



# Leadership Perspectives:

## Leading and Looking Ahead Through COVID-19











**An e-book by the Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm on how communication leaders are responding to the pandemic and other organizational challenges**

*“This is the third in a series of co-branded research reports that has shed light on the thoughts, feelings and actions of America’s most senior communications professionals as they help steer organizations through the uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our intent in publishing these reports is to share best practices from the best minds in the profession and help each and every one of us anticipate and prepare for the unknown.”*

– **Dr. Tina McCorkindale**, President and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations and  
**Steve Cody**, CEO and Founder, Peppercomm

As COVID-19 continues to threaten the health of millions worldwide, it also continues to significantly impact businesses and has led many corporate leaders to shift their priorities. For some, this means focusing more on internal engagement; for others, it necessitates a refreshed look at mobile technologies and the role they will play in this “new normal.” Despite the challenges currently facing almost every company in the global marketplace, many top executives are also looking at the opportunities within the crisis, assessing the makeup of the workplace as well as recruitment and retention practices. This is even more crucial as the plague of systemic racism has become a focal point of public discourse, leading many organizations to revisit their corporate purpose and work to be part of the solution in this area.

The Institute of Public Relations (IPR) and Peppercomm are proud to present their third joint study of 2020 on the effects of COVID-19 on businesses and how leaders are responding. While the first two reports provided important numerical findings on corporate preparedness and collaboration regarding the pandemic, this new report provides an in-depth analysis from 30 senior communications executives on how they are leading and looking ahead of this crisis. Interviewees represent various industries, including healthcare, manufacturing, retail and finance.

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

Barbara is the Global CEO of Hotwire and the former founder and CEO of Eastwick Communications – which was acquired by Hotwire in 2016. She has more than 25 years' experience working with brands to tell their stories, accelerate growth and build value working in Silicon Valley and beyond. Barbara has partnered with some of the world's biggest technology brands as well as emerging leaders to create high-impact communication strategies and was named in Business Insider's 2014 list of 50 Best Public Relations People in Tech and one of the Top 5 Women in PR by the PR World Awards. More recently, she has been recognized as one of San Francisco Bay Times' Most Influential Women In Bay Area Business, one of the winners of CEO Today's Business Women of the Year, and a finalist in Silicon Valley's Women in IT Awards Series.



## Shifting from External Promotion to Internal Engagement

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, few marketing priorities have proven they will remain as vital an asset as communications. From reporting accurate, global health information to supporting the maintenance of business continuity to adequately announcing new work-from-home (WFH), furlough and layoff policies, communications roles and priorities have played a vital role for clients and corporations over the past few months of upending change.

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.

The complete adjustment to WFH policies has been a great example of this. Corporations have had to address (1) how to function at the same capacity with a disparate workforce, as well as (2) keep employees informed, engaged, on task and in touch with one another. These are incredibly difficult communications challenges in the best of times, but even more so when they are forced without preparation.

In addition to finding the right communications tools – Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc. – the companies that have fared the best as WFH policies continue into the summer are those that embraced the change as an adjustment of their company culture instead of creating a Band-Aid fix to maintain practices that were no longer effective when not working in the office. For example, at Hotwire, we have been building what we call a



“thoughtful working” policy over the past few years. Meaning, we trust our employees to be the adults that they are: to be accountable and complete their work on time and well, but to do so where, when and how it makes the most sense for them. This mindset made the shift to completely working from home a much smoother transition than most companies, and allowed us to dedicate resources to improving the at-home experience (with scheduled meditations, healthy guidelines and weekly leadership video updates) instead of simply adjusting to it.

If not already in place, agencies should be using this time to truly implement policies that support their own employees, and not simply recommend those policies to clients. Healthier, happier and more supported communications professionals will be able to weather this and future storms in a much more productive way.

One aspect often overlooked but vitally important to supporting your employees as they work from home: a continued focus on diversity and inclusion initiatives. Often, this falls by the wayside when more “urgent” needs arise, but as we are reminded time and time again, D&I considerations should be at the very center of employee policies and communications.

Keep in mind that working from home may not necessarily be an equitable circumstance for many. Parents homeschooling young children, BIPOC facing renewed uncertainty in light of recent civil unrest and young workers in small, shared accommodations are all facing different challenges on a day-to-day basis. Not every situation is the same, so ensure the communication and implementation of new policies is as equitable as possible, keeping empathy at the core.

Like a lot of leaders, I don’t know when we will finally return to the “new normal,” but I do anticipate that the communications industry has been permanently affected by the change. An emphasized focus on internal communications – for client crises, employee engagement and continued work practices – will remain a vital need for both corporations and agencies. PR agencies with diversified offerings and experience will be best prepared to weather the current crisis and support client priorities on the other side.





**Matt Bianco**

*Head of Corporate Public Affairs,  
Novelis, Inc.*

Matt Bianco is currently the Head of Corporate Public Affairs for Novelis, Inc. the world leader in aluminum rolling and recycling with 33 operations in 9 countries, and approximately 15,000 employees worldwide.

# Novelis

Not just aluminum, Novelis Aluminum.™

## Focusing on Transparent and Frequent Internal Communication

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

At Novelis, our communications efforts have been aimed at helping ensure employee safety and business continuity. To that end, we have significantly increased our communications with employees, customers and suppliers, establishing and maintaining new and innovative channels to keep stakeholders informed about the company's actions and operations during this evolving pandemic. A majority of our actions – specifically around safety – have been informed by global government agencies and health authorities.

**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

That's a heck of a question. I think the business community has surprised itself with how well it can function virtually with people working from home. Productivity is up and people are able to take more intentional steps to achieve work-life balance, from spending more time with their kids and partners, to exercise, to finding new and innovative ways to connect with each other. And dogs love it! While many people (and all dogs!) are enjoying the ability to work from home, it is becoming increasingly evident that we need to do more around our culture to ensure we maintain a collective and collaborative workplace – albeit remotely.



**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

We have made every effort to keep our people employed – we believe that is the best way we can keep our families and communities safe. Novelis has also made targeted charitable contributions, as well as PPE, to help curb the spread of COVID-19 in our local communities and to provide aid to those who have been adversely impacted. These donations include in-kind and financial support to local hospitals, food banks, community health organizations, and school systems around the world. Communications has been instrumental in this work (CSR is a part of our function) and has made – and will continue to make – these types of recommendations moving forward.

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

At Novelis, we activated our Global Crisis Team to ensure a coordinated and holistic approach across all Novelis regions and facilities to effectively respond to the evolving COVID-19 situation. The Team includes our CEO, CFO, Regional Presidents, Global Security, Environmental Health & Safety, Legal and Communications personnel. This group has been meeting three times per week and will continue to meet for the foreseeable future.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

Like many companies, we have become very familiar and increasingly facile with virtual meeting technology solutions – you name the technology, we’re probably using it.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company’s response to the crisis?**

At Novelis, we are driven by our purpose of shaping a sustainable world together, and are committed to keeping our people and communities healthy and safe during these challenging times. From our charitable giving, to work-from-home flexibility, to using our aluminum to make cradles for ventilators, our purpose is at the heart of all we do.

## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

Communications has been instrumental in return-to-work preparation. We have created and distributed an Employee Handbook to all employees with general and site-specific information to help ensure a smooth and safe transition back to the workplace. It includes resources and guidance, as well as FAQs to address top employee concerns. With stable operations in place and colleagues working effectively from home, we believe that a pragmatic, phased approach to returning to work will significantly reduce the risk for potential future infection and help keep our employees safe.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

Our company has embraced working remotely and is currently evaluating the implementation of a long-term Work from Home policy. As a global Communications function, we are now speaking more regularly as a team – given the critical need for message alignment across regions during COVID-19.

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## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

We do not see 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.”

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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!



### **Jill Carapellotti**

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

Jill Carapellotti is Group Vice President, Corporate Communications for Macy's Inc. She has two decades of global strategic communications experience with specialization in corporate communications, internal communications, change and issues management, executive coaching and corporate branding.

She held positions and managed projects within the full spectrum of corporate communications including: internal communications, external communications, media relations, corporate giving, video and graphic production, CSR, issues and crisis management.

She has worked within multiple disciplines, including automotive, beauty, consumer goods, education, entertainment, fashion, finance, healthcare, hospitality, information systems, real estate, retail, technology, and telecommunications.

She is an active member of New York Women in Communications, International Association of Business Communicators, and a Trustee for the Institute for Public Relations.



## **Increased Collaboration: A Tool for Success Amid a Pandemic**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Macy's is dedicated to keeping our colleagues, customers and communities informed, from the policies in place to keep them safe as our stores reopen, to ensuring our colleagues have the resources and information necessary for their wellbeing. As we have furloughed team members across the country, we have worked to keep these valued colleagues updated on the business, but also in the loop on key initiatives that impact them, such as benefits open enrollment and the company's support of equality in the face of national civil unrest.

Some challenges we have encountered are around keeping our furloughed colleagues engaged. We are also working through the challenges of keeping up with the speed of change and having fewer team members to get the job done.

We continue to look to government agencies, such as the Center of Disease Control (CDC) for accurate and up-to-date information related to COVID-19.

**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

The communications role at Macy's will broaden as we move into the future. We will continue to cultivate a strong voice in response to the needs of our colleagues and customers. Our communications team is not just managing how we talk about what we're doing, but we are also at the table to support the work of policy making, crisis management and business resiliency.





**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

The safety and wellbeing of our colleagues, customers and communities is a top priority. Communications has been closely partnered on all efforts to ensure we are doing what is best for our colleagues and the communities we serve. We've implemented safety and wellness practices in our stores, call centers and distribution facilities, including hand sanitizers, temperature checks and plexi glass partitions. We've also addressed the emotional toll the pandemic has had on our colleagues, encouraging those eligible to utilize personal time off, practice work life balance and seek support through our Employee Assistance Program, which provides resources and counseling at no additional cost to our colleagues.

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Collectively, we are all in the trenches, and our C-suite leaders are together with us on the front lines to help make decisions and drive change.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

We've leveraged existing technology and our intranet sites to reach our colleagues, as well as email and text message when appropriate. We've also embraced virtual platforms to bring our teams together, including Microsoft Teams for webcasts and collaborative meetings. While sheltering-in-place has kept our teams separated, our communications efforts are allowing us to stay closer than ever before.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

At Macy's, giving back is in our DNA. We've supported our local communities in many ways, including raising over \$1 million dollars for the Meals on Wheels COVID-19 Response Fund, providing 100,000 meals and check-ins for vulnerable seniors. Additionally, some of our office locations have donated perishables to local shelters and food banks while our teams work remotely. In some store locations, our parking lots have held graduation ceremonies for local high schools, enabling seniors to walk across the stage and receive their diplomas with their extended family viewing live from their cars and listening on an FM channel.

## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

Communications is closely involved with the teams establishing our return-to-office plan, and we’ve seen great efficiency and collaboration across teams virtually.

We’ve given careful thought to how we will approach the return to our offices. We will take all the necessary precautions for the safety of our colleagues. The return to offices will be a slow and measured process with all decisions made carefully based on conditions in the community, government and health guidelines, and readiness of the office environment.

At this time, we do not plan to fully reopen our corporate offices until, at least, September 2020. Our teams are diverse with a variety of roles, needs and specific space requirements that need to be considered. As a result, we’ve identified three types of role classifications that we will use to build our plan to return to the office: highly dependent on the office; somewhat dependent; or not at all dependent. At the right time and when it is safe, colleagues will return based on these classifications.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

This pandemic has re-shaped how we think about remote work, shifted our view about the importance of an office environment and taught us about flexibility. We have learned how to adapt and be efficient without being together physically. We have remained connected, building relationships and achieving camaraderie despite the distance. Most importantly, we have experienced a significant increase in collaboration and speed of decision-making that has been vital not only to our culture but to our business strategy.

So, now is the right time to re-frame our mindset about how we work. The role of the office will remain important, but it may not play as much of a central role as it has in the past – at least in the near-term. Getting our work done is the primary focus, regardless of where that work physically takes place. As a company, we will embrace a virtual and flexible work approach that is more advanced than our policies in the past.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

Our colleagues are as richly diverse as the communities we serve and DE&I efforts remain a priority. As we continue to look to the future, our strategy to drive DE&I is integrated into the work we need to accomplish. We expect our colleagues to hold us accountable to the goals and commitments that we have made to prioritize DE&I. The pandemic does not change our ultimate pledge to promote diversity and inclusion at Macy's and respect everyone who walks through our doors.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION (CONT.)

### **Additional comments? Anything we may have missed?**

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.

### **With the recent protests against anti-racism and police brutality, how has your CEO or company reacted to this crisis, internally and/or externally? How do you see these events changing, if at all, corporate investment in things like DE&I and other approaches to combatting racism?**

At Macy's, we embed DE&I into how we think, act and operate. Our commitment to DE&I has been a priority for years and it's an investment in the work we continue to do every day. Our Chairman and CEO has addressed the company's support of racial equality externally on social media and in an open email to customers. We've also committed \$1 million to our social justice partners to combat social and racial injustice, including National Urban League and National Action Network.

For our internal colleagues, our CEO hosted a "Can We Talk?" session with Dr. John Fitzgerald Gates, Vice Provost for Diversity and Inclusion at Purdue University. This session invited all Macy's, Inc. colleagues (regardless of furlough status) to attend and listen to an open conversation about systemic racism inherent in the recent acts of racial injustice. As a follow up, we held a series of smaller discussions with colleagues to continue to listen and better understand how we ensure Macy's, Inc. has a culture where every colleague is seen, is safe, and has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Colleagues were encouraged to participate in a period of silence for George Floyd, his family, and other black lives that have been lost, pausing for eight minutes and 46 seconds in silent reflection. Anti-racism and allyship resources have been provided to all colleagues for further education. People Leaders are conducting open and candid conversations with their teams and creating safe, supportive environments that foster compassion and empathy.

As America's Department Store, we remain committed to DE&I and cultivating a workforce that is as diverse as the communities we serve. We still have work to do. On our agenda is to attract and retain top multicultural talent, both by developing the potential of our internal talent, and through our external recruitment efforts. Our goal is to have 30% of VP and above roles held by minority talent by 2025. We continue to listen and learn from our colleagues, and while we cannot always control what happens outside of our stores and facilities, we can shape the culture within. And that is one of inclusion that welcomes and respects all, believing and acting on the principle that all of us are created equal.



**Rob Clark**

*Chief Communications Officer,  
Medtronic*

Rob Clark is the Chief Communications Officer for Medtronic, the world's leading medical technology solutions company. In this role, Clark leads Medtronic's global public relations, employee communications, corporate marketing, brand, digital and social media and philanthropy communications teams worldwide.

# Medtronic

## Reconfiguring Business Operations for A New Type of Workplace

**What has gone really well, and what has been a big challenge for Medtronic specifically relating to COVID-19 and this period of time?**

We've got a range of communications workstreams across the board so there's really not one aspect of COVID where we are not involved. We've also had a different set of workstreams around employee communications because in our operations and in our sales force, we've had thousands of people that are continuing to go to work every day in the middle of COVID because people still need medical devices, such as pacemakers and stents. We've had a big segment of our workforce who have been going to work every day so we've had to communicate security, safety and health measures so they can continue to work.

We've also had to reconfigure our manufacturing operations for social distancing while moving other employees to remote work. We've also had to account for a range of external communications regarding ventilators as we are one of four of the largest ventilator manufacturers in the world. To expedite the production of ventilators, we did an open source initiative where we put our engineering plans online for a particular model and had over 200,000 registrations for that information globally. That's resulted in a whole host of external communications.

But, I'd say probably 75% of our work is focused around employee communications, 20% around ventilators, and the rest has been communicating the impact on the business, which has been dramatic. Our CEO does a weekly video on our intranet. He's been doing a weekly COVID update, which has been incredibly popular. We did a live town hall last week, our first quarterly town hall, and we had 22,000 people attend online. We've just been producing story after story on COVID, the impacts on the business, what our business is doing, human interest stories and what we're doing from a philanthropic standpoint.





### **What have been some of the challenges with that?**

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.

### **How are you ensuring DE&I initiatives are continuing or still embedded throughout?**

It's been one of our top five corporate issues for the last ten years; it didn't go away. The biggest casualty for us was that we won the Catalyst Award, which is one of the preeminent corporate inclusion and diversity awards in the country, but the date of the award celebration fell on one of the first weeks where COVID was coming down, so they had to cancel. It was in New York City. It was a bummer that we couldn't celebrate that recognition, because that's a major accomplishment. But, it hasn't stopped our fundamental momentum. Every time we do a town hall, there is a focus on inclusion and diversity. It's in our top five goals for typically every VP. Nothing there has stopped.

**How do you see DE&I efforts generally changing in the future? Especially because you're in Minneapolis, you have a very interesting viewpoint on that. Do you want to talk about that and how Medtronic has reacted?**

I think the corporations here are at a bit of a loss of words right now, other than we all recognize that the fundamental issues with race and bigotry are unacceptable and have to be rooted out. In terms of what to do next, we'll invest in business redevelopment, and things like that. But clearly, there's something much deeper here. I think the frustration is that this community and our community partners have tried so hard, and yet we still do have the largest wealth disparity in the country. We have the biggest achievement gap in the country. There's a huge dichotomy in this community.

The wealth disparity between African Americans and the rest of Minnesota has always been an issue. We have not solved it. Clearly what we've been doing is not working. I think what we're doing at Medtronic is a little bit of the back to the drawing board. We are thinking, with our assets and resources and expertise, what's our contribution towards solving the underlying problem?

**What do you think has changed in the comms function post-COVID? I know we're not through COVID. But what do you see as potential permanent changes? Because you've talked a lot about internal comms, do you think there will be more emphasis on it?**

We were in the middle of a big intranet transition and it's importance has been magnified exponentially. Part of the reason we did it was to take on more of a real-time news feel. It's an accumulation of stories almost in real-time, stories about what's going on within the company and our employees have gravitated there heavily during the pandemic. The biggest issue we've had is being able to have enough people and resources to keep up at the pace that people are wanting information. How do we sustain that? I don't have 15 journalists walking around here that can produce news and updates constantly so sustaining the volume and timeliness has been the challenge.

## **Any other changes that you think may be more permanent in communications moving forward?**

Generally, you want your comms people located together physically, but the reality is, we've all worked incredibly well remotely. So, remote work is here to stay in some form going forward. I think that, like everybody else, we've been struggling with inclusion and diversity, and bringing in a diverse talent mix. I think a little bit of the problem is we're trying to get diverse talent to relocate to certain locations that aren't as diverse or where people may not want to live. I think we'll do a lot more remote work and have less of a perspective of where that work has to be situated. We have locations all over the country if people need a location to tether to.

## **It sounds like you've been coordinating quite a bit with a lot of other C-suite leaders in the organization; how has the response to that been?**

We have a COVID Crisis Response Team. We meet daily. We have an executive committee meeting each week with our communications report out there. We've had multiple report outs to our Board. It's a full-court press of our key human resources, operations, government affairs, communications, and legal teams.

