a clear priority at Cox Automotive and is consistently front and center with our leadership. An internal communicator sits at the leadership table of most of our businesses, and the team plays a critical role in our organization and is well respected for its strategic counsel and execution.

COVID-19 made that focus even stronger as the need for internal communications took precedence over nearly every other business need. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, a large percentage of Cox Automotive employees began working from home. The work-from-home isolation, coupled with health and safety fears, created an anxious workforce that needed a multitude of communications to help them feel informed and motivated.

Our "Voice of the Employee" pulse surveys showed that an overwhelming majority of employees were very satisfied with the internal communications they were receiving. In fact, 96% of employees responded favorably to the survey question, "Cox's communications are keeping me informed about useful resources." We were also pleased to see our leaders were having a positive impact. When presented with the statement, "My leader is keeping me informed about changes that affect me," 92% of employees responded favorably.

The work-from-home change and many other big and small adjustments to how we did our jobs and ran our businesses had a negligible impact on productivity. Nearly 50% of our employees said they had no challenges arising from remote work. And the open-ended comments in our survey reinforced that employees appreciated the open and ongoing communication, they felt that Cox takes care of them and they had a positive transition from the office to remote work. The biggest concern among employees was the future stability of the company, which was expected and exacerbated when we furloughed roughly one third of the workforce, and increasingly employees have struggled with new forms of work-life balance.

We are fortunate in that we have a CEO who is a huge proponent of transparent communications, and that also showed up in our survey. As I mentioned, we furloughed 12,000+ employees in May. Our CEO had been regularly communicating with our employees

about the state of our business and had messaged early and often that our business was being impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and we were going to have to make some hard decisions that no one wanted to make. After paying employees who couldn't do their jobs from home for nearly three months, we announced the furloughs.

The CEO's push to always be transparent resulted in many comments on our survey including some like this: "The email today confirmed my thoughts of being grateful for transparent communication," and "I am thankful for everything the company has done and remain proud to work here. I can only hope the economy can turnaround sooner than later and we can welcome back many lost employees." This was very gratifying to see.

Aside from the surveys, our C-suite executives set out on virtual listening tours with employee groups. They joined pre-existing staff meetings, met with our Employee Resource Groups, held regular leader calls and just ... listened. They heard the same themes and concerns that were highlighted in the survey, and they also learned that working from home was not as big of a challenge as we might have all guessed it would be."

**-Shirley Powell, Senior Vice President of Communications and Industry Relations, Cox Automotive**

"We know from our own pulse surveys that our employees are grateful to the leaders and the company for all the efforts to protect jobs, that they are thankful to be able to work remotely to be there for their families (many are parents of school-aged children or supporting elderly family members), and that they are anxious about the future (either because a spouse lost his/her job or a college-aged student's plan is in limbo). Satisfaction with the current efforts to communicate are high as is trust that the leaders can guide the company through this crisis. What we need to watch is the duration of this crisis; working remotely as a novelty is OK for most, we know; but, if some are going to be working remotely for extended periods of time, that requires a different mindset, set of tools, productivity measures, and some planning to understand that some of the team may be in the office while others are remote. For leaders, that takes extra effort to avoid "drift" particularly for a corporate culture as invested in engagement as ours. Post-COVID, I can see that the complexion of our workforce will likely change based on those who take the separation packages, and we will need to work hard on our internal communications to first understand the demographic of the various work groups (pilots, flight attendants, finance associates, mechanics, etc.) and then to be able to create communication that keeps them highly engaged (even in an environment which will likely have a higher degree of uncertainty).

Video has been very effective. We're seeking feedback via blog posts, pulse polls/surveys, employee roundtables and an "Ask Gary" email (our CEO uses that content for his twice weekly video series that we serve up to employees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. We also have digital signs (500 or so) in breakrooms across the country which are ideal for quick hit video snippets, headlines, and infographics to keep employees updated on all the latest information. We also set up a section of our intranet dedicated to all our COVID content, so it's in a one-stop resource for our employees."