## **How are you prepping for employees to return to the corporate office?**

We've had a sub-team of the crisis team working specifically on the return to office. We completed our return to office toolkits for our facilities a couple of weeks ago, and now we're in the process of getting authorization for the return to work at a site by site level. Social distancing, PPE, and so forth has to be in place before they're given a green light to go back and we have around 160 locations around the world. We've only had three that have gone back to work so far.



### **Sarah Crawshaw**

*Managing Director, Asia Pacific,  
Taylor Bennett Heyman*

Sarah Crawshaw is the Managing Director, Asia Pacific at Taylor Bennett Heyman. She consults clients across all industries and works closely with communications and corporate affairs professionals to help them navigate and build their careers. Sarah has considerable experience in communications search and has provided talent management solutions to many leading listed companies in markets across the Asia Pacific region. She also consults with businesses on organizational design and competency framework development.

Sarah sits on the Institute for Public Relations' Board of Trustees. She is also an active member of the International Association of Business Communicators, as well as Page Up, the Arthur W. Page Society's membership organization for tomorrow's CCOs.

Prior to her career in Asia, Sarah worked in executive search for Taylor Bennett in London, again specializing in communications, with a focus on UK public affairs and investor relations assignments. She holds a Master's in Economics and Politics from the University of Edinburgh and a Bachelor of Laws from the BPP Law School, London.



TAYLOR BENNETT HEYMAN

## **Opportunity in Crisis and A Changing Global Landscape**

### **How has the pandemic affected companies being able to hire senior executives in Asia?**

Surprisingly in Hong Kong, we haven't been affected as much by COVID-19 as many other parts of the world. Business is certainly down, but we've taken on new business and placed people during this period, and they've joined their respective organizations, even going into the office because we haven't ever been in full-blown lockdown. But, inevitably, in a lot of markets the onboarding process will be impacted and delayed.

### **What do you consider to be the opportunities for communications to demonstrate business value during the pandemic?**

I think there has been an opportunity for communications to shine during this period by working more closely with product development teams; providing input to these teams as to what consumers, clients and society want and need during this time. Communications teams act as the window to the outside world for businesses, which gives them an opportunity to help in the creation of solutions for this environment; solutions and products that could ultimately help to enhance a business' reputation.

I don't know whether communication professionals have been doing that, but I think that's a key opportunity. And we've certainly seen a number of job openings in marketing communications during this period.

Another area that communicators will be having to really flex their muscles right now is media engagement and gaining share of voice. A lot of the media reporting is focused on the pandemic, meanwhile people are suffering from (social) media saturation as a result of relying wholly on social media channels to interact with people during the pandemic. One potential consequence of these dynamics is people switching-off from the media due to saturation. Which means that communications teams will be having to work even harder to tell their businesses' stories.

Certain communications agencies in Asia are clearly doing well out of this situation, particularly the ones that help in terms of crisis and business continuity. They are helpful in providing companies with an external perspective and objective guidance to manage



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the scenario. Plus, organizations don't want to invest in permanent headcount at the moment. Most businesses are only fulfilling a select few strategic appointments right now. Everything else is on hold. Agencies can profit from this because they can help to fill gaps, without placing the same pressure on budgets as permanent headcount otherwise would.

**In your market, how prevalent is the integration of marketing and communication? Do potential executive hires have experience in both product and communications?**

We have observed certain businesses, within certain industries, showing a desire to integrate marketing and communications. But people tend to have experience and skills in one or the other. Over the course of the last five years or so, we've seen people trying to gain experience in both marketing and communications, recognizing that this is the direction that a lot of businesses may go in, particularly in markets like China. Almost every communications professional that I speak to in China wants to gain experience in marketing.

**What other dynamics and trends are you seeing in terms of hiring in the field of communications?**

An area where we are seeing an investment in hiring - which started before the pandemic and will likely continue - is, public policy and government relations. This virus has accelerated these dynamics. Businesses are going to need people with that expertise. That's where we're envisaging most opportunity in the next year to two years, frankly, and it's across the board in Asia.

Another dynamic is the reduced emphasis on regional headcount and an increased emphasis on people with deep market expertise and a localization of expertise. I think that's going to be accelerated by COVID-19, primarily because this is a region where businesses have often relied on people being able to hop between markets. I mean, we're a case in point as a business; we have a regional center and we service six or seven markets from Hong Kong, but it relies on us being able to go to those markets.

That's impossible in this environment, for starters. Secondly, you've got the rise in nationalism and increasing concerns about whether globalization has gone too far. Businesses are now looking at supply chain risks, realizing that they're too reliant on the globalization dynamic, but they're not necessarily going to pull out of those countries where they've got strong revenue streams like China. They're going to have to localize more, I suspect, and bring in more local expertise that can play well into their international headquarters. I think that's where we're going to see a bigger shift. We were seeing it already in the hiring that we do. A big





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proportion of our work is country specific senior roles. I think we'll see a stronger emphasis on that and it will continue to increase.

Public policy and government relations are heavily reliant on local market expertise and that's partly why I think we will see more opportunity in that space. Plus, the geopolitical dynamic means that public policy and government relations expertise are a necessity for a lot of businesses.

### **What differences are you seeing from the 2008-2009 financial crisis and today?**

It's a big contrast between this situation and what we saw in 2008-2009. Clearly, the dynamics are completely different because the cause is completely different. In the 2008 financial crisis, what we saw was a huge surge in business from financial services organizations. They were looking for quality communications professionals to help (re)build reputation.

We are not going to see that as a result of this downturn. This is a very different beast. It will not be overcome with reputation recovery for organizations because that's not what sits at the heart of it. And therefore, unfortunately, what we have seen quite a bit at the moment is people leaving posts and businesses choosing not to refill that post, and instead, look at that function and say, "Okay. Who have we got in our business who could probably plug and play and do that as well?" And we've spoken to a few organizations who have done exactly that; they've said, "We've got somebody who does our marketing communications, so let's just give them the communications to manage too." I would hope it's a temporary thing.

The reality is, businesses are trying to work out what they're facing here, and many people don't have a living memory of when economies have just ground to a halt for months.

What we tend to see from businesses in economic downturns is a sort of internal reflection of capability capacity. They're asking, what do we actually need? So, we're going to see a fallout as businesses start to reflect on whether they've become a bit too heavy in areas that are not necessary. Once that clear out has happened, what normally happens is a further reflection and realization that "we do have a gap here and we do need to fill it." I think that the government bailout packages will probably prolong that process. Whereas in previous downturns, that process has happened in a certain timeframe. I think the timeframe will be longer this time around because the packages are designed to help stem layoffs; the terms of these bail-out packages will therefore discourage companies from conducting any immediate restructuring exercises. So, in that sense, I think the recovery of the recruitment market will be quite slow.



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**If you look into your crystal ball, what do you see for the future as we try to move on from this pandemic?**

I'm just trying to be optimistic. I think it is important to reflect on the difference between this downturn and the previous one in 2008-2009. The fundamentals underpinning business have not caused this downturn, whereas in 2008-2009 bad business and poor economics were absolutely the cause. So, I'm hopeful that there will be a reasonably quick bounce back in terms of business activity.

Nevertheless, I think that this pandemic will undoubtedly catalyze change. Businesses will adjust to a new world that is much more localized. I think they will ultimately create more headcount in countries where they have local business operations, but they'll do so having slimmed down on their regional centers.

We were actually seeing this with some clients before the pandemic. And it is not just a case of companies stripping out regional headcount in favor of local market focused roles. Some companies are being creative about this, putting regional headcount in different markets. For example, we placed somebody at the end of last year in Shanghai to perform a regional role, even though the regional center for the business is in Singapore. I expect that we may see more of that going on.

Now that the world of business has shown that it is possible to operate without conducting business face-to-face, business travel inevitably will reduce. People are going to use video conferencing systems more and there's going to be a rise in tools and platforms that will be so much better for that. There seems to be a dichotomy of trends taking place – in some ways we have and will become more globally connected as a result of the pandemic but the dynamics of globalization are going to change and there is undoubtedly going to be an element of retrenchment from reliance on global supply chains.

Another interesting point to consider is how the virus has potentially accelerated the move toward stakeholder capitalism. I think that this presents some real opportunities for the communications function in the future. And so, although the immediate landscape from a hiring perspective is not looking terribly rosy, I do think that we will see job and role creation taking place in the field of communications in the relatively near future.



**Geoff Curtis**

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

Geoff Curtis is executive vice president, corporate affairs and chief communications officer at Horizon Therapeutics, overseeing corporate and brand communications, government affairs, patient advocacy and corporate social responsibility, sustainability and impact. He has more than two decades of health communications experience and has held roles on the agency and client side.



## **In a Post-COVID World, Trust Will Be Paramount**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Transparency and accountability are two of our core values and that is how we've centered our communications approach during the crisis. Even during a disruptive time, we are value focused, which makes it more business as usual from a communications standpoint than disruptive. Sure, some of the mechanisms and cadence may change, but the alignment to these values does not change.

For us, we don't have a scorecard on "what has gone well" or "what has been challenging" because we are always transparent with and accountable to our internal and external stakeholders. Although our intention hasn't changed, where we have focused and learned is with cadence and message clarity since this is a different situation and there is a greater demand for information and guidance. Some of what we learned will be considered as we move into our return to office/field communications.

As for COVID-specific sources, we rely on the CDC, WHO, as well as state departments of health and country-specific health authorities for up-to-date information and guidance. With a large sales force, we are relying heavily on state level guidance to determine a safe reentry into the field.



## **What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

While it's hard to predict the depth of the impact on the business world overall, one thing we all will agree on is that the pre-COVID office as we knew it will no longer exist. We can expect more remote work moving forward and those companies that will transition back into an office will likely do so in a staggered and limited capacity. Speaking for Horizon specifically, we have always had a flexible work policy with the ability to work remotely on a regular basis, so this coupled with what we have experienced during COVID-19 will not be a significant adjustment for employees. In addition, a large segment of our employee population (sales force) is remote, so there will not be any significant change as it relates to an office environment.

In the post-COVID world, communicators will need to increase their focus on: 1) CEO/C-suite visibility particularly with internal stakeholders, 2) information flow/cadence/transparency and 3) information quality and tone. Trust will be paramount and it will be up to the communicators to instill that trust with internal and external stakeholders.

## **What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

The overall employee response was a massive coordination between internal comms and human resources – not just on the rollout of the COVID-specific benefits, but also on all of the overall messaging used to answer pressing employee questions and develop surveys to test how employees are feeling. The communications function helped to make sure employees feel supported and know they are in safe, good hands.

Overall, our internal communications played an integral role, in partnership with our human resources organization, in the messaging and as well as guiding people toward the current benefits that exist.

From a pure tactical, HR benefits standpoint, we instituted a COVID-19 Leave Policy, which offers two weeks paid leave for recovery for an employee or his or her family member; 12 weeks of paid leave for severe COVID-19 cases for an employee or family member; policy also offers 12 weeks of paid leave for our medical professionals to volunteer or be called upon for their services. In addition, our existing wellness benefits include MD Live, a service for employees feeling ill to virtually connect with a physician; an Employee Assistance Program which provides professional



support and guidance on a range of topics related to family, work, money and health; and Headspace, an app that each employee has a membership to, offering meditations and sleep aids, which all proved and continue to be particularly useful during the pandemic.

Additionally, the internal communications function developed a COVID-19 specific intranet page, which served as the “source of truth” for Horizon-focused support and information along with feature articles on how to work remotely, and stay healthy, connected and engaged. For parents, we created a distinct community on our intranet that included helpful resources and activities to do with kids.

### **How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

We have been very deliberate with C-suite communication, particularly with our CEO, from a cadence and message standpoint. Typically, we have CEO-led, quarterly all-employee meetings supplemented with e-mail milestone-driven e-mail communication. In addition, our human resources colleagues historically hold monthly leader calls. During the COVID-19 crisis, we adjusted the cadence for the CEO all-employee meetings and e-mail communications to bi-monthly so that employees were hearing from him every week. The leader calls moved to once-weekly so that company leaders were hearing from other C-suite executives and the human resources team with increased frequency.

The CEO-led, all-employee meetings have been surprisingly successful and well attended. We have consistently had 98+ percent of our employee base attend. The key learning for the communications team has been the structure of the meeting itself – focus the meeting on only Q&A and less on prepared remarks/updates. We quickly found that employees want to be informed, feel secure and trust leadership. Our CEO would spend the majority of the calls answering 50-60 questions from employees. As a result, he created a space where employees wanted to participate and be transparent about how they were feeling. We have always had an open and transparent dialogue during our all-employee meetings, but spending a significant amount of time answering employee questions is something we will likely implement moving forward.





**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

There isn't anything that is hindering our ability to respond. Internally, we have relied heavily on our intranet, e-mail, video and virtual meetings (Cisco). Externally, we have relied primarily on our owned social channels.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

At Horizon, we believe it is our fundamental responsibility to support the communities where we live and work, as well as our global community. As a result, we felt strongly that it was our responsibility to step up during the COVID-19 crisis. We donated \$1.5 million to COVID-19 response efforts in Illinois and in other impacted communities where our employees live and work, including Washington, D.C., South San Francisco, Canada, and Dublin, Ireland.

In addition, we are matching employee donations to nonprofits in their communities, including local foodbanks and COVID-19 relief funds and also provided a list of digital volunteering opportunities and suggestions to employees, such as ordering from a local restaurant and having it delivered to a local domestic violence shelter.

## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

Our engagement and involvement are consistent with our approach to the COVID-19 crisis – we are playing an integral role, in partnership with our human resources organization, in the messaging and rollout of the return-to-work guidance. We are in a unique position as we are moving into a new location at the end of the year, which ultimately factors into our approach to returning to work – both from a standard and a change-management communications standpoint.

From a physical office space standpoint, we, similar to other companies will likely stagger the employee return and limit the capacity in our current office space. We have provided all office- and field-based employees with Personal Protective Equipment and we are preparing socially distanced office configurations. In addition, we have the capability to check temperatures and are following other global health authority and individual state guidance for a safe return.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

We have always had a flexible work policy with the ability to work remotely on a regular basis, so this coupled with what we have experienced during COVID-19 will not be a significant adjustment for employees. In addition, a large segment of our employee population (sales force) is remote, so there will not be any significant change as it relates to an office environment. There are no changes planned in the communications function other than taking the learnings around the need for increased cadence and clarity and applying those to the return to work communications.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

We have a very active and robust inclusion program and a network of five Business Resource Groups. The program hasn't taken a backseat to the crisis and in fact we are nearing the completion of a rebrand for our inclusion program that will roll out in the next few weeks.

**With the recent protests against anti-racism and police brutality, how has your CEO or company reacted to this crisis, internally and/or externally? How do you see these events changing, if at all, corporate investment in things like DE&I and other approaches to combatting racism?**

In addition to our robust inclusion program, we will be adding anti-racism specific employee programming and education, as well as enhancing overall inclusion programming. As for our response to recent events, our CEO sent an internal message to all-employees and commented on social media via his Twitter handle. The company provided an official response on all owned social channels (Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram) and the company also announced financial support for organizations including the YWCA of Chicago, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Urban League, the Equal Justice Initiative, the Bail Project among others. More importantly, we had a leader call addressing the overall environment and how to facilitate team conversations and racism.



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

Ray Day is Vice Chair of Stagwell's marketing and communications agencies and the former Chief Communications Officer at IBM and Ford. He is well-known for expertise in reputation building, content creation, data and analytics, crisis readiness and recovery, and communications team development.

## THE STAGWELL GROUP

### **Toward a Digital, Mobile, Engaging and Measurable Future**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

The Stagwell Group has been very proactive throughout the crises – to assist our clients and the business community overall. Among the added activities we put in place:

- The Harris Poll's COVID-19 Tracker: As a public service, the team at The Harris Poll curated key insights to help leaders navigate COVID-19 by going in the field on a weekly cadence to poll American consumer sentiments across various topics.
- Stagwell's Back to the Future Webinars: A weekly webinar series to facilitate conversations with industry leaders about the New Future of the industries, platforms and people with whom we work.
- Repurpose for Purpose: Program created in conjunction with Trade X Partners to help businesses affected by COVID-related event cancellations by up-cycling unused corporate assets for other goods and services companies need to operate their businesses.
- Internally, we accelerated all communications and offered our team members extra time off, meditation and personal and team support.

**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

In short, trust in business has skyrocketed, as has the pace of digital transformation of everything.

During the crisis, we saw the broader business community provide a sense of security and trust to those who depend on it. When they needed it the most, Americans turned to the corporate world. According to The Harris Poll, which has been conducting public opinion polling on a weekly basis since mid-March, there is widespread approval of corporate America's response to the pandemic. Companies have been active participants in providing solutions – whether producing different goods and services, reinforcing supply chains or seeking cures for the deadly disease.

In addition, as we think about the world post-COVID-19: digital transformation has been accelerated among consumers and among business. Some people say we've just seen digital accelerate by 5 to 10 years. That means those who are digitally savvy and focused on the future will be the successful businesses going forward.

From a Communications standpoint, the successful companies and Comms leaders will be the ones that quickly shift their focus to the future of communications – in line with what is clearly a changed world and a changed consumer. This future will be defined by being digital, mobile, measurable and engaging – both in reaching stakeholders and in delivering compelling content.

**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

Stagwell has more than 3,000 employees operating in more than 25 offices around the world. All have been working from home. The key has been to keep everyone connected, creative and client-focused. We have relied on direct contact with our team members – from town halls to daily check-ins. We also have made clear that our business has invaded our employees' homes – and not the other way around. We told our team right from the start not to apologize for interruptions from children or pets. Family and people came first during the crisis, and we are very proud of the Stagwell team responded.



**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Our Managing Partner Mark Penn has conducted weekly calls with all of our C-suite leaders across the company portfolio and the business community. These check-ins with business leaders and executives have provided our leaders the opportunity to lean on each other's experience and understand how we're all pivoting and adapting during this time of uncertainty.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

Stagwell's strength is the fact that our companies were born digital-first, and we're technologically savvy in how we work and serve our clients. We, of course, used videoconference and other virtual tools to stay connected – all while delivering solid performance throughout our business. We also took our digital-first mindset externally – including helping the canceled SXSW put all of its content online and meeting nearly every day with the C-suite of major companies, assisting with their own digital transformations, research and insights, marketing and communications, and content and media.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

In our weekly Harris Poll on COVID-19, Americans have signaled that they expect corporate America to protect and help safeguard society. While our government institutions must play a critical role, Americans expect companies to protect the health and safety of their employees (**80%**), speak out on social issues (**68%**), demonstrate their corporate purpose and values (**68%**), and take action for the greater social good (**78%**). This is a standard we long have valued inside Stagwell, and it's advice we provide each day to our clients.

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Our Managing Partner Mark Penn has conducted weekly calls with all of our C-suite leaders across the company portfolio and the business community. These check-ins with business leaders and executives have provided our leaders the opportunity to lean on each other's experience and understand how we're all pivoting and adapting during this time of uncertainty.

## **RETURN TO WORK**

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

As we all eventually seek a return to normalcy, we know it will be a slow and phased return for both The Stagwell Group and across the country. American workers have asked for safety before returning to the office and employers will need to take that into account and remain flexible. Our entire leadership team has spent time each week coordinating our global return to work and establishing a standard of safeguards for all 3,000 members of our global team. We have given our leaders the flexibility to return to work when it’s right and safe for their specific teams and locations. To assist with this, we centralized pan-Stagwell support, including OSHA-certified best practices, communications templates, legal resources, bulk PPE ordering and COVID-clearance via Vital Check.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

As a digital-first company, we have been flexible and nimble pre-COVID-19. During the crises, we tested that capability further and will emerge even stronger in flexible working methods.

## **INTERNAL COMMUNICATION**

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

We live the mantra diverse people bring diverse ideas, and that is representative of how Stagwell has and always will operate. As advocates of diversity, equity and inclusion, we have in place a Stagwell DEI initiative, which includes recruiting, hiring, retention, supplier diversity and celebrating works that embodies our commitment. In addition, members of our leadership team have held positions on various DE&I councils, including Adweek's Diversity and Inclusion Council and PRSA's Diversity Action Alliance.

**With the recent protests against anti-racism and police brutality, how has your CEO or company reacted to this crisis, internally and/or externally? How do you see these events changing, if at all, corporate investment in things like DE&I and other approaches to combatting racism?**

Our leaders have been very active internally and externally underscoring our values and our absolute commitment to an inclusive business environment and a world where everyone is valued and respected. This has been the way we have operated since our founding, and it will continue. To us, the solution is less talk about diversity and inclusion and far more action – and we are committed to being part of the solution.



**Paul Gennaro**

*Senior Vice President and  
Chief Communications Officer,  
Voya Financial*

Paul J. Gennaro is senior vice president, Brand and Corporate Communications, and chief brand and communications officer for Voya Financial (NYSE: VOYA). Serving the financial needs of approximately 13.8 million individual and institutional customers in the U.S., Voya is a Fortune 500 company with \$7.5 billion in revenue in 2019 and \$538 billion in assets under management and administration as of March 31, 2020.

Mr. Gennaro oversees internal and external communications, brand, advertising, research and consumer insights, meetings and events for Voya. He is a strategic advisor to senior management, protecting the company's reputation with stakeholders. He also serves in a chief of staff capacity, managing Voya's Executive Committee and Enterprise Leadership Team (ELT).

Mr. Gennaro has held top global roles for much of his career, overseeing more than 50 M&A-related transactions, an award-winning initial public offering on the New York Stock Exchange, a CEO transition, a global rebrand, and multiple new business launches and integrations. He is a board member for Ethisphere LLC, parent of the Ethisphere Institute, which annually selects the World's Most Ethical Companies. He also serves on the board of directors for Disability:IN, a national nonprofit that helps the business community drive performance by leveraging disability inclusion in the workplace, supply chain and marketplace; on the board of advisors for the Emory University Center for Ethics; and as a trustee for the Institute for Public Relations.



## **Staying Agile and Authentic in Response to Crisis**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Our communications have been frequent, proactive and transparent, with an emphasis on taking actions and making decisions based on the health and safety of employees (and contractors) and their families and loved ones, as well as the health and safety of our customers, all stakeholder groups and society. We have leveraged one-way communications such as emails and video messages as well as virtual town halls for businesses and functions. We launched an internal CEO podcast. There is a thirst for communication from the employer, as a source that can be trusted. Participation has been very high for all virtual town hall meetings – we have seen 80%+ and 90% participation. We also do quarterly Brand and Corporate Communications crisis drills; we had one scheduled for March 5 that we repurposed from the planned topic to COVID-19, which was very valuable and we have continued to scenario plan throughout the crisis.

Almost all of our 6,000 employees work remotely and we have remained open for business. Our CEO has been communicating well internally, with weekly positive messages on Fridays and a CEO Q&A podcast to address top questions. We have made sure to focus on our people and their wellbeing by encouraging breaks during the day, and time away from work calls and the computer. We have also encouraged the use of PTO and non-PTO for mental breaks. There have been many Zoom meetings to stay, and feel, connected – I hired a trivia game facilitator for a one-hour Zoom Team Trivia session for our 40-person team session; everyone loved it and we're doing in on a monthly basis now.

Throughout all of this, we asked for employee feedback. The overwhelming majority of employees agreed with the direction that we've taken as a company and the support they've received. Our survey highlights included:



- 91% of Voya's people said, "I've been able to do my job effectively, despite changes in work arrangements due to COVID-19."
- 90% of Voya's people said, "Communications have been effective at helping me understand how Voya is responding to the COVID-19 crisis."
- 87% of Voya's people said, "My manager helped me get what I need to get my job done."

Early on, the main challenges were uncertainty and societal fear; then, things externally seemed to stabilize; then, racial injustice and societal unrest became the primary societal concern and we focused our communications accordingly.

All has appeared to go well from a Brand and Communications perspective thus far. Out of all information sources, I trust the data, not the interpretation of the data by governments at the local, state or federal levels or the media and "media experts." There is no "one trusted source," which explains why employees are looking to the employer.

**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

In the future, I think the business world will include more remote work and less business travel. I also think there will be less emphasis on densely populated areas – for work and living.

Brand and Communications will play a big role in the future of business. In addition to the once-in-a-century changes from COVID-19 becoming permanent, the impacts of racial injustice and societal unrest are of once-in-a-generation factors that will also impact everything going forward. Trust in the media is not improving and I don't see it changing, so the need for organizations to proactively, frequently and transparently communicate will continue to be important.



**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

To mitigate the impact on our employees, Voya has offered employee benefit enhancements, EAP, and webinars and activities for families and kids. For me, while I'm managing my team, I encourage balance and flexible hours, echoing the CEO's sentiment. There have been a lot of Zoom calls, so burnout is a concern.

For client support during this time, we have utilized our Cares Act Program, which provides fee credits and financial education. We have also taken the following actions to support clients during this time:

- From May 1: The employees and families of Voya Financial wanted to thank all of the everyday heroes who are helping society during this challenging time. So we asked singer-songwriter Mandy Harvey, who rose to fame as a finalist on America's Got Talent and happens to be deaf, to help us say "Thank You!" Lots of positivity when the world needs it most! Mandy performed a live min-concert on Instagram on Wednesday night. It was pretty cool, as Mandy sang five songs and world-renowned American Sign Language (ASL) translator Amber Galloway signed the entire event, which included teaching viewers to sign the lyrics to Somewhere Over the Rainbow. It's now posted on [Voya's YouTube channel](#).
- From May 27: At 4 p.m. EDT today, during the closing bell ceremony, the New York Stock Exchange will recognize and thank Voya for its efforts to support and honor the frontline workers of the COVID-19 pandemic – thorough our social media channels as well as [Voya's recent sponsorship of an Instagram mini-concert](#) featuring a live performance by America's Got Talent finalist Mandy Harvey. The closing bell can be viewed here: <https://www.nyse.com/bell/calendar>. This recognition is part of the NYSE's #Gratitude campaign, which celebrates the extraordinary steps that NYSE-listed companies are taking during this challenging time. The NYSE closing bell will be featured on CNBC as well as the NYSE's social media channels. The attached image of Mandy with Rod at our most recent One Voya Day conference will be featured during the closing bell.

We have been very involved. Moving forward, we will continue to be active. Returning to the office, whenever that occurs, will be a big undertaking. And racial injustice will continue to be a priority.





**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Yes and it will continue. We talk on an ongoing basis and our recommendations have been supported **100%**.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally?**

**Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

We have been using Zoom for mass conference calls and virtual town halls. Challenges are on the other end, as employee work-from-home situations vary widely – we have been working to accommodate them.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

As our CEO shared during an interview, during times of crisis, organizations act based on their values and culture. Everyone can look good when times are good. When times are challenging, you can see whose values, culture and purpose are genuine.

Throughout the crisis, as employees have asked about hypothetical things that could happen and what the company would do, I have told them that we will also make decisions based on the health and safety of our people. That is the one answer for the hundreds of scenario-based questions that could be asked.

Also, purpose, culture and values – and their authenticity – have been demonstrated in organizational responses to racial injustice and societal unrest.

## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

We play an active role on the core team. I will be able to share more once this is finalized.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

There has been more work-from-home. With more work-from-home, we are focusing on how we engage and communicate with a greater number of remote employees. More to come on that.

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## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

Virtual Town Halls have been the most effective 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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

Our D&I efforts have increased, and we’ve gotten good feedback.

**With the recent protests against anti-racism and police brutality, how has your CEO or company reacted to this crisis, internally and/or externally? How do you see these events changing, if at all, corporate investment in things like DE&I and other approaches to combatting racism?**

We have been proactive in our communications with employees, using all of the vehicles mentioned for COVID-19.

Below you will see an excerpt from our CEO's recent message. We have also [leveraged LinkedIn](#) for the CEO message and the videos mentioned.

Dear Colleague,

Today, on June 19, we at Voya join the rest of the nation, as well as people around the world, in celebrating Juneteenth — the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States.

On this date in 1865, the total emancipation of those still held as slaves was announced. This important holiday, which gets its name from the combination of June and Nineteenth, is also referred to as Emancipation Day, Juneteenth Independence Day and Black Independence Day.

By any name, it represents freedom and independence for African-Americans, and is an important, historical day to celebrate — for all Americans.

On Wednesday, we announced the introduction of a Diversity Celebration Day for each employee on an annual basis. This flexible addition to our paid time off benefit reflects our continued efforts to evolve and advance diversity and inclusion at Voya. It also demonstrates our continued commitment to celebrating our differences in race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability status and lifestyle.

In my message to you last Friday, I shared the sense of optimism I've heard from our African-American colleagues based on the open discussions taking place across society, and Voya, about instances of racial injustice that have been experienced, including by our colleagues and their families. On that day, I joined our African-American Employee Resource Group (ERG) Open Forum, during which people from across Voya shared their perspectives on race and injustices. I participated to listen and learn. The dialogue was candid and poignant — and I encourage anyone who was unable to join to listen to the Open Forum recording on Voya 360°.

While personal stories of racial injustice and discrimination are painful to hear, the positivity of those sharing them has been inspiring. As our colleague and African-American ERG National Chair Yasmine Lewis recently wrote in a Voya 360° Rough Drafts blog post, while quoting her father, "Change is painful." Like Yasmine and so many others, I am hopeful that the pain being felt, and shared, serves as a catalyst for the change that people of all backgrounds across our country are demanding.

Earlier this week, we saw a reason to believe that change can happen with progress made during Pride Month. On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to protect those who are LGBTQ+ from workplace discrimination. To quote our colleague Brad Betlach in his Voya 360° Rough Drafts blog post, "Meaningful change seems possible. Finally, we hope." And as Voya's LGBTQ+ Allies ERG Executive Sponsors Kevin Sims and Denise Nichols wrote in a Voya 360° article, "This important ruling only became possible after decades of fighting, protesting and advocating. As we continue to fight against racism and for equality for marginalized groups, this Supreme Court ruling is a reminder that, while progress may be slow, and painful at times, with diligence and commitment, change is possible." Well said!

As I shared on my podcast last week, all of our ERGs — including our African-American and LGBTQ+ ERGs — are open to everyone at Voya. All are welcome to join — including allies.

Thank you for all that you're doing to help our customers and each other. Have a great weekend.



**Gary F. Grates**  
*President, W2O Group*

Gary F. Grates, President of W2O Group, is a globally renowned, recognized, and respected expert in corporate communications, change management, employee engagement, and corporate strategy.

At W2O, he oversees the corporate/strategy portfolio in addition to industry and academic outreach. Grates established and led the global Change/Employee Engagement Practice at Edelman and served as Vice President-Corporate Communications/North America at General Motors Corporation for North America Region.

Grates is co-director of the W2O Center for Social Commerce at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications.

Twitter handle: @GaryGrates



## In the Search for Truth, “Meaning” Matters Most

As a global marketing and communications firm specializing in the health care sector with analytics and insights at the core of our client partnerships, W2O has been engaged in the COVID situation from aggregator, supporter, counselor, critical voice, to client partner.

As such, we have experienced the pandemic from multiple angles. In each case the measure of our learning stems from a thirst for truth but in seeking such wisdom the only thing worth knowing is meaning. The why behind the what, where, and how. Below is a summation of key learnings meant to increase our knowledge of the role of communications during such a tumultuous, uncertain time.

Let's start with internal communications. 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.

The next area to consider is *outreach*. Some companies have gone insular since the pandemic began, choosing to wait out the situation rather than engage more deeply. At W2O, our founder



and CEO, Jim Weiss, a veteran of the health care industry, has been leading efforts on behalf of the firm with the industry but also with clients in vaccine development, ventilator and PPE distribution, testing, employee engagement, and HR policies around mental health, to address myriad needs to solving the crisis. Being so deeply involved in the process provides weekly and daily forums to engage our staff in these activities raising morale, productivity and confidence. Many of our clients are either involved in vaccine development, testing, or some level of support in finding a solution. And all clients are dealing with employee challenges and the move back to the next normal and what that entails. This means most if not all of our staff are actively involved in the pandemic in one way or the other sharing insights and lessons along with practices with their colleagues.

A third component to discern is *corporate culture*. This is where purpose comes in. In a virtual working world, the transference of culture becomes even more acute. Do your values hold true? Do your operating principles continue? In a virtual working world are people invisible? Luckily, what we've experienced as both W2O and with our clients is that culture has become even more important and hardened during this pandemic. Respect, value, purpose, integrity are shining through collapsing silos and political barriers as people forge a better way to exist.

COVID-19 has certainly upended the entire world. *IPR and Peppercomm* through their timely and important research is keeping the profession complete with information to find the truth and more importantly the meaning behind it. We are grateful for the chance to share an additional swath of the COVID picture and hope it adds to your understanding.



**Jon Harris**

*Senior Vice President and  
Chief Communications Officer,  
Conagra Brands*

Jon Harris is Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer for Conagra Brands. He is responsible for the strategic development, direction and implementation of corporate communication and reputation management programs across the organization. Jon also oversees the Conagra Brands Foundation, as well as corporate giving efforts. Jon joined Conagra Brands, formerly known as ConAgra Foods, in August 2015.

Jon is the former Chief Communications Officer and Senior Vice President at Hillshire Brands where he oversaw all aspects of integrated communications. He had previously served as Senior Vice President, Global Communications for Sara Lee Corporation, where he was responsible for leading worldwide business and marketing communications for the company's core food and beverage brands and oversaw the spin-off of the company into two pure-play, publicly-held entities. Prior to Sara Lee, Jon held leadership positions at Bally Total Fitness Corporation, PepsiCo, Ketchum Public Relations and Medicus Public Relations. Jon holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications from Rutgers University and is an adjunct professor for PR & Marketing at the University of Chicago's Graham School.



## **“Staying Connected” to Employees and Community During COVID-19**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company’s communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Our goal throughout the pandemic is to continue to keep employees connected, even though they are working remotely. As an essential business and in the absence of face-to-face communications, we wanted to make sure that the team felt connected to the company, it’s important work and much needed results.

We immediately created a “Staying Connected” email that includes content about best practices for working remotely, business news, brand news and EAP resources. “Staying Connected” also includes a section about how we are helping our communities. “Staying Connected” will continue as employees return to the office.

In addition, we also stepped up our video engagement tool called “The Conagra Connection,” where I interview leaders across the country on key topics happening throughout the company. During the COVID-19 quarantine, we created a “home edition” that airs 2-3 times a week and was very well received by employees.

The challenging part of the pandemic is the uniqueness of it. Companies have to learn to navigate in a new world on their own, with very few credible resources to pull from, simply because no one has experienced a pandemic. We found the best option is to reach out to colleagues across the industry for validation on communication strategies.





**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

Transparency will play a key role. As employees return to the office, they want to be assured that their health and safety is top of mind. The role of Communications will be to create messaging that describes the procedures and protocols that are being executed consistently and for the long-term to ensure a clean and safe office environment.

**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

Led by my very talented colleague Barbara Zibell, our Internal Communications team works closely with our HR team to ensure that employees are aware of the health and well-being resources available to them.

Internal Communications also works with the Foundation to ensure that community programs and partnerships are communicated to ensure employees that we are good citizens and supporting communities where we live and work.

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Yes, our Senior Leadership Team (SLT) has been involved in all communication aspects of the pandemic, which includes messaging to our internal and external stakeholders – employees, customers and consumers. We expect this SLT involvement to continue.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

We've leveraged all existing to ensure the proper bandwidths that allow us all to work remotely. Our IT Team has been heroic during this unprecedented time.



**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

It could be said that our purpose is to keep people fed, nourished and comforted. During the pandemic, there has been an even greater strain on community resources to ensure children, teenagers, adults and senior citizens have access to food. We have greatly increased our efforts through the Conagra Brands Foundation to donate food and funds to partners – like Feeding America – who can direct product and monies where they are needed most.

## **RETURN TO WORK**

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

The Team and I have been very involved and an active member in the overall Return to Work and Pandemic teams. We created an overall communication strategy to return employees at all locations in phases as outlined by federal, state and local officials. If an employee is uncomfortable or has extenuating circumstances and chooses not to return in their phase, a custom solution was created.

In addition, we are following all Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines to ensure the work environment is safe and healthy. We have embraced social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE), employee temperature checks and enhanced sanitation.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

We have begun to execute our Return To Office plans in certain regions, based on local and federal guidelines, always with our 18,000+ employees’ health and safety as our primary concern. We continue to accommodate employees who prefer to work from home or wish to do so during this unprecedented time throughout the entire company, including our great Communications Team.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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. And again, we have greatly increased our video content during this time.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

D&I priorities have not been put on hold. In fact, this work has never been more critical to the success of Conagra. We continue to partner closely with our D&I Team to continue to analyze our approaches and processes across the business and work to ensure that they are all equitable, diverse and inclusive.

**With the recent protests against racism and police brutality of African Americans, how has your CEO or company reacted to this crisis, internally and/or externally? How do you see these events changing, if at all, corporate investment in things like DE&I and other approaches to combatting racism?**

Our CEO Sean Connolly has been very clear that it's heartbreaking and unacceptable that racism and racial injustices exist around the world. Our goal at Conagra is to work together in a peaceful and constructive manner where everyone has a voice and must be heard. We have used our internal and external channels to underscore our belief that racial injustice is wrong and to promote our timeless values, which include integrity, broad-mindedness, and leadership.



**Catherine Hernandez-Blades**  
*SVP, Chief ESG and  
Communications officer, Aflac*

Catherine Hernandez-Blades is SVP, chief ESG and Communications officer at Aflac, previously serving in the CMO and CCO roles simultaneously at two Fortune 500 companies. She is in three Halls of Fame, including Women in Communications, PRNews, and the PR Week Hall of Femme; a Forbes Top 50 Most Influential Global CMO; and the first American to win the Relations for the Future Medal at the Communications for the Future awards at Davos.