**-Linda Rutherford, Senior Vice President, Chief Communications Officer, Southwest Airlines**

“With a widely dispersed and very diverse array of stakeholders, we are making the most use of the most accessible technologies – email, text, websites, social media and videoconferencing. Social media is important, but more as an amplifier than the principal platform for communications. We have found that the more complicated messages – and much of what we are conveying about health and safety information is complicated – are best delivered using the simplest technology, which is why email remains by far the most effective medium for reaching our community (students, faculty, staff and parents).”

**-Michael Schoenfeld, Chief Communications and Government Relations Officer, Duke University**

“Employees tell us that their preferred channel for receiving communications is face to face, from their supervisors. In the new workforce reality, that channel will present some challenges. At USAA, for example, most of our employees told us in a survey they prefer to work full- or part-time from home even after it’s safe to return to the office.

When face to face isn’t available, leaders need new tools to connect with their teams and cascade key messages for priority enterprise initiatives. We have to rethink our leader toolkits, moving from formal talking points and white papers to consumable multimedia assets that embrace the conversational nature of one-on-one meetings and provide the bottom line up front.”

**-Chris Talley, Chief Communications Officer and Senior Vice President, USAA**

“Communications teams – particularly employee and internal communications teams – will play a key role in making this new model successful. We will need to find new and creative ways to connect people and ideas, maintain corporate cultures, deliver important and timely messages, and create natural opportunities for engagement and fun.

In some cases, we can make small tweaks to old habits and do our jobs just fine. Earlier gripes about people multi-tasking or not paying attention on conference calls can easily be avoided by simply turning the camera on during a conference call instead of just “phoning it in.” And, to be honest, we likely will benefit from more voices chiming in and diverse experiences being represented as we more intently listen and participate. Instead of a two hour meeting every other week, we might need to host 30 minute meetings twice a week to make sure teams are all on the same page.

But we haven’t fully solved for the spontaneous interaction and expanded social networks that are often formed in a work place – the impromptu conversations and bonding that occurs between meetings; bumping into a former colleague or a friendly face in the hallway; meeting people that aren’t part of your immediate work group but have similar interests.”

**-Jennifer Temple, Chief Communications Officer, Hewlett Packard Enterprise**

“My guess is that overall satisfaction with the organization has stayed the same. No better, no worse. And our numbers have always been relatively high particularly compared to other healthcare systems because we've invested a lot in creating a culture where people just enjoy coming to work and doing what they do. So, I would say it's remained about the same and that's against an already very high bar. One of the things that we have done because like all healthcare systems, we have suffered financial losses as a result of the pandemic, is we have reduced the base salaries of our top leaders. But we've not done anything with our rank and file folks and hope to not do that. In what we call our volume-driven areas, we have flexed volume down as needed. For example, if you work in the orthopedic area and we're doing fewer orthopedic procedures, we don't need all those orthopedic doctors and nurses who might be scheduled to be there. We've given them reduced hours.

When it's come to making those financial decisions, there are probably people who were less satisfied with those decisions. The context in which we announced these was, we believe it's better to take on some reductions and still remain a financially strong and viable healthcare system versus chugging along as if there's been no financial impact and then finding out later on we have to make drastic decisions that might result in loss of jobs. That's where we don't want to go. I think people understand that. I think they appreciate the fact that we're really thinking about this. We also tell them that if they have to go out, to wear their masks and just be smart.”

**-Chuck Wallington, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing & Communications Officer, Cone Health**

“DE&I never took a back seat. D&I was a priority for us that kicked off in 2018, and it is now taking even more of a lead. It is about how we as a company approach the world. We are focused on being an empathetic organization at all times. We are also focused on an environment that feel safe to discuss and learn more. Not one that already knows what to do.”

**-Danielle Ward, Understood.org**

“I think we are working more. Most people are working at more than 100% at my company. I constantly hear that they feel like they should have slowed down, yet there is burn out. That burn out could be related to the other factors at home (virtual school, etc.,) but there is no impression that people are less productive right now.

Surveys have been the most effective mode of internal communication. We conducted a short survey. They don't mind telling us how they feel if it only takes five minutes. Anything more is harder to achieve.”

**-Senior Communications Executive in the Pharmaceuticals Industry**