## Crises Reveal Character

### Once in a century

COVID-19 creates a crisis unlike any other, and not just because of its speed and scale, but in the unique way it impacts the physical, mental and financial wellbeing. For corporations to weather these trying times, they must support these three critical needs of all of their stakeholders. In order to do that successfully, they must be in a strong capital position. This is a crisis where compassion and liquidity in equal measure are key.

This is a once-in-a-century pandemic, meaning it's an opportunity for companies to have once-in-a-century social impact. No function plays a more critical role in determining a company's post-pandemic success than Communications – the conscience of a company.

Purpose-driven companies are uniquely positioned to enhance their reputations by staying committed to the better angels of their core values. According to The RepTrak Company, formerly Reputation Institute, consumers' decisions will be shaped by the way a company takes care of their employees and communities, more so than other stakeholders, like investors.

### About Aflac

Fortunately, venturing into the bond market late last year, Aflac raised \$1.5 billion dollars. No one ever predicts a pandemic; however, what goes up often comes down, and for the market that means the possibility of a recession. Aflac wanted to be ready for any potential downturn.

With the company in a strong capital position, the Communications team began preparing to share Aflac's key messages from a people-first perspective, starting with a 30 page stakeholder map, resembling extraordinarily ugly pieces of wallpaper knitted together without skill. What may have looked like bad art, is proving to be a backbone of success.

By starting with the business objective, considering each stakeholder, along with where, when and how each wanted to be met in terms of information, the team scrutinized every element of data and allowed the data to drive the strategy. The team curated and created relevant information for each audience, making the most important strategic decision right up front – provide content



and then condition each audience to go to specific locations for the information most helpful to each of them. Teaching stakeholders to pull, rather than forcing the team to push, became a critical advantage in terms of speed of information and message control. This approach is efficient as only a single set of data per audience is being updated, most often housed only in one location. In spite of this, the detailed grid listing the tactics currently exceeds 69 pages – and is growing!

The business, taking a similar approach, has been asking, “How do we ensure all of our stakeholders remain whole, so that when the crisis is over, the business is fully functional and poised for optimum performance? To answer this question and put the answer into action, the company assembled a cross-functional, virtual war room, shifting activities throughout the crisis, moving from driving technology efforts to get people out of the building to return to work activities – all the while ensuring the business runs smoothly. To ensure efforts remain on track, surveying of all audiences takes place frequently and regularly. To the company’s credit, putting people first – the unanimous decision of leadership – has without fail been consistent through all messaging and actions.

The following illustrates how Aflac is preserving its business and reputation through the crisis:

- There are approximately 5,000 Aflac W-2 employees in the U.S. Through a significant cash investment in technology, 98% of those employees are now outfitted with the equipment needed to work from home. Those employees deemed essential, with a duty to report, receive premium pay, personal protection gear and a safe environment subject to temperature screening and social distancing protocols.
- There are almost 30,000 independent sales agents in the U.S., licensed to sell Aflac products. They are independent contractors and their tax status is that of 1099. Their primary way of selling in these commission-only roles is through face-to-face engagement. Actually, Aflac’s business model is cluster selling at worksites – not feasible in a pandemic of this nature. Not only did the company provide these agents with information on how to apply for government assistance programs, the corporation is self-funding a \$50 million no-to-low interest loan program, with generous repayment terms. Also, the company is absorbing the interest payments where such payments are applicable, which would be on loans greater than \$10,000, per Internal Revenue Service regulations.
  - Additionally, those 30,000 people would like to be able to sell during this time, so virtual enrollment centers and technology support have been provided by the company for these efforts.
  - Imagine being a recruit, waiting to sit for a licensing exam that may not be given for months due to social distancing protocols. By working with state regulators, Aflac’s government affairs





team has been able to get many states to grant temporary licenses to new recruits as an important stop gap measure. Also, labs are unavailable for drug screening and I-9 validation is virtually impossible with the emergency orders, adding to the complexity of onboarding.

- Policyholders are struggling too. Aflac proactively provided a 60-day grace period on premiums so that policies would not lapse and claims could still be paid during the window. Subsequently, some states have mandated grace periods.
  - To support small business owners, a microsite through Aflac.com has been established providing need-to-know information about programs to help keep them afloat.
- The community at large, the recipient of multi-million dollar donations, particularly to aid first responders with mental health and personal protection equipment support, has been incredibly appreciated.
- Aflac is renowned for its internship programs. The company provides an apartment, social activities as well as a paid work experience. This year's program looks very different with additional scholarship stipends and a virtual work experience.
- The shareholders, analysts and investors expect attention too.
  - Aflac conducted its first-ever remote quarter-end close and shareholder meeting.
  - The company also spent a great deal of time modeling financials, using previous global pandemics, most notably the Spanish Flu. This type of activity is critical to the shareholder community and to leadership in terms of making decisions for capital deployment.
- Acquisitions happen, even during a pandemic. Post-acquisition onboarding of new employees, making them feel appreciated, is difficult enough during the best of times – almost, but not entirely, impossible during a global shut down.
  - By using virtual tools like portals and WebEx, the latter being Aflac's technology of choice, senior leaders are doing their part to welcome the two companies acquired by Aflac during the pandemic.
- An interesting and rather non-traditional audience found itself in the form of local internet service providers (ISPs), who had to bolster infrastructure in its rural Georgia locations to meet the demand on capacity created by the influx of remote workers. The company's Information Technology team worked with the local ISPs to ensure a seamless experience for policyholders and employees.

It's also critical to look at the future and the challenges it holds, in order to plan for what companies will be up against going forward. That includes the possibility of reinfection spikes.



## Conclusion

The workplace will not look the same going forward. With all of the investment in technology as a result of keeping employees productive during the emergency orders, for some companies, it won't make sense to hold as much real estate or the overhead costs associated with doing so. Additionally, companies will need to social distance those who do come back into the office, meaning workspaces won't even look the same post-pandemic.

Return to campus protocols at Aflac are being established to include staggered schedules, masks requirements and temperature detection protocols.

Employees from different locations will return at different times, based on everything from childcare availability, to government restrictions by geography, to the health care community's surge capability.

Five things that are important to keep in mind:

- Culture cannot be built during a crisis. This also provides a future challenge as natural attrition happens and new employees come into the fold. How do companies foster and grow culture in a remote working environment?
- Alignment is a thing of the past. Agreement is required going forward. It's not enough for Investor Relations and Marketing to align on do-no-harm, lowest common denominator messaging. The functions across companies will need to collaborate until actual agreement is reached and it won't be as easy as it sounds.
- Just because the technology creates artificial engagement doesn't mean that the relationships are artificial. This means technology will need to adjust and so will those using it.
- When taking care of your people, often the simplest things mean the most. I have food delivered to each member of my team weekly so they always have one hot meal each week, taking something off of the proverbial plate for stressed parents who are now charged with providing home schooling, three meals a day and working a full time job.
- Finally, and this is most important: crises reveal character, they don't build it. This is true for Corporate America as well.



### **Moyra Knight**

*Vice President Corporate Communications, Astellas US and President of the Astellas Global Health Foundation*

Moyra Knight is Vice President Corporate Communications Astellas US and President of the Astellas Global Health Foundation. She is responsible for developing and leading communications initiatives and reputation management to achieve Astellas' strategic business goals in the United States. Her team of 25 communications, events and CSR professionals, oversee executive communications, employee and digital communication, issues management, product communications, media relations and corporate social responsibility. In addition to her five years with Astellas, Knight served as director of global community relations at Baxter International and has held leadership roles at Ogilvy and Kraft Foods. Her May 2020 article, "Leading Now" [Astellas Pharma's Strong Employee Culture an Antidote to the Current Crisis](#) appeared in PR Daily.



## **The Rising Importance of Telemedicine and Digital Health**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Early on, Astellas' Corporate Communications / Events teams positioned our function and our work as strategic enablers, to help drive the COVID-19 decision-making process around travel, event attendance and work-from-home measures, maintaining an employee-first focus. We also quickly repositioned and created new vehicles for executive communications, awards, employee engagement and information-sharing, to adapt to the new environment and ways of working.

### **What's Working**

Several new digital vehicles have gone particularly well. For example, our pre-produced talk show called Astellas ONE FUTURE Today allows multiple leaders and employees to speak on various topics regarding patients, products, performance and community support and have been extremely well-received. Ninety-eight percent of attendees have reported feeling very or extremely informed on how employees are supporting our culture.

We've also hosted virtual awards shows that recognize outstanding achievements for the year across the organization. Attendance and engagement have been extremely high, with employees giving constant kudos to one another over the chat function. Additionally, employees have actively engaged in Yammer campaigns with creative hashtags (#ThankfulThursday, #PhilanthropyFriday), sharing stories of how they are helping their communities and each other. Numerous employees submitted stories of community support through an employee storytelling program, reinforcing our culture. Additionally, we've issued weekly news digest emails and posted more than 100 articles, memos and guidance documents to the COVID-19 internal hub to keep employees constantly informed.



From a business perspective, we have adjusted some of our therapeutic outreach and content, moving to virtual support of major congresses such as the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) meeting, creating an online news hub and issuing a virtual thank you video to oncologists supporting cancer patients, who are particularly at risk.

### **Room for Improvement**

Technology and processes have remained ongoing challenges, which we continue to work through in order to maintain a steady stream of communications and the ability to effectively engage.

### **Sources of Information**

We're referencing multiple external sources for information including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization, National Institutes of Health, State Department, Johns Hopkins and state governments, among others. Benchmarking with peer companies and guidance from healthcare associations such as PhRMA have also provided data points.

### **What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

Within the healthcare sector, the pandemic has accelerated the use of [telemedicine](#) with healthcare professionals quickly adopting technology to provide virtual care. Likewise, the use of [digital health](#) continues to rise, playing a vital role in the detection and mitigation efforts designed to slow the pandemic spread.

From a communications perspective, we expect to see the continued strategic intersection of Communications, Corporate Social Responsibility, Policy, Human Resources and Operational Excellence, as we all work together to harmonize our message, approach and collective strengths to advocate for engaged employees and mobilizing the industry response.



**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

Astellas and its employees continue to be engaged in many ways to contribute to serving patients and alleviating strain on healthcare resources during this critical time. These efforts specifically include the following measures, among others:

- Volunteerism benefits have temporarily been extended up to four weeks to specifically support the pandemic. Click [here](#) to access our total community impact efforts.
- We expanded multiple benefit offerings for employees including Bright Horizons crisis, student and childcare options, mental health offerings, financial resources, home office equipment reimbursement and more. A comprehensive look at our efforts to support employees can be found [here](#).
- We launched a new job search assistance program to support immediate family members of the company's U.S. employees laid off or otherwise adversely impacted professionally as a result of COVID-19.
- We doubled [paid military leave](#) from two weeks to four weeks to support our service member employees' military training obligations and remain committed to making up any difference in compensation between their military pay and regular pay for up to two years.
- [Astellas Pharma US and the Astellas Global Health Foundation](#) committed to expand support for global and local communities fighting COVID-19 by providing up to \$2 million of new financial assistance, in aggregate, to meet the urgent demand for resources to help patients, healthcare workers and first responders.
- We implemented changes to [Astellas' patient assistance programs](#) and provided ongoing [supply chain management](#) to help ensure our patients have access to Astellas medicines.
- We issued an internal call for ideas and proposals in the fight against COVID-19 using Astellas' strengths, technologies and expertise.
- Additionally, we are [responding to requests](#) from Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, the National Institute of Infectious Diseases, the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries Associations and the Innovative Medicines Initiative and various governments to provide access to compounds and provide counsel on countermeasures.

We continue to explore opportunities to expand our benefits and offerings for employees, patients and the broader community and our function remains actively involved in promoting these enhancements internally and externally.



**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

We've been closely partnering with our Commercial Strategy and Operations team to plan for and communicate the actions we're taking to maintain business operations and as we prepare to re-enter our facilities and resume field in-person activities, in the future. We meet twice weekly with a core team of functional experts and senior leaders to review our strategies and implementation efforts, and provide ongoing updates to U.S. and Global leadership on our progress and future plans.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

We've leveraged several communications tools to engage employees and instantly them notify of changes, including Skype, SharePoint, Yammer, Intrado, Send Word Now and Know Before You Go. Like many companies, bandwidth and system overload have posed challenges in our ability to communicate, but we've worked to test and pivot to new platforms to maintain consistent communications.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

As a healthcare company, we are intrinsically focused on improving the health and wellbeing of people around the world. And, as a purpose-driven organization rooted in [CSR-based management](#), responding to global health crises locally and globally and working to ensure access to health is at the heart of what we do. We've provided [financial assistance](#) to support local and global communities; supported employee volunteerism and company-matched donations to humanitarian organizations; and supported legislative policies focused on the wellbeing of our employees, healthcare professionals, patients and partners. We're seeing this purpose extend to a highly engaged (93%+) employee workforce with deep roots in the community.



## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

As a strategic function, Communications is co-leading re-entry preparation efforts with our operational excellence and HR teams. We’ve prepared multiple scenarios, a detailed, three-pronged communications approach reflecting our phased re-entry process aligned with the Restore Illinois plan and created a communications theme, “Working Well Together, Wherever” designed to motivate and reassure employees. This campaign will further support employees via a ‘welcome kit’ containing PPE, manager and employee toolkits for ready access to important information, a re-entry video detailing safety measures, and more.

A number of critical upgrades have been made to our facilities to promote a safe working environment, including: thermal scanning upon entry; limited capacity rules; social distancing decals; signage reminders throughout the buildings; closing of all “gathering” spots; and PPE. We’ve also mapped out all safety measures and precautions we’ll need to take through a Day in the Life simulation exercise as we resume in-office activity and in-person interactions with healthcare professionals, to protect our employees and prevent community spread.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

We’ve gained a greater comfort with workplace flexibility. From a functional perspective, our team has grown closer through weekly touch base meetings, and we see the function becoming even more imbedded into the strategy and planning efforts of the organization and operating as a fully integrated team.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

D&I has remained a priority for Astellas throughout the pandemic, with our Employee Impact Groups providing continuous guidance to our employees related to mental health and offering webinars and other resources to combat discrimination. Early on in the stay at home order, our Asian Employee Impact Group held a company-wide forum to educate and discuss the pressures faced by people of Asian descent during COVID-19. Most recently, we issued an internal and [public response](#) to recent national events, reaffirming our values and commitment to a diverse and inclusive workplace and mindset.



**Mike Kuczkowski**  
*Orangefiery*

Mike is the founder and CEO of Orangefiery, a hybrid consulting and communications firm focused on helping leaders and brands navigate growth opportunities and challenges on their organizations' journeys. Based in New York City and the Bay Area, the firm emphasizes four areas of work -- research, communication, engagement and systems -- to develop tailored solutions that meet client needs. During his more than 25 years of experience, Mike has helped some of the biggest names in business address complex public issues, improve their reputations and achieve commercial success. Mike's career spans journalism, politics, consulting and communications. He was the global client relationship manager at Edelman for Pfizer, which his team grew to be the firm's largest, founded the firm's management consulting division and was General Manager of its San Francisco office. Mike is a trustee of the Institute for Public Relations.



## In Pursuit of the Good Company

**"The American dream is alive but fraying. Major employers are investing in their workers and communities because they know it is the only way to be successful over the long term."**

**- Jamie Dimon**

*Chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase & CO.,  
and Chairman of Business Roundtable Statement  
on the purpose of a corporation, August 19, 2019*

### Fraying? There can be no doubt.

When Business Roundtable proffered a new Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation last year, embracing all of an organization's stakeholders—customers, employees, suppliers, communities and shareholders—the group could hardly have imagined a future quite like what we've experienced in 2020.

As of June 10, more than 100,000 in the United States and 400,000 globally have died from COVID-19, according to [Johns Hopkins University](#). The American economy has been forced into its first recession in 12 years. The unemployment rate has soared to levels not seen since the Great Depression, revealing the economic fragility of the lives of tens of millions of American workers. Following the videotaped killing by police of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, our streets erupted in protests about systemic racism. The protests have been marked by pockets of civil unrest, clashes with police and calls to defund police departments. Meanwhile, the pandemic is still uncontrolled. In many geographies, we remain short of public health standards for testing, tracing, health system capacity and personal protective equipment. In many counties, the rates of community spread continue to increase.

The stressors revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, are not new. If anything, the pandemic has amplified and accelerated trends in income inequality, education, housing, technology access and health disparities, in an era of a deeply divided body politic.

For business, this crisis has been and remains a major test. For many, particularly small businesses, it is an extinction-level event. Those that survive will be changed by the experience, with an increased emphasis in their operations on hygiene, social distancing and symptom detection, at a minimum, and likely more work-from-home flexibility. Other changes may be broader and sustained. The question is, what kind of change will we see?



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I'm hopeful the seeds of change can be found by looking at our pandemic experience in a certain light. We have all had a 12-week crash course in empathy and compassion. Many of us stayed at home to protect ourselves, yes, but also to protect people more at risk of serious complications from COVID-19. We thanked and prayed for the first responders, the health care workers, and essential workers who kept things running despite the risks. And we marched to draw attention to racial injustice, despite the risks of the disease spread, because so many of us recognized that the persistent injustice of racism is deeply at odds with our values. True, not everyone embraced these behaviors. But those who did have shown a capacity to act in the interest of others at a scale that had not previously been seen.

If we apply this thinking to other, similar issues, we can be very hopeful about the next era of business. Businesses can, for example, take action to eliminate gender disparities in leadership and boards. (Women are 50% of society, after all, so shouldn't they be 50% of business leadership?) Businesses can dismantle racism, starting from within but then also by creating incentives for change among suppliers and communities in which they operate. Businesses can deliver fair wages and benefits to employees and inspire a sense of purpose in them. Business can lead with empathy.

It will require effort and focus to do so, however. At the height of the crisis, only 19% of communicators in an Institute for Public Relations/Peppercomm survey in April reported that their companies were communicating about diversity and inclusion (D&I). My firm's surveys showed people were seeking more information about mental health resources, including resources for dealing with stress and anxiety. In April, many felt justified in the decision to put continuity of operations ahead of D&I efforts. In May and June, that didn't look like such a great decision.

In a similar way, I was surprised to see that while 81% of communicators surveyed by [IPR/Peppercomm](#) said their function had been very involved in their organization's pandemic response, there were limited efforts to use measurement as part of that effort. Some 27% of respondents said they were not measuring the impact of their internal communications at that time. Of those who said they were measuring their communications, only 28% said they were conducting employee surveys, which can uniquely quantify impact. Over time, adopting better measurement practices will be critical to managing a function that can be broadly understood by other members of the C-suite.

Still, the strategic communications function can be a big part of the solution. Chief Communications Officers and agency leaders understand the complexity of multi-stakeholder dynamics and the benefits of a positive corporate brand reputation. They can see the importance of taking positions on galvanizing issues like D&I and strong environmental, social and governance (ESG) policies. They



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can see the value of traits like transparency, curiosity, vulnerability, empathy, resilience and compassion in corporate leadership. And, perhaps most importantly, communications is the nimblest function, and have been key leaders during the pandemic in shaping the responses of organizations and clients.

That said, we cannot be complacent. Business leaders tend to turn to their communications leaders in times of crisis. Communicators may be lose ground within their organizations as the crisis normalizes. Some Chief Communications Officers have demonstrated tremendous leadership in corporate branding and reputation, employee engagement, advocacy and digital business – all functions critical to strong businesses and Business Roundtable’s multi-stakeholder statement of purpose. But gaps remain. Corporate communications is still not taught in many business schools. We still spend significant amounts of time explaining what we do to business leaders in other functions. We still have fewer resources than other business functions. And we still operate in significant measure through influence, though we often have more authority and responsibilities for the functions that truly drive the business today than we have in the past.

Still, the recovery efforts here will likely take time. Expectations will be moderate. There will be more learning and experimentation on the path back to an open economy. As we shift from crisis to recovery, communications should maintain its seat at the leadership table, embracing Business Roundtable’s statement of purpose as a starting point for helping business have a more positive impact on the world.



**Brian Lott**

*Chief Communications Officer,  
Mubadala Investment Company*

Brian Lott is the Chief Communications Officer of Mubadala Investment Company, responsible for stewardship of the Mubadala brand and management of the Group's corporate communications requirements.

Brian has worked in the communications industry for over 30 years, beginning his career in Washington, D.C., where he served as chief of staff, spokesman and campaign manager for two members of Congress.

Before joining Mubadala in 2009, Brian worked at global public relations firm Burson-Marsteller for ten years, where he provided strategic guidance to the firm's public affairs, corporate and technology clients.

He is a board member of the following organizations: the Arthur W. Page Society; Institute for Public Relations; Middle East Public Relations Association; Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation.



MUBADALA

## **Facing the Challenge of Unpredictability with Dedication and Leadership**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

The United Arab Emirates moved quickly in March to restrict movement among its population, closing the schools, limiting business activity and assessing its testing and patient care capabilities in the country. Mubadala followed suit by beginning a rotation of staff across our four campuses in Abu Dhabi, staggering the workforce into thirds so that were a single staff member to be infected, we could trace and isolate a team and location without paralyzing business activity. By mid-March, we had decided that it was best to move all employees to a work-from-home status as the country began extensive testing.

Working with our leadership and in line with our mandate as a company, we also wanted to contribute across our portfolio to the efforts in the communities where we operate. Our health care facilities in Abu Dhabi, including Cleveland Clinic as a partner, were on the front lines of patient treatment and testing.

The communications team, working with our leadership, designed and quickly rolled out our #WeAreDedicated campaign to inspire our employees and those within our portfolio companies. The goal was to harness the collective power of employees worldwide who were part of the Mubadala Group, to enlist them in efforts to combat COVID-19.

This took two forms: first was an employee contribution effort, based in Abu Dhabi, to financially support the local Ma'an Initiative (providing care to those affected) as well as the World Health Organization. We also raised funds to help our support staff – those who administer security, cleaning and back-office functions like photocopying – who were in quarantine, ensuring not only that they would continue to receive their paychecks but also have extra funds for necessities.



Internationally, our portfolio companies – across industries such as semiconductor manufacturing, real estate, and manufacturing to mention a few – both contributed to the creation and donation of Personal Protective Equipment as well as financial support to patient care in their communities, such as construction of a new temporary hospital in Brazil. All of these activities were captured and promoted internally and externally, via the #WeAreDedicated campaign hashtag with accompanying video when and where appropriate.

Our biggest challenge has been the unpredictable nature of the disease and its impact in the Emirates, and monitoring when our employees could return to a physical office environment to work as they continued to work from home. We have put our employee's safety at the top of the priority list and have worked closely with government officials so we are aligned on our activities. While we regularly did crisis simulations – which came in handy when it was time to activate a crisis management team and network, as well as the necessary IT backbone for working remotely – it was difficult to anticipate the daily vagaries of fluctuating infection rates.

**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

It's hard to imagine that any business would return to the way it functioned in 2019. We envision much greater use of technology, potentially greater flexibility in core working hours and reduced international travel, not to mention ongoing efforts to monitor employee health and safety.

**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

Our internal communications function has been critical to alerting employees to what they need to know: governmental restrictions on movement; where, if necessary, to get tested; and what to do if a known colleague they worked with has tested positive. In addition, keeping employee motivation high and positive – particularly with the inspiring results of #WeAreDedicated – has been essential.





**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

The daily crisis response has been led by our Deputy CEO, who has a working group of function heads (including Group Communications) coordinating activities on a daily basis. He has regularly communicated with the Group CEO and other members of our Investment Committee which serve as the company's top leadership. We've also had a monthly Leadership Majlis (gathering) online to update both our senior leadership – the level below the Investment Committee – and all employees, to keep them informed about developments affecting the business and its employees.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

We were fortunate to have a strong video conferencing backbone in place, called BlueJeans, which we have used extensively throughout the year. It has worked very effectively.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

Our corporate purpose includes our values – for example, the importance of accountability, to the company and each other – as well as a look to the greater good as a responsible investor. That has continued to rally employees and allow us to shift quickly from a global investment company to a global aid delivery company, in a matter of days.

## **RETURN TO WORK**

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

We are currently looking at options to return to physical office spaces, following our cues from the government and when it will be safe to return. We will return in shifts, as per the March protocol, to ensure safety of employees. We have designed a campaign – Home2Home – that is intended to both reacquaint and reassure employees, creating a sense of security that their work environment will be as safe and secure as the home environment they will shift from. We are also looking at different employee seating configurations, and rules for conference meetings. And, for the time being, we have ceased any outside guests coming into our office spaces.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

We are at the very beginning of trying greater flexibility in core work hours, to ensure people have time to meet obligations at home and at work. Some of these initiatives may become permanent.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

I'm fortunate to manage a team where I'm the exception, as a western white male, with a majority of my team female, Arab and largely Emirati. It's a reflection of the company as a whole, but our particular goal here is to continue to develop talented Emirati investment professionals in sectors which are new and strengthen the country's future – that emphasis will certainly continue.



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

Catherine Mathis has been Chief Communications Officer for McGraw-Hill since 2015. She is responsible for creating and executing internal and external communication strategies targeted to critical audiences and leads the company's social responsibility initiatives.

Prior to McGraw-Hill, Catherine served as the SVP of Marketing and Communications for Standard & Poor's Ratings Services. Before that, Catherine was SVP of Corporate Communications for The New York Times Company. Previously, she held management roles at Overseas Shipholding Group and International Paper.

Catherine serves on the Board of the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota, the Board of Trustees at the Institute for Public Relations, the Board of the Corporate Communication International Center at Baruch College, the Advisory Board of the Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms and the Board of Trustees of Hartley House, a New York-based social services organization.

Catherine graduated with honors from the University of Minnesota with a B.S. in business and an M.B.A. She was named to PR News' 2019 list of Top Women in PR and the PRWeek 2020 Hall of Femme.



## Handling Coronavirus from the Inside Out

### COVID Employee Communications at McGraw Hill

I've always believed that reputations are made from the inside out. How you treat your teammates is how they will treat your customers, your suppliers, your communities and others you partner with – and will be reflected back in how people think about you and your company. So, when we thought about how to approach communications around COVID-19, we wanted to make sure that we kept our 4,000 global employees well-informed, that we supported them and their families through a difficult time with engaging communications that spoke to both their heads and hearts, and that we celebrated the work they were doing with our customers and in our communities.

### COVID-19 Support Engage Celebrate



#### Inform

Issue frequent company/office-wide emails and video updates sharing important news re: office Closures, policy updates and more



#### Support

Provide ongoing support to employees needing help, information, resources and guidance



#### Engage

Create an easy-to-access hub of regularly-updated COVID-19 information on Spark with FAQ's, links to resources and ways to help



#### Celebrate

Highlight #RedCube-Proud stories celebrating employees going above and beyond to serve our customers and communities



Headquartered in New York City, McGraw Hill has offices across North America, Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and South America. We make our course materials available in more than 75 languages. Given the global nature of our work and what we saw happening in China, we formed a Pandemic Committee in February to address the issues we faced with the virus. The Committee continues to meet frequently and includes our CEO and representatives from Communications, Culture & Talent (HR), Customer Support, Finance & Treasury, Information Technology, Legal & Government Affairs, Procurement, Risk & Compliance and Supply Chain Management.

Our offices in Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen closed at the end of January because of the coronavirus. As the virus moved around the world, our other offices followed suit with our U.S. and Canadian offices, where two-thirds of our employees are based, closing on March 16.

### **Inform**

Our first job was to let employees know what was happening. We are fortunate to have a great CEO, Simon Allen, who not only understands the value of communications but is an empathetic and caring leader. Plus, he has a great sense of humor.

Simon, who began self-isolating in his home outside London in mid-March, worked with his wife Dana (very handy with an iPhone) to create regular video updates for our employees. Their dog Jasper, who had many appearances, was a huge hit. One theme that carried throughout Simon's communications and those of our other leaders was that the well-being of our employees is our No. 1 priority. That came through in both our words and deeds.

To make sure that people saw Simon's videos, we sent an email to everyone in the company with a link to our internal social platform, Spark, where the videos were posted. Our platform is quite robust and enables people to like, share and comment on content. In addition, we included a link to each video in our Daily Briefing, an email newsletter that the Communications team sends every business day to keep all of our employees up to date on what's happening in our company, with our competitors and in education.



## Support

While roughly 20% of our employees usually work remotely, making sure that nearly our entire workforce could be effective working from home was challenging. Our technology teams provided equipment and support to enable employees to do their jobs remotely. We added Zoom as a way to conduct virtual meetings. Our Culture & Talent team developed a Pandemic Policy to ensure that employees who were unable to work would continue to receive benefits, and offered sessions on how to work effectively from home. With kids out of school, child care became a concern and we provided resources for that. We also gave all McGraw Hill employees free access to the K-12 materials we offer schools around the country so that parents could use them with their children.

We could see that with many people unable to leave their homes, more people were working on the weekends and many employees were putting in very long hours to help educators move their courses from print to online – something that we know how to do very well. Given how hard people were working, we told employees to take a “Chill Day,” a day off that didn’t count as either vacation or a personal day, so they would have some time for themselves.

To help our employees address the myriad issues they faced, we created three communities using Microsoft Teams – Juggling Act, Burnout Busters and Cabin Fever Fighters. Employees shared their coping strategies and inspired one another with stories and videos.

## Engage

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, as you can see, we did well.



### **Celebrate**

Our company is driven by its vision to “unlock the potential of each learner.” People come to McGraw Hill because they believe they can make a difference in the lives of students. This was shown during the spring when we provided free access, training and support to educators around the world seeking to move their classes online as a result of the pandemic. In the U.S. we helped 7,000 instructors at 1,500 colleges and universities serving more than 100,000 students move from print to online.

Employees were also drawn to help in the communities where they live. Two women in Iowa sewed more than 1,000 masks for essential workers. Another made Personal Protective Equipment for local hospitals using a 3D printer. Team members in India donated sanitization supplies to keep disadvantaged children safe, while another employee used his Chill Day to volunteer at a food distribution center.

### **Looking Ahead**

In the first phase of the pandemic, we focused on the health and safety of our employees and helping our customers make the transition from print to online teaching and learning. As we look ahead, we’ll begin to concentrate more on how to safely return to our offices. We are currently fielding another survey to determine our employees’ reactions to returning to the office and their expectations for measures the company could take to protect them when they do. The results of that survey will be used to create our plans for reopening the offices that are currently closed.

Longer term, the question we’ll need to address will be the future of how work is done based on what we’ve learned during this time. The pandemic has changed how we interact. It’s changed the tools we use. Those serendipitous discoveries and exchanges that happen in the physical world are less likely in the digital realm. Going forward we’ll have to consider how we maintain the strong culture we’ve built with a workforce that is less physically connected.

Because of the shape of our logo, we often talk about being “Red Cube Proud.” We celebrated the successes we had with our customers and employees by sharing them widely on Spark and in our town halls. Our response reflected our culture and our values. At an extraordinary time, we came together. I’m very Red Cube Proud.





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

Jennifer Mauer is head of Global Corporate Communications at Merck. Her team comprises Leadership Communications, External Affairs, and Global Content and Creative, and Planning and Operations and is responsible for driving communications that support the company's key business priorities, and build and defend the company's reputation.



## **Finding Guidance in a Different Place**

My daughter, Madeleine, is a senior in high school—graduating Class of 2020. While it's true that this class is missing a number of moments that many of us consider rites of passage due to the global pandemic, many are also having a veil of innocence lifted as they watch the country move through what is likely to be one of the most significant historical civil rights movements. Watching them navigate and succeed during these many months under stay-at-home orders and discourse has been truly illuminating.

In fact, the three key behaviors that helped my daughter and her peers through tremendous uncertainty with grace and poise are the same ones that enabled the success of the communications teams at Merck—and other companies—during these unprecedented times.

### **The first is Grit—the ability to overcome difficult and unexpected circumstances.**

I don't think any of us could have imagined what four months (and counting) of working from home would mean or how it would change how we do our work. Rather than allow the situation to ruin their lives, Madeleine and her peers adapted, embraced, and created new ways to interact, learn, and enjoy the new normal.

Similarly, the communications team at Merck responded with creative problem-solving centered around four goals that allowed the company to maintain focus: protecting our employees and their families, ensuring our medicines and vaccines continued to reach our patients and customers, supporting healthcare providers and our communities, and contributing our scientific expertise to research efforts of COVID-19. We established a centralized communications structure through which all internal and external communications flowed to ensure everyone in the company was on the same page and speaking with one voice to employees, patients, customers and community leaders. We found new ways to connect—through WebEx and Teams and Webinars. And, we launched new channels—podcasts and videos that ensured people felt more connected.



## **The second is Empathy—the ability to care deeply for our fellow humans.**

No matter what they look like, who they love or how they pray. I witnessed first-hand how these young men and women in high school reached out and cared for each other and others in the community. Even while we are struggling with the staggering losses and worry caused by the pandemic, people around the world have been horrified by the video showing the brutal death of George Floyd, an African American man, at the hands of a group of police officers in Minneapolis. This misuse of force by those in authority has led to protests in the U.S. and around the world over continuing racial injustices and disparities. Our CEO Ken Frazier shared his thoughts on this with all employees, and with a broader audience externally, calling for unity and meaningful action. So, in addition to our COVID-19 efforts, we have been reflecting on the actions we are taking to support our community and close racial inequities – and committing to do more.

We plan to grow our current diversity and inclusion efforts in four key areas: our internal work environment, health equity, our workforce development efforts and economic inclusion. Our collective goal is to create change within our company and deliver meaningful impact in the fight against systemic racism.

## **The third is Determination—focusing on making a difference.**

The Class of 2020 set their collective sights on changing things for the better even while their expectations and dreams were altered. Crises come in different shapes and sizes. And, 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. Employees are also now looking to their organizations to drive the changes that are so badly needed in the fight against racism. As communicators, we are in the prime position to connect across our organizations and ensure what we do actually makes things better. This has been a time of unprecedented tumult, but it has also wiped the slate clean, so to speak – cut through the noise – to remind us all what really matters.

This pandemic and the tragic death of George Floyd have shaken up the status quo and laid bare a lot of our country's deep-seated problems – from massive economic inequality to ongoing racial disparities to a lack of basic health care for people who need it. With so much uncertainty, with everything suddenly up for grabs, we as communicators can play an important role in leading to what comes next.

If the Class of 2020 is any indication, leading with grit, empathy and determination is the roadmap to follow!



**Jamie McLaughlin**  
*CEO, JWM Talent*

Jamie McLaughlin is CEO of JWM Talent. He is regarded as an authority in Marketing and Communications recruitment and search, successfully working in the industry for 15 years, across 4 continents and partnering with the world's most regarded brands.

Jamie has an unrivaled global network and has created formidable tactical partnerships with peak trade bodies such as the PR Council. He sits on the board of Institute for Public Relations, the selection panel of The Marketing Academy and the steering Committee of the Commission on Public Relations Education.

## JWM TALENT

### **Job Hunting During a Global Crisis: The Importance of Flexibility and Involvement**

**I've heard a lot of mixed things about what recruitment looks like right now, and a lot of agencies are cutting jobs. And we've seen that even in some of the trade pubs that people are doing layoffs or furloughs. So, why don't you give a synopsis right now of what you're seeing in the industry? What's on the rise and what do you see is struggling?**

Well, if you asked me this two weeks ago, or two and a half weeks ago, it would have been a completely different answer, because March was brutal, April as well. But I've been talking to agency heads, CCOs and CEOs, and they said that they were winning new business or getting pitch referrals and RFPs. Now, they've started winning those pieces of business and it looks like they're now starting to hire.

So, the market is night and day compared to what it was only two weeks ago. That's on a US level. If you're talking to people in New York, for example, it's a very different conversation than speaking to people in Seattle, speaking to people in Texas. Because of what New York's been through, it's probably pretty obvious why they're a little bit more hesitant and probably less enthusiastic about what the market looks like, just because of the ordeal they've been through.

I think agencies are always a very good barometer for what's happening in the market and then even more so, recruitment is a good barometer. Because if you're laying people off, it's not really a good market. If you're hiring people, it's a good market.

Whether it's agencies or industries, industries that weren't doing very well before this have done very badly and others that were doing well seemed to weather the storm. It's not a huge amount of shock in the market. Layoffs haven't been as widespread as maybe some people predicted. It's not like 2008, in my opinion. It feels different to the market. There are definitely pockets here and there that aren't doing well; sports, entertainment, retail, travel, tourism, but I haven't seen companies making 40-50% cuts. It's more like 10%, 15%, and maybe particular departments.

But as I said, there definitely seems to be a big jump in the last few weeks in terms of who's hiring, both agency and in-house.

While we're seeing quite a few cuts in other industries, I don't think there are as many in the PR and communications world. Never before has communications been so important, arguably, particularly if you work next to the CEO.

**Because a lot of people are still working from home, they're having to onboard their employees virtually. How is that going for you? Do you have any tips for what makes people successful? How do you account for the virtual onboarding?**

I think the practicalities include getting laptops to people and getting people set up on the IT side of things, which is a bit of a given in most businesses. You'd expect to be able to do that.

But it's also the softer things, people being intuitive and inventive in the onboarding process. I saw my friends at Hotwire agency have a new joiner happy hour to introduce everyone to the global team and bring everyone in. So, sending people not just your laptop, but also onboarding gifts.

It's difficult. Often, if you join a new company, you get assigned a buddy. You have a manager, but of course, those people are often very busy. It's different online because if you have an issue or a question and you need to have a conversation about it, Slacking someone or emailing them doesn't usually give you an instant response. It's quite an occasion to ask someone to get on a Zoom call just to say, "By the way, I don't get what's happening here on my email or on the CRM or in the database," or something like that.

I think one thing that would help virtual onboarding is businesses making themselves available. And then the softer things in terms of trying to convey your company culture. Other than sending gifts and Zoom calls, it's not easy.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold? What have you seen on the hiring front?**

Unfortunately, sometimes in times of crisis or extreme pressure, two things so important as D&I do go out the window. But the flip side of that is diversity, equity, and inclusion are even more important when people are distanced, I think, because it's arguably harder to include people from afar.

But in my opinion, PR and communications are a lot more progressive than many other industries. Therefore, people that head up communications departments internally tend to be more progressive and thoughtful. So, I think we're probably on the better side of it. But it definitely doesn't become as big of a priority, which is a shame because arguably it's just as important and it may be even more important at this time.

## **What suggestions do you have for students or recent graduates looking for jobs?**

There are roles out there, which is great to hear. There are two things. One, PR Council introduced the Agency-Ready Certificate, which I think is a fantastic idea. Depending on people's circumstances, I always say to them, you can take a role and then make it about marketing and PR to an extent. So, if you join a small business, you can ask to get involved in the social media aspect of things. You can ask to take a look at the marketing and PR plan. Get involved.

Also, you can offer your services on an ad hoc basis, a short-term basis, to work on projects here and there. I think PR is a good industry for that; using people for a week or two for specific projects. It's about being open-minded on that front as well, and not expecting a long-term project. There is the opportunity to offer your services on an ad hoc basis.

There's a ton of 5 to 20-people agencies out there that don't have storied graduated programs but could maybe do with an intern, but they haven't thought about it and you haven't approached them. They could use your services. My only worry about this is I don't want people necessarily working for free, which is the temptation at the moment. I wouldn't recommend that.

But I do understand it can be about building your resume and building your skillset. So, there is that temptation. When you're working from home, you could do a project for a couple of days for free or a couple of hours a week. That's fine. But I wouldn't want anyone taking full-time gigs for nothing.

## **Let's talk about what makes good candidates. I think it ties in directly to what skills people can think about if they're looking for a job. What does a candidate look like to you? And has that changed with COVID?**

I definitely think it has changed since COVID, especially candidates for the corporate communications function. The hiring need has been less around products, and more around employee engagement. I think employee engagement is becoming much more sophisticated and it has had much more importance put on it. I also think a rounded media skillset is important.

A lot of people keep telling me, "We need good writers." That wasn't fashionable a year or two ago. It was all about AI and digital and VR and AR and that sort of thing.

Crisis communication is important right now, but it's difficult to learn the crisis skillset until you're in it. I don't know how many businesses had a global pandemic response document, but I'm sure they have one now. Then the next thing will come along. Generally speaking, people that are proactive and curious are the ones that seem to get the jobs. So, the LinkedIn thing, you've got to do it. It can be a real slog, but you've got to apply for stuff on LinkedIn.

I always remember an intern that applied for a role with me. I wasn't dealing with it. But she emailed me the night before. She was coming in for an interview and said, "I'm coming in to meet one of your team members. This is my resume. I'm really excited about potentially joining your team. If you have five minutes, I'd love to just say hello to you." I was like, "Give that woman a job." We did. We hired her. It was just a summer internship.

So, I do believe those individuals that are proactive and curious will be the ones that usually shine through. That goes for your career. Put your hand up and say, "I want to do that." Ask about things.

### **Where do you think we will be a year from now and then where do you think we will be three years from now?**

In a year's time, I think communications will be strengthened from this. I think the importance of the role of the communicator, the CEO whisperer, the trusted advisor will have gained acknowledgement and we'll be better prepared for this sort of thing, hopefully, as well from a communications perspective.

And employee engagement and internal communication will be as important as media relations and crisis and all the other things that go into the communications mix. But I think generally speaking, communications will have gone another step forward in terms of marketing if that is a battle that's to be had.

I think one of the upsides that will come about is flexibility. Remote working, yes, but I think flexibility will be even greater. I think that will help our industry in particular because it will mean there is a lot of flexibility for people like working mothers, who have to leave the industry because there isn't flexibility or willingness for remote work. I think that presents another upside.

### **What changes are you seeing in terms of salaries?**

Salary stagnation will probably happen. There are a lot of people that are out of a job. It will flatten out. For about how long? I'm not sure. It depends how long this goes on for, of course. We will see some salary stagnation, which is a shame because it was starting to pick up again. But that will be affected.

But generally, I do see the positives of this from a communications perspective because it's made communications more prominent and important.





**Juan-Carlos Molleda**

*Edwin L. Artzt Dean and  
Professor at the University of  
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and Communication*

Juan-Carlos Molleda, Ph.D. is the Edwin L. Artzt Dean and professor at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. He is a member of the Institute for Public Relations' Board of Trustees, The LAGRANT Foundation's Board of Directors, Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations' Board of Advisors, HIV Alliance's Board of Directors, and Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art's Leadership Council.



## University Communication When a Global Pandemic and Protests Against Systemic Racism Converge

Like many people around the world, those of us who work at academic institutions are outraged at the wrongful deaths of Black Americans, and all racially motivated violence and police brutality. This is a turning point. We must acknowledge that, as citizens of a nation and, in many cases, employees of universities with a history of racist policies and actions, we play a role in the systemic inequities that continue to harm our Black communities today. This is a troubling reality that demands action and a clear shift in the ways we operate and communicate.

We all know words are not enough. Now is the time to make real changes to eliminate obstacles and increase support for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). At the university level, this includes our students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

On June 6, I sent a [message to my school's students](#) proposing 12 action items that we are refining with faculty input for fall implementation. This plan addresses key areas such as curricula, hiring practices, and financial support for BIPOC students, groups, and projects. In addition to discussions at the leadership level, we hosted two town halls this month with undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff. The school's communications team has been monitoring reactions to our messages and engagement strategy, and the public response has been overwhelmingly positive.

Most recently, we reached out to alumni because many have expressed concern and a desire to support our BIPOC students, especially the class of 2020, who will face a tough job market. We suggested a few ways they can help, including **financially supporting BIPOC student projects and groups; offering internships or remote micro-internships**, freelance work, or entry-level employment to students and graduates; **joining the school's Diverse Alumni Mentor Network; establishing scholarships; and volunteering for activities such as speaking in a class or participating in informational interviews with students.**

As we all know, the worldwide movement to address systemic inequities and social injustices came to a head while we were already in the midst of a surreal global health crisis that continues



to test all of us personally and professionally. In American universities, this also converged with two other stressors: the need to quickly learn how to deliver classes remotely, and the graduation of a class that suddenly faces an uncertain labor market in a turbulent world.

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.

The larger community wants to bring students back to campus, but many are also concerned about a spike in COVID-19 cases when they return. Despite the fluid situation, the university community demands timely and accurate information, encouragement, and hope. Our communications aim to reduce the high levels of anxiety and uncertainty felt by all, and our responses follow a central guiding principle: to prioritize the safety, health, and well-being of our student body, faculty, and staff.

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.

We are constantly reflecting on the information to share and the tone to strike in internal communications. Here are some lessons I have learned:

- This moment demands empathetic and ethical communication. Our faculty, staff, students, and our student's families need reassurance and acknowledgment of their individual and collective circumstances. People are juggling their family and work lives and facing many pressures.
- This crisis requires us to strike a balance between a call to remain calm and a sense of urgency emphasizing the need to change behaviors to protect others, especially the most vulnerable members of our community. Clear policies, processes, and procedures, combined with agility and flexibility to address circumstances we cannot predict, reflect a sense of control and intentionality when anxieties are running high.

- Some updates are relevant to all members of the school community, but often specific groups expect guidance and insights that pertain directly to them. Finding efficiencies when email boxes are already overflowing strengthens the voices of our leaders as trusted sources of critical information.
- We need to be as coordinated as possible ahead of major announcements. At my university, the provost communicates the general messaging to the deans, and we tailor those announcements to our units.
- Consistency and repetition (within reason) are important as we try to capture the attention of our internal audiences and convey information clearly, especially when the messages they receive externally might conflict.
- Everyone around us faces their own set of circumstances, fears, questions, and concerns that deserve both nuanced responses and collective actions.
- Multiple brains are better than one. Empowering those with specialized knowledge and responsibilities is critical to an informed and functional community.

The way we live, work, and communicate needs to be more authentic and intentional. How we navigate the challenges we face today may lead us to a better future. But to get there, we must go beyond lip service and follow through with real changes for the benefit of all.



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

Dominic heads corporate communications for Bed Bath & Beyond Inc. He is a strategic advisor to the CEO and executive team and leads external and internal communications across the business and its retail brands. His role includes reputation management, corporate brand development, purpose communications, crisis and issues management, as well as ongoing public relations.

Dominic joined the company after several years working for PR agencies, including Edelman and Fleishman Hillard. His agency career included several years leading public affairs, financial services, crisis and corporate communication agency practices in London and New York. He has acted as a senior advisor to a variety of Fortune 500 and equivalent companies globally, including Diageo, Shell, Microsoft, AB InBev, Saudi Aramco, Western Union, S&P Global and others.



## COVID-19: Navigating Uncertainty

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.

When the extent of the COVID-19 crisis became clear, navigating communications felt like paddling a canoe in the middle of a tsunami. Every day new challenges would emerge and we'd be presented with issues to contend with that had no precedent or handbook to guide our path. I've spent most of my career handling crises and issues for companies around the world, but the most robust crisis communications plan seemed laughable in the face of the pandemic and could barely provide for the sheer breadth and scale of the challenges before us.

We quickly organized our leadership team into a series of cross-functional groups, to provide speed and agility in our response to the rapidly changing landscape. Communications played a dual role, informing and supporting decision-making, in light of new regulatory or competitive context, as well as helping our leadership team communicate changes in operations, standards and ways of working to our people, customers, vendors, investors and other stakeholders.

To support decision making, we established some early rules of the road, including:

- Safety first, every time: the implications for our business were clear, but all decisions were made with one priority above all else - the safety and wellbeing of our people, customers and the communities we served. In line with the government's guidance and our own medical advice, this meant closing the vast majority of our stores and taking the decision to put many of our associates on furlough. These were incredibly difficult decisions to make, but they were essential to keep our commitment to safety.



- Accelerate and go: teams were empowered to review new information, assess and make decisions with delegated authority. Communications played a key role in ensuring there was clarity around actions and plans could be conveyed coherently and with strategic intent. We established and implemented new safety standards, created training programs to speed their uptake by associates and closed sites quickly when we were alerted of a COVID-19 case amongst our associate team.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate: with so much change underway, we massively ramped up our internal and external communications. Our associate teams received updates, at least once a day, including regular videos from the CEO to put a face to our decisions in real time. We also introduced new technology platforms to reach associates on furlough to maintain contact and regularly update on the business. At the same time, we delivered ongoing communications to our customers, the market, suppliers and others to provide the latest information on changes we were making and the implications for them.
- Be open, honest and transparent: we weren't always able to provide perfect answers, but associate feedback told us that we needed to be clear and transparent about what we were planning. We provided daily updates on any cases of COVID-19 amongst our associate population to provide transparency. At the same time, videos from our CEO and leadership team allowed us to put a human face on our work, and we realized pretty quickly that it was better to be scrappy and authentic than worry about creating a polished piece of corporate communications. We've also sought feedback and questions throughout, responding as quickly as possible to maintain a link with our people while teams are working remotely.

During this time, we were also mindful of the need to express our values and purpose as our own people, their families, and the communities we serve were suffering. With the support of the CEO, we were able to move fast to establish a new community giving program, 'Bringing Home Everywhere', which facilitated essential home, infant, health and personal care item donations that many communities need at this time. We've also sent essential items to first responders and people in healthcare or nursing facilities to support them during a difficult time. I was also proud that we could pivot this program to show support for Black communities in recent weeks, partnering with the NAACP to provide essential support to its members and the communities it serves.

Of course, the sudden impact on our business from the COVID-19 pandemic moved into reverse as we re-opened stores and began to resume 'normal' business operations once it had become safe to do so. During this time, we've also kept up and even accelerated the transformation of our business, bringing in new services like Buy-Online-Pickup-In-Store and contactless curbside pick-up. Communicating how customers can buy quickly, effectively and with limited contact will be an essential part of the retail mix in the near-term, so these have proven to be critical to helping us rebuild.



The tragedy of COVID-19 is plain to see and it feels wrong to find silver-linings when so much havoc has been wreaked on people's lives. The impact of the virus on our economy and society remains to be fully seen, but I have no doubt that it has created fundamental changes to our corporate culture and the role of communications alongside.

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.



**Doug Pinkham**

*President, Public Affairs Council*

Doug Pinkham is president of the Public Affairs Council, the leading international association for public affairs professionals. Under his leadership, the Council has conducted groundbreaking public opinion research, opened a European office, and made the Council the leading authority on digital advocacy, global public affairs and integrated communications.



### **It's the End of the World as We Knew It**

Major crises often cause changes in long-term behavior. My mother, who lost both her father and her financial security during the Great Depression, continued to watch every penny she spent for the rest of her life. The 9/11 terrorist attacks not only created long airport security lines; they changed our whole approach to protecting our personal security and privacy.

In the same way, the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting effects on how we live our lives. As in the past, these impacts will manifest themselves as trade-offs made by individuals, companies and governments. My mother's penny-pinching was not an obsessive habit; it was a trade-off to forego items she wanted in return for knowing she'd have the money to buy what she needed.

Since the pandemic is far from over, it's too early to say how extreme these trade-offs will be. But I expect that by next year most Americans will view the world as a much more dangerous place than it was in 2019, and that will impact our calculations of risk and reward.

International corporations, for example, will have a tougher time making the argument that an interconnected global economy helps reduce the potential for conflict. Thomas Friedman predicted in *The Earth is Flat* that "No two countries that are both part of a major global supply chain. . . will ever fight a war against each other as long as they are both part of the same global supply chain." While that statement may be true for wars, it doesn't help predict behavior during a raging pandemic. The closing of national borders has created gaps in supply chains that were once optimized for efficiency and profitability.

Pressure is building for countries to become more self-sufficient, which means the isolationism pendulum will swing back in that direction. Firms headquartered in countries still willing to embrace globalization will need to build in greater redundancy in production and distribution. They'll also want to become less dependent on one very large country (e.g., China) to manufacture their products.

That will be a major trade-off: A bit less efficiency and a higher price in exchange for a lower chance of being shut down during the next pandemic.

There are also numerous public affairs issues that need to be resolved once we make it through this crisis and as we prepare for the next one. Each government decision requires a trade-off. Here are two of them:



### **Cooperation vs. Independence:**

President Trump has backed away from the World Health Organization and various agreements to cooperate on pandemic response and vaccine development. If the U.S. were highly successful in battling COVID-19, it would be selfish not to assist other countries. But when the U.S. accounts for more than 25% of all cases and deaths worldwide, it is absurd not to join forces. One way or another, even if Trump wins re-election, I suspect we'll see a tilt back toward cooperation.

### **Local Control vs. National Control:**

Countries that have managed the coronavirus well had a plan ready to go and they implemented it at the national level. In the U.S., however, it's still not clear whether the federal or state governments are taking the lead on re-opening the economy, who will secure testing supplies and PPE when a second wave strikes, and who will pay all of the extra costs.

At a business and personal level, there are trade-offs Americans are already making or will need to make in coming months.

### **Personal vs. Remote:**

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.

In Washington, D.C., where I live, studies have shown that the most effective way to communicate with policymakers is for constituents to meet with them face-to-face. But according to a new Public Affairs Council survey, over 70% of public affairs executives believe that, after the pandemic is over, it will remain much more difficult to meet with federal policymakers in person. Instead, 83% think it will become increasingly common to schedule video conferences. If that's what it takes to maintain relationships and have one's voice heard, everyone will make the adjustment.





### **Safety vs. Economy:**

learly, most Americans and their political leaders were unprepared for the economic damage that would result from several months of quarantining. Now, as pressure builds to fully re-open the economy, new COVID-19 cases have been soaring in those states that appear to have lifted restrictions too soon. As of mid-June 2020, we haven't yet determined the proper balance between safety and the economy. But sooner or later we'll have to do so — and that will affect everything from our reliance on mass transit and attendance at sporting events to whether we routinely wear protective masks when in public.

Other changes in behaviors and attitudes will ensue from the COVID-19 crisis. These include greater acceptance of digital retailing, telemedicine, online education, digital advocacy and voting-by-mail. (Over 60% of executives surveyed by the Public Affairs Council expect an increase in the use of digital advocacy strategies and nearly 80% think voting-by-mail will become much more common.)

As with remote working, each of these developments represents a trend that was already in motion before the pandemic began. But the toughest changes will result from the hard choices we haven't yet made.



### **Shirley Powell**

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

Shirley Powell is senior vice president of communications and industry relations at Cox Automotive, a global automotive services and software company whose vision is to transform the way the world buys, sells, owns and uses cars. Cox Automotive is a subsidiary of family owned Cox Enterprises, Inc.

Based in Atlanta, Powell leads and manages the day-to-day operations of the company's communications organization, which includes internal and executive communications, industry relations, and reputation and crisis management.

Powell joined Cox Automotive with more than 25 years of strategic communications experience in the media industry, having held senior communications roles at The Weather Channel, Turner Broadcasting System, NBC Entertainment and Disney Channel.

Powell has a passion for serving the community and has served on the board of directors for several Atlanta-based non-profit organizations. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from Temple University in Philadelphia.



## **The Power of Listening: Prioritizing Internal Communications**

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.

So, we created a communications strategy that focused on the right frequency of the right content to the right audiences from the right leaders. We communicated decisions almost as they were made which meant more frequent and more visible communications, especially in the first few weeks of the pandemic. We also quickly established a COVID-19 section on the home page of our intranet in order to make it as easy as possible for employees to find the information they needed as well as to connect with their now-remote colleagues and share tips and photos of everything from work-from-home spaces and new co-workers (kids and pets) to inspirational playlists and favorite recipes. And we highlighted people who were making a positive difference in the lives of others and in their communities – heroes of every variety – which resulted in nearly twice as much engagement as usual.

We did everything we could to increase the frequency and transparency of information we pushed to our employees. And then we listened.

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.

That's good news as I believe that working remotely is here to stay at Cox, and our internal communications team will need to continue to employ strategies that can effectively serve this new "office." As we do, we'll need to revisit conventional wisdom about volume and become comfortable with communicating more frequently to fully satisfy employees' information needs. And we'll have to continue listening. Truly listening. Not listening for an opportunity to insert company messaging, but to understand what's on the hearts and minds of employees and responding to that. Understanding EQ will become just as important as feeding employees' IQ. At the end of the day, helping leaders stay emotionally connected to employees will reap greater engagement and loyalty rewards than it ever has before.



If we do that, and do it well, we'll be able to adapt and get our messages across to reach our employees in whatever workspace they will use. That's valuable for today, but it's even more valuable as the business and cultural landscapes continue to evolve for the future.



**Linda Rutherford**

*Senior Vice President,  
Chief Communications Officer,  
Southwest Airlines*

Linda Rutherford is the Senior Vice President, Chief Communications Officer for Southwest Airlines. She is known for creating and leading powerful teams that deliver award-winning communication for one of the most beloved brands in the world. She oversees media relations, corporate communications, special event planning, crisis communications, emergency response and business continuity planning, community outreach, social business, multimedia and visual communication, culture and employee engagement and change leadership. Prior to joining Southwest Airlines in 1992, she was a journalist in the Dallas area, including working for the Dallas Times Herald, and she began her career with Newsweek magazine in New York. Linda graduated from Texas Tech University with a bachelor's degree in journalism.



## **Using Corporate Purpose to Navigate a Pandemic**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Southwest Airlines has dealt with its share of emergencies, crises and tragedies, but nothing on the scale of what the current pandemic. Each time we've faced a new crisis, we pulled on our previous knowledge, lessons learned and robust emergency planning contingencies and checklists to help us address the new crisis we're facing. What has gone well for us thus far is a good reception to both our external and internal communication. In all facets—medium, frequency, tone and voice—we have received great feedback on our transparency and timely information even in this dynamic, unpredictable environment. The volume of our communications has increased 10x compared to our “business as usual” efforts. Our greatest challenge is keeping up with the unending desire for more information—everything from details of voluntary separation packages internally to what our route network will look like in each of the 100+ communities that we served before the crisis. Early on, we created a formal partnership with the University of Texas (UT) Southwestern Hospital system's resident expert on infectious diseases, Dr. Trish Perl, and she has been a valuable resource for CEO briefings, policy reviews and to help us navigate the sometimes conflicting information from county health officials, state government and the CDC (like whether mask/facial coverings were a good idea to recommend or not).



**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

Well, that depends on your business. Pharma, industrial, food production, consumer paper goods, etc., are all examples of industries that have been stable and/or seen business increase during the pandemic. Others, like travel and tourism, brick and mortar retail and casual dining have seen significant drops in demand and revenues. As each business looks at its recovery plans, strategic communications can help the business “monitor and adapt” messaging by reacting quickly with insights from the intended audiences. For example, when we were beginning to develop the Southwest Promise (our campaign effort to help travelers feel comfortable with our new policies and procedures), our intention was to “strongly encourage” mask/facial covering among Customers. Marketing, for logical and practical reasons, didn’t want to require them. But some initial messaging was soft sounded for Customer and political acceptance and the feedback was swift with the guidance that we should require masks/face coverings AND that the industry should act in unison and not airline by airline.

**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

Southwest has taken a myriad of steps to preserve cash and protect jobs, including: eliminated all discretionary spending; sought CARES Act stimulus payroll support, secured additional financing in the markets through supplemental securities offerings, credit revolvers and loans; trimmed our flight network back to essential flights connecting our route system in order to match capacity to travel demand; launched voluntary measures for employees to take time off without pay to help reduce payroll costs; launched a new voluntary separation program to help bring down overstaffing; and introduced new policies related to temperature screenings, mask wearing, and a contact tracing system to track COVID+ cases, treatments and return to work support. For the corporate campus, we launched immediate efforts to support remote working, like laptop/office chair sign outs and access to more digital collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams, along with hints and hacks for effective meetings, managing a remote workforce, and how to maintain mental wellness in a stressful situation. For the broader community, we offered our air travel services to move both medical supplies and personnel to the places that most needed it, allowed our Customers to donate their frequent flyer points to key charities like Feeding America



and donated spare snack/drink inventory to area food banks. Moving forward, we plan to monitor travel demand, adjust the fleet/capacity as we can to meet demand, and keep discretionary spending in check. We are hopeful that all the voluntary programs we put in place will help reduce the overstaffing we will have come the Fall, based on our travel demand forecast. We have a nearly 50-year track record of no furloughs, and as we enter our 50th anniversary year in 2021, we are hopeful to reflect back on how we managed through this prolonged crisis. Our CEO says: "Our goal is to thrive; our imperative right now is to survive."

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

All the "other" meetings that were on the calendar have been cancelled until further notice to free up capacity and ability for the C-suite team and other collaborators to meet quickly to deal challenges presented by the dynamic situation. We have weekly meetings, daily business reporting, monthly customer and employee sentiment data and regular assessments of media coverage and social chatter themes. We can also access macro trends and data to see how the globe is responding to the pandemic, including Europe and Asia's recovery efforts, changes in travel/hospitality demand, and other economic trends.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

Southwest's Purpose is to connect people to what's important in their lives through friendly, reliable and low-cost air travel. No one, from the CEO to the line mechanic lost sight of that purpose, even in the dark days of April when planes were flying with one or two people on board. There was broad understanding of the essential service we provide, and a pride that even when very few people were on board, we were there when people needed us—sometimes that was to bring a soldier home to his final resting place; other times it was to deliver a pallet of respirators to a hospital in need. No one lost sight of the role we play in connecting people to what's important in their lives. The reasons might be different, and we certainly have adapted to that new environment—no one may be rushing to their flight to get to the beach, but they are rushing to get on a flight to get to a loved one in need.



## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

Communications, Operations, HR, Facilities and others have been collaborating on “return to work” policies and decisions. In mid-March we instituted our “Code Yellow” portion of our campus policy that closes the facilities to outside visitors and all but essential personnel. We went from daily attendance of ~8,500 people to fewer than 500 a day. It’s important to note that as an airline operation, our frontline was always at work, so we had to be sensitive in our broad communication. Another quick learning for us: “return to work” is a terrible phrase which hints that you weren’t working at home. We quickly pivoted and renamed our effort “Return to Campus.” With a focus on our corporate campus (multiple support buildings), we have been creating new policies, signage, communication, educational videos, etc., to help the effort of getting word to all our corporate campus employees prepared for our “new normal” of reduced building capacity, need for physical distance, mask wearing and limited services (such as Cafes and our Tech Zone), and guidance on no large gatherings. We have recently distributed a Return to Campus guide, launched an educational video in our Learning Management System that all campus employees need to view, and communicated department by department on what “phase” employees will be returning in our first wave, second wave, third wave, etc. We have limited the entrances to all the facilities in order to implement temperature screenings upon arrival and we are currently investigating what technology might be available to use to get daily “health declarations” from employees as they arrive on campus (no temperature, not around anyone who has been ill, has not traveled internationally, etc.). Nearly all of our employee work stations on our corporate campus allow for physical distancing; we do have a few work areas where “scrum” work had employees in close quarters and those are being studied for solutions, including alternative in/out of office team scheduling, staggered schedules and other options.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

Prior to COVID-19, Southwest allowed flexible work arrangements but did not fully embrace remote working. For example, we operate seven call centers around the country. While we have studied the idea of agents being able to work from home, we had not enacted it for the nearly 3,500 people who manage Customer calls and emails. After the crisis fully emerged, the leadership team over our Customer Support & Services area, in partnership with our Technology team, found hardware, software security protocols and training to be able to allow 1,700 of those agents to be able to work from home in a matter of weeks—thus allowing the remaining agents to physically distance themselves in our call centers as needed. Moving forward, our company is coming up with a formal remote working policy to be able to support a higher level of this kind of work arrangement post-pandemic. As for the communications function, we will take lessons learned from dealing with this crisis into our day to day and further improve our product delivery (learning the voices of each of our executives), collaboration with other departments (work on any gaps in our relationships), and more fully fleshing out our Pandemic response plan and fully articulating the associated business risks.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

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).

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

Video, video, video. 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.



**Michael Schoenfeld**

*Chief Communications and  
Government Relations Officer,  
Duke University*

Michael Schoenfeld is the chief communications and government relations officer for Duke University in Durham, NC. He serves as Duke's principal spokesperson and counselor to the president and trustees on public affairs, issues and crisis management, media relations, marketing, branding and advocacy. He is also a visiting professor of the practice of journalism and public policy at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy, where he teaches a course on media and politics.



**Duke**  
UNIVERSITY

## **The Unique Challenges of University Communication During a Pandemic**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

Every organization has a unique culture, but I would say that a large, complex, highly decentralized university is more unique than most because of the number and diversity of activities and stakeholders, each of whom has a personal and passionate connection to the institution and looks to it for not just operational matters, but also for moral and emotional support and leadership. Thus, even in the best of times, our communications can be more like a cacophony than a symphony. Since March we taken unprecedented (for us) steps to consolidate and sharpen both the content and source of communications to ensure accuracy and consistency in our messaging, to provide actionable information to our internal community, and to utilize the intellectual resources of our faculty, research and health care experts to advance public knowledge and understanding of many different aspects COVID-19's impact on society.

**What will the business world look like post COVID-19? What role will strategic communications play in shaping what the business world will look like?**

Strategic communications and communicators are in a vital but perhaps perilous place. In the understandable absence of clarity and certainty around what the future looks like, there will be an even greater than usual tendency to expect communications to "solve" important business and policy matters, rather than vice versa.



**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? What are your plans moving forward?**

As the major health care provider in the region, Duke has been deeply immersed in both treating and educating the community about COVID-19. Likewise, the we have maintained direct, regular, and persistent communications with our employees about both workplace issues and broader health and financial matters.

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Our senior leadership has been very involved in both the substantive response and communications. This has taken a number of forms: regular email messages from the President to the university community, participation in meetings and other open forums, videos and online interviews. This was also the catalyst for the President to begin social media engagement through his personal Instagram channel, which has become an important vehicle for reinforcing major institutional themes and messages.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

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).

## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are you doing in terms of strategic communication planning for this “return to business?” What are some steps you’re taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

The vast majority of our workforce has been working throughout the crisis, though about half have been doing so remotely. We are now implementing a phased return to the workplace – research labs are now open and staffed, albeit under very different conditions than before COVID, plans are being refined to reopen public facilities like libraries and offices as we plan for the return of students to campus in August. Communications has been critical to all of this, including websites, FAQs and video explainers on new processes and procedures. Our employees are eager for information and reassurance that the university has taken the necessary precautions, is looking out for their safety and is following the medical and public health guidance from our own medical center and scientists as we move through this continuum.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function overall as a result of COVID-19? If so, what?**

The speed and precision with which we need to speak to our stakeholders means that have centralized more communications as a result of the COVID-19 environment. That is, the “old” way of cascading messages through local units has been increasingly supplanted by direct communications from leadership, or the central communications office. We have also put in place a much more rigorous review process for employee and student-directed communications that comes from individual units.



**Erin Streeter**

*Senior Vice President of  
Communications and Brand  
Strategy, National Association  
of Manufacturers*

Erin Streeter serves as senior vice president of communications and brand strategy at the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), the nation's largest industrial trade association. A veteran of high-stakes communications campaigns, Ms. Streeter is the association's chief communications officer.

After joining the NAM, Ms. Streeter transformed the department, expanding its size and reach to improve the NAM's positioning and branding. Her award-winning team has empowered manufacturers to tell their stories persuasively inside and outside Washington, D.C., giving NAM member companies of all sizes a platform to share their message.

Ms. Streeter possesses a wide range of unique insights thanks to her diverse career experiences, from serving in senior-level positions at a national security agency, to working for one of the largest human service organizations in the country, to working as a television reporter. For her many accomplishments, she was named one of PR News' Top Women in PR for 2015 and in 2018.



## **Communications, COVID-19 and Creators Respond**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, governors and public health officials have proven over and over that in fighting this virus, communication is as vital a weapon as any mask or treatment. Those who have spoken regularly and clearly called us to a purpose greater than ourselves have been the most effective in fighting the outbreak. They are the ones that get the highest marks from their constituents.

That model has been—and should continue to be—applied on a different scale in our workplaces. Our employees and colleagues, our customers and members, and the broader public need and deserve that same type of purposeful communication. It the antidote to uncertainty.

Internal communication is paramount. With employees scattered about in remote offices, this is the key to team cohesion. Successful leaders have discovered by now that in this new environment, in which routines were upended and uncertainty reigns, clear and regular channels of communication can ease anxiety and improve remote workplace morale. It is not just what leaders are saying to their teams; it is how they are saying it. A regular all staff meeting, preferably with everyone on camera, provides an opportunity for a reset even when there is little new information, while ad hoc, irregular convenings only add to the chaos.

A regular, predictable cadence is helpful for external audiences too. At the National Association of Manufacturers, we reimagined our communications operation more than a year ago so that we could serve as our own news organization—a news source for manufacturers and about manufacturers. That transformation laid the groundwork for us to be a trusted source amid the pandemic for our member companies—on everything from the latest state lockdown decisions to CDC best practices to Paycheck Protection Program application requirements.

We leveraged our existing channels, including Input, our daily morning read. And we were able to add new channels, including an afternoon daily email of the most important and actionable resources that came directly from our president and CEO to the leaders of our member companies and partner associations. Using predictable, established channels ensured that manufacturing



leaders—already stretched thin navigating economic strains and protecting their employees—knew they could rely on one reliable resource.

Information has been gold in this pandemic. The NAM has seen the measurable evidence—in the form of record web traffic, to the tens of thousands that have joined NAM webinars on everything from how to sanitize the workplace to how to leverage the Fed’s lending opportunities.

Regularity and clarity are key. We are living in a just-the-facts environment. But that does not mean that we do not have an opportunity to inspire.

Throughout this crisis, manufacturers have been in the business of saving lives by producing the masks, testing kits, gloves, and ventilators that our front-line health care workers and patients need—while continuing their vital work producing food and other daily essentials.

The NAM, stepping far outside its conventional role, has helped to mobilize those supplies over the past months. As part of our “Creators Respond” effort, we identified manufacturers who could provide or produce personal protective equipment and supplied that information to federal agencies and governors. Tens of millions of pieces of PPE have reached those in need as a result.

The NAM and manufacturers across the country have been supporting a cause greater than themselves. Telling this story matters. It inspires action and hard work. It reminds policymakers of the vital nature of this industry. It gives employees—whether at the NAM, on the shop floor, or in a remote location—a sense that their work profoundly matters. It gives the country a reason to be proud and the confidence that we can overcome this together. That is a message worth communicating.

With businesses beginning to reopen, it can be tempting to think that we can just revert to our old ways or that proactive communication efforts we took in the early months of the pandemic are no longer needed. But the virus isn’t going away, so neither is the disruption or uncertainty in our workplaces and economy. For that reason, communicators must hold firm—keep communicating regularly, clearly and with an emphasis on a greater cause.





**Chris Talley**

*Chief Communications  
Officer and SVP, Corporate  
Communications, USAA*

Chris Talley is Chief Communications Officer and SVP, corporate communications, at USAA, the financial-services provider for military families.

He has more than 25 years of corporate, agency, brand, reputation, crisis and all-audience communication expertise and experience.



## **Open Questions in a “Post” COVID World**

As communicators, it feels like we’ve lived a generation in just three months. Amid the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, we’ve had to rewrite our operating manuals, adjust crisis communications playbooks, address the confusion and anxieties of employees and help guide our leaders through the fog of uncertainty. Mike Tyson’s conclusion that everyone has a plan until you punch him in the mouth suddenly seemed personal.

Just about the time we were beginning to get our arms around how to think about a changed world, tragedy, horrible and unacceptable actions unfolded across the country, creating another highly emotional and personally charged set of issues that require immediate action. We’re all grappling with the right role, voice and places to participate. Specific to COVID, there are many open questions for us to answer. Here are three worth considering:

### **How do we equip leaders in a remote employee environment?**

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.

### **How do we maintain our seat at the table and speed of decision-making?**

One outcome of the COVID crisis is that corporate communicators have occupied a center seat at the table to help leaders make critical decisions that impact employees, customers and other stakeholders. Our insights into audience sentiments have supported accelerated decision-making at a time when being slow to act could have had dire consequences for the business.



With communications in the lead, many companies have delivered timely health and safety information to employees; provided clarity to employees migrating to work from home; publicized assistance programs for financially struggling customers; and updated various stakeholders about the impact to business operations.

In a typical corporate environment that is more accustomed to working decisions through multiple layers and matrixed teams, how do we help leaders maintain this decision agility once the urgency of the pandemic fades? Maintaining a seat at the leadership table is step one, but we must also be equipped with rich data and analytics that help our leaders understand their audiences and the impact of their decisions.

**How do we help employees stay emotionally healthy and engaged in our company's mission, strategy and culture in a national environment of health fears, financial distress and social unrest?**

The confluence of traumatic events this year will linger long past the first wave of the coronavirus. Families of more than 100,000 U.S. victims and more than 1.5 million confirmed COVID patients are struggling with its aftermath, and no one can predict with certainty whether more waves are on the way. The historic contraction of the U.S. economy in the first and second quarters of the year left tens of millions jobless – and others worried about their jobs. Lockdowns and social isolation have increased anxiety levels and led to greater demand for prescriptions to treat anxiety and depression. Meanwhile, a series of racially involved tragedies have stoked levels of social unrest not seen since the 1960s.

With all this as a backdrop, how do we show care for a partially remote workforce that is understandably uncertain, anxious and hurting? And how do we rally them to help achieve our company's goals? There will be a premium on communications that are authentic, empathetic and inspirational.

What's more, few company income statements and balance sheets are escaping the financial impacts of the recession. What if we have to communicate difficult decisions about headcount, pay, benefits or general expense reductions? Transparency is important, but so is conveying the "why" behind the decisions and connecting the dots for how employees can play essential roles in the company's strategy and future success.

There are more questions than answers at this point. But we need to start mapping out how we will retool corporate communications for a post-COVID, socially and economically tumultuous world.



### **Jennifer Temple**

*Chief Communications Officer  
and Member of the Executive  
Committee, Hewlett Packard  
Enterprise*

Jennifer Temple serves as Chief Communications Officer and member of the Executive Committee for Hewlett Packard Enterprise, a global technology company with \$30 billion in revenue and 60,000 team members. Jennifer joined the company in 2018 and reports to the Chief Executive Officer, partnering closely with him on strategic positioning. She is leading a transformation effort and redesigning the Communications team to advance HPE's narrative, enhance the employee experience, and demonstrate the company's societal impact. Through a mix of financial, product, executive, and internal communications, she is driving enhanced stakeholder engagement to distinguish HPE in the marketplace and deliver shareholder value.

## **Hewlett Packard Enterprise**

### **On Returning to Work and the Role of Communications Post-COVID**

When we talk about “returning to work,” the reality is, we probably won’t be returning in the same way for a very long time, if ever. Now that we’ve been sheltering-in-place for several months, the big takeaway for me is two-fold: On the one hand, we’ve learned that many roles can be done well remotely. On the other hand, we’ve also seen the downside of isolation and the absence of the comradery and collaboration that comes from a shared workplace.

The reality is, different people have different needs and preferences, whether it’s coming into an office or working from home, or adopting a less traditional work schedule to care for themselves or others. COVID-19 has proven that we have viable options. The post-COVID work environment will need to do a better job of balancing new personal habits now that they have now been tried and tested.

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.

Going into the office can be a source of stress for some – because



## Hewlett Packard Enterprise

of a long commute or having to get a kid to practice by a certain time or because they would just rather work in their pajamas. But for others, the office is a source of stability, a big part of their social lives, and a built-in support system.

Now that we've all experienced the pros and cons of both, we will have to do a better job of respecting individual preferences while finding ways of maintaining a strong corporate culture and creating celebratory and even serendipitous moments. I'm excited about the role communications will play in addressing that challenge.

### On Inclusion, Diversity, and Black Lives Matter

As we processed the death of George Floyd and began to talk about racial injustice in the days that followed, it quickly became clear that we needed to take a stand. On June 1, our CEO, Antonio Neri, issued a memo to all team members, which was also shared externally, committing to speak up on inclusion and to advocate for equality - within and outside of HPE.

Of course, our instinct is to leap into action. I heard passionate pleas from team members who wanted us to quickly articulate bold, next steps. But what I also heard from some of our black team members is: "How can you fix what you don't understand? How can you help me when you haven't even taken the time to hear me?"

Even for companies that have been genuinely focused on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts (DE&I), it was clear that we were entering a new chapter, and it had to start with listening. Our leadership team began meeting with black team members to hear their stories and experiences. I was so moved by the candor, courage and resolve. While we received some praise for our corporate culture and DE&I efforts, one of the recurring themes was that there are also more subtle issues that are causing pain and preventing progress.

Following our initial listening tour, we hosted an All Team Member Meeting to share what we heard and outline some of our near-term actions, including the launch a global HPE Inclusion and Diversity Council, which our CEO will chair; a new integrated Advocacy Program; enhanced leadership training; support for student scholars at historically black colleges and universities over the next five years; a grant from the HPE Foundation to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund; and, a giving fund for our team members, in which HPE will match all contributions.

We also invited Lenora Billings-Harris, an author and Inclusion Innovator, to speak to all of our team members on the state of racism and what we can all do to make progress. Feedback from employees was remarkable, with 95% of team members expressing



## **Hewlett Packard Enterprise**

confidence in the actions HPE is taking to better drive diversity and unconditional inclusion. As one team member posted on our CEO's Facebook page, "It was probably one of the most thought-provoking meetings I've been to in my 33 years with the company."

Those are just some of the first steps we have taken so far on this journey. We know that we can and must do more and the time is now. I am both hopeful and optimistic that companies like HPE can be a force for change if we continue to be willing to share our vulnerabilities, set bold goals, and measure our progress.



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

Since joining Cone Health in April 2011, Chuck has built a talented team of professionals focused on providing strategic marketing and communications support for our sites, service lines and key initiatives such as Reinventing Care. Under Chuck's leadership, this team has launched award-winning advertising campaigns, including one focused on sharing our patients' stories of exceptional care. Chuck brings more than 30 years of marketing and communications experience in a variety of sectors, including health care, consumer packaged goods and financial services.

Prior to joining Cone Health, he was a vice president at American Express. A graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, Chuck has a master's degree in communications management from Syracuse University and is pursuing his doctorate in leadership studies at North Carolina A&T State University. He is a trustee of the national Institute for Public Relations, a board member of the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, a leader at St. James Presbyterian Church, and a member of two fraternal service organizations, Sigma Pi Phi and Alpha Phi Alpha, for which he serves as president of the local chapter.



## **Tackling Widespread Misinformation in the Age of COVID-19**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? What sources are you and your company trusting the most for accurate information?**

I think that our organization has done an incredible job of communicating through the pandemic. We have two primary audiences: we have our internal stakeholders, those who wear a badge and come to work every day. So, our doctors, our nurses, our other clinicians, and those of us who work in the support area. There's that cadre of people, as well as the community, because the community has looked to us to be a source of truth about the pandemic. Because of this, we were always very clear that we had two audiences and we made it a point to communicate to those audiences, giving them information that mattered to them. From early on, we made sure that we stepped into the role of sharing information that matters. And we didn't allow other people to do that because there was frankly so much misinformation about the virus from the very beginning. We knew we had an obligation to share the facts as we understood them and to then help people understand the facts and how to act on them.

**You have a unique perspective when it comes to misinformation because you're part of a healthcare organization. Can you talk about your approach toward correcting misinformation?**

Misinformation caused a gray space where people didn't understand (then, and to a large degree now still don't understand,) what they should and shouldn't be doing about the virus. We realized that at the end of the day if we were going to help control the spread of the virus, that we had to make sure that our internal stakeholders and the community understood what the virus is, how the virus is spread, and what people can do as a practical matter to mitigate them getting the virus. It became as simple as that and as complex as that. Because remember, this was unfolding against a backdrop on the national stage where our President and others were saying it's not a big deal, and when





the weather gets warmer it'll go away. All of these messages were being shared out there on the national stage. In response, we really had to say no, the data strongly suggest that this is what's going to happen. And as a result, we need to do these things.

Very early on, our CEO took the initiative to be an advocate. Even if he was the lone soldier, he was going to be the advocate for people understanding the facts and being really clear on what they should do with the facts, and how they should live their lives during this inconvenient period.

We then made his messages available in other ways. Internally, on our intranet site and through targeted emails to our internal workforce, and then through commercials, our website, and our social channels for the rest of the community. We offered him up to do media interviews so that he, and some of our infectious disease doctors who live in this space every day, could go out and share what they were understanding based on other credible sources. We were fortunate to have a CEO who's willing to do that because a lot of leaders would have said, "Just let people figure it out." That is not the stand that we took.

**What do you think the healthcare world will look like post-COVID and what role will strategic communications play? Has that role changed? Do you think it will grow in importance?**

It's hard to know exactly how the world of healthcare will look post-COVID. But one of the things that we do know is that healthcare systems, including ours, figured out how to operate in the virtual space very early on. So, we have seen an incredible increase in our private practices' willingness to do virtual visits. That's not going to change when we're back into whatever the new norm is. That's going to be driven primarily by consumers saying, "you figured it out during the pandemic, so why can't I have a virtual visit with you now?" So, the marketplace is going to demand that healthcare provides services in a different way. The healthcare systems that will survive this are the ones who will stand up to the challenge and figure it out.

As for strategic communications, we're at the heart of this. One of the best compliments that one of my physician colleagues has given our team and by extension, the industry that we work in, is that he had said, "I realize now more than ever the importance of strategic communications in the middle of a crisis and in particular, a crisis that's a pandemic because if you don't have strategic communications council at the table, as decisions are being made, then folks are going to go off and do whatever they think they should do and they think is right, and it's not." So, I think the healthcare systems that have been afforded a seat at that strategy table early on are the ones that are going to be in a better place to compete on the other side of this pandemic.





### **How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations and how will that continue?**

Very early on, we reorganized the structure of our team so that everybody had responsibilities for COVID. Everybody on the team put things on hold and worked with strategic communications in support of COVID. Also, I sit on the executive leadership team, so I'm one of nine leaders who provide strategic oversight for the organization. From the very beginning, we began to set the strategy of how we were going to deal with COVID and frankly, how we were going to run the healthcare system and keep the doors open during this time. Like all healthcare systems, we made the decision very early on to not do elective surgeries and procedures, because we didn't know if we're going to have enough PPE and we didn't know if current customers were going to be upset. There was not a single time when we were having a discussion and there wasn't a need to think through what we were going to say or do about some COVID-related matter. And so, being in that room and helping to make decisions for running the healthcare system is great. And then being able to weigh in on how we should communicate strategically about the other matters is also extremely important. We're already looking at our structure moving forward once we get on the other side and COVID becomes one of those diseases that we just treat as a matter of course.

### **What are some of the challenges you've been facing, from a communications perspective?**

Oftentimes here, there is a desire to go tell people everything once we've made a decision. I usually have to say, it's great that we made a decision and we need to put together a communications plan so that we can roll out the decision. Just because we've talked about it for 45 minutes and we're good, doesn't mean we're ready to go out and tell 12,000 people what we've just decided. I oftentimes have to pump the brakes and say, it's great that we've made this decision, but here's what will happen next. I'm going to go and talk to my team, in 24 hours we'll come back to you with our recommended communications plan. We might have some talking points. We may need to talk to one of you to get more detail because you're the subject matter expert. Then we'll come to you with talking points, which will inform the internal email and the external news release. So, the challenge is being strategic and grounding everyone in what we have to do to get our work done, and then walking them through the process.



**Is everyone in your organization back in the office? How are you working to prepare the rest of the healthcare enterprise to come back?**

To state the obvious, the clinicians who have been working on COVID patients have been coming in to work throughout the entire pandemic. But there was a time when we had to shut down our physician practices, so those folks were not working in the office and many of them went to virtual work. Specifically with the marketing communications team from the very beginning, I said to them, you get to make this decision just like you would for any inclement weather day that we have. If you feel comfortable coming in, you're more than welcome to come in and if you don't feel comfortable, then you should not. You have the ability to work from home and there is COVID-related work that you can do from your virtual location. That's what we've been doing. There have been a handful of us, probably three to four on average, who come in every day or a couple times a week. We also have a weekly staff meeting with everyone through Zoom.

As an organization, we've already started planning what bringing people back in could look like. As we do so, we're realizing we have an opportunity at an organizational level to think about this differently. Maybe we don't need all this real estate that we have that houses office people. Maybe there are some functions that are okay being handled remotely. What are those functions and who are those people? And what might that plan look like? There's some very concerted work going on at the enterprise level to understand what that looks like.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why? How will your internal communication change post-COVID?**

I'm going to step out on a limb here and just speculate. 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.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

DE&I practices are becoming embedded in what we do. I think we have a long way to go as an organization before people would say it's a part of the fabric of how we run every day. During the pandemic, I'll be honest with you, that's not necessarily something that we directly focused on as an organization. We did focus on it from the perspective of healthcare disparities. The data strongly supports that many of the people most likely to be exposed to the virus are frontline workers, those who drive buses, those who pick up garbage, those who work at pharmacies, etc. And many of those individuals are people of color. So, as a healthcare system, we're very aware of how those numbers are tracking for us and then how many people of color tested positive, how many have to be hospitalized, how many deaths occur, etc. We track all of that in the space of watching healthcare disparities. What that has translated to us in terms of action is we have begun to go out into the communities and do testing. Doing testing in communities where these vulnerable populations of people live has gone well for us. That's something we would normally do, and we've been very deliberate about doing it as a result of the pandemic.

Regarding the situation with George Floyd in Minneapolis, our CEO decided to take a stand against this brutality. He's getting incredible feedback from the workforce, and we've also decided to bundle it and send it out externally. Even in the middle of a pandemic, he is willing to take a stand on this and I applaud him for being willing to do that. That's another thing that we've done in the pandemic in the space of DEI, and also in the space of just what's flat out right to do.

### **Additional comments? Anything we may have missed?**

It becomes clear to me that the role of strategic marketing and communications remains critical. The smart organizations are making sure it's at the forefront of what we do. We have an opportunity to influence business strategy, and then we have an opportunity to also create and shape the appropriate marketing and communications strategy to support business strategy. I think it's a great time to be in the field and to do what we're doing. I would suggest that now more than ever, it's our job to raise questions, to challenge assumptions, to make sure that our clients understand the value of being very deliberate about what we say and what we do, and how we say it and do it. It's a good time for people who want to be in the industry and are willing to truly make a difference.



**Danielle Ward**

*Senior Public Relations Manager,  
Understood*

Danielle Ward is the senior public relations manager at Understood, a social impact organization dedicated to supporting families, educators and young adults with learning and thinking differences, like dyslexia and ADHD. She manages PR strategy, media and influencer relations to help elevate the awareness of the Understood brand and its mission to create a world where everyone who learns and thinks differently feels supported at home, at school, and at work.

Before joining Understood in 2016, Danielle worked as an independent PR consultant in the New York area for various nonprofit and local clients in New Jersey. During the dot-com boom, Danielle spent several years at hi-tech PR agency, Mindstorm Communications/Golin, developing integrated PR campaigns for small to midsize start-up companies in the San Francisco bay area. She also brings 10 years of agency experience working with a diverse range of national technology and consumer brands, including Sony Electronics, IBM, McDonald's and Ronald McDonald House Charities.

Danielle has a B.A. in journalism from Michigan State University. She lives in Maplewood, New Jersey with her husband and two children.



## **Crisis: Pushing Communications to the Forefront**

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging?**

The entire communications process and function had been amplified during this time. We are working directly with leadership more than ever. It helps to have a voice at the C-suite table with a CMO who knows communications and its value. We were able to navigate quickly and rally those that needed to be rallied.

Families and educators were at the center of this storm, and that is who we service and work with. We had to work with all of our coalition partners to develop and execute a new platform in real-time to address and coach families and teachers through the issues that this brought. It was exhaustive hours at the onset, with multiple workstreams we never anticipated. As a nonprofit, the communications team is small, and our workload multiplied.

**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts? How are you seeking employee feedback?**

Our people team and communications team were active from day one to communicate with the entire organization, as well as solicit their feedback. We worked closely with senior leadership and particularly our CHRO on everything. We provided them new resources, new channels (Slack), work from home tools, etc. We have executed ongoing surveys as well as bimonthly all-team meetings. These helped and were a source of relief for the team. It was all new to all of us.

## **RETURN TO WORK**

### **How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? How are you going to RTW?**

We are involved in messaging, but not heavily involved in the logistics. CHRO and operations team are leading that charge.

### **Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function in general because of COVID-19?**

There is certainly more appreciation for what we bring to the organization, the importance of thoughtful messaging and strategy; not just pushing information. Spokesperson training has become more front and center, more respected and more of a necessity. The communications process is elevated and I think will remain there. Black Lives Matters is also elevating this importance.

The crisis has allowed us to dust off what our function did and educate on what we can do.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall, there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why?**

I believe productivity has actually gone up, which may be a surprise to veterans in the field. Many employees at the organization had already participated in a flexible schedule, so maybe 25% were already working remotely at home a few days a week. The change was not very disruptive in that sense. That said, the isolation has impacted our (and everyone's) mental health. It has affected morale. Digital tools work, but we are missing the collaboration, our colleagues, sharing, etc.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

This never took a back seat. DE&I was a priority that we kicked off in 2018, and it is now taking even more of a lead. It is about how we as an organization approach the world. We are focused on being an empathetic organization at all times, shaping the world for difference.

We are also focused on an environment that feels safe to discuss and learn more. Not one that already knows what to do.

**What lesson have you learned throughout this about you, your team, communications role?**

I learned that we have an amazing team. They stepped up in the hardest of circumstances. Also, I learned that while the role of communications is critical during times of crisis, it is still an afterthought in so many cases. This may have moved the needle, but it could slip back. The crisis has reinforced the importance of having a seat at the table.

Personally, I realized how much I am a people person. Working remotely from home full time is tough and isolating. I need the interactions and collaborations that go with working in an office. I learned how quickly you can become disconnected. But, the health and safety of our employees and their families is the most important thing we can do right now.





**Jennefer Witter**  
*Chief Executive Officer and  
Founder, The Boreland Group Inc.*

Jennefer Witter is the chief executive officer and founder of The Boreland Group Inc. (TBG – [www.theborelandgroup.com](http://www.theborelandgroup.com)), a 17 year old boutique public relations firm headquartered in New York City. The agency specializes corporate communications, with a focus on women-led and minority owned businesses as well as grassroots non-profits. It was selected by TheStreet.com as one of five national, black owned businesses “making a buzz”. Jennefer was named one of the nation’s “10 most successful black CEOs and entrepreneurs” by MadameNoire Magazine, and her company was recognized as one of 12 black-owned businesses to be “loved by its community and beyond” by ThriveGlobal (<https://tinyurl.com/y7k4a6hw>).

Jennefer is an active public speaker, with presentations to military, trade and academic venues on regional, national and global platforms, on implicit; gender-based workplace conversation; and public relations, communication and professional growth topics. Venues include: TedX Albany; The Pentagon; The Brookings Institution; Pennsylvania Conference for Women; Vital Voices Global Ambassadors Program; The Durst Corporation; Ellevest Network; and Columbia, American and Fordham universities. Jennefer was the keynote speaker at Brown Brothers Harriman’s “Women’s Summit” and Women in Cable Telecommunications DC/Baltimore Chapter.



## The Need for Change in Public Relations

### Changes Due to the Pandemic

I believe we will see a greater focus on strategic communications overall because that interpersonal touch is so hard to get now. So you have to make sure your communications are absolutely the best they can be.

### Leadership Post-George Floyd Protests

As a leader you might think the work will speak for itself and you don’t have to take the extra step to show you really understand. You’re putting yourself between a rock and a hard place. Eventually you will learn a very hard lesson.

We have some leaders who are like, “Don’t touch this!” and then we have others grabbing at everything possible and not focusing on tools they have that can benefit the audiences they’re targeting, and that’s a fail too.

### Keeping Employees Involved in Your Purpose

I’ve asked everyone who works for me for a nonprofit to donate to. Without them knowing, I’m making a donation from the Boreland Group in their name. When they find out, I think it will help them to understand that it’s not about the money for us. Even though we have been hurt, there’s enough to give back. You just have to give back what you can. So by having them participate in the process, without giving a dime of their own money, they feel that they too are contributing. They gave it so much thought, it was wonderful – I was so pleased!

### Reboarding

There’s a focus by some in reboarding to create spaces where people can safely congregate and just not feel so alone. We suggested to one client that that they go beyond just the hand washing and temperature checking and to send email alerts or screen popups with cartoon figures, every 2-3 hours asking employees, “Have you washed your hands?” Because people forget.



## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Crain's recently showed what companies were most worried about right now, and at the top was "employee morale" and at the very bottom was D&I. Even post-George Floyd, D&I is still at the bottom of the pile. PR has been one of the most difficult industries from the get-go to embrace D&I efforts. I've been around for 30 years and every place I've been at has wanted to change things. But even with everything that's happened with George Floyd, I just don't think in PR IS going to change.

Within public relations, D&I has mostly been lip service. But let's see what companies do. It's easy to say you support Black Lives Matter now, it's easy to do the black square. But let's see where you are in 6 months. Let's see if you've taken the talk and made it into the walk.

For most of my career, I've been the only Black person in the room. The questions I've been asked and the things that have been said to me have always cost me an emotional tax. That's what people of color call that feeling of when you have to be constantly on your guard against microaggressions and any actions or activities that are against you. As an example, I was once at a client dinner where there was about 30 people and all of a sudden the president of one of the agencies who was there shouted at me from across the table, "Hey Jennefer, why don't you talk that black street jive talk now?" The entire table went dead silent. Another example occurred when a client's staff member, a young woman, told me that I must HAVE learned to speak PROPER English by watching television.

We knew about the George Floyds and Breonna Taylors years ago, and people just don't believe what we've been saying for years and years and years. So that's why I take all of this with a grain of salt.



*Sr. Comm. Executive in the  
Pharmaceuticals Industry*

## pharmaceuticals INDUSTRY

### Scenario Planning as a Way Forward

**Navigating how best to communicate to stakeholders has been an ongoing issue for many communications executives since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. From that perspective, how would you describe your company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic? What has gone well? What has been challenging? Is there any planning underway for a possible second wave?**

Most employees have been very receptive to our company's communications efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, although some employees expressed interest in hearing more. Some wanted to get a better understanding about the thought process behind the decisions. Others wanted to know what the company was doing to positively impact the U.S. healthcare system. Others felt overwhelmed by the volume of conversations about the crisis.

#### **What has gone well?**

We quickly pivoted and were able to implement solutions that would have normally taken much longer to implement. Leadership showed vulnerability. Employees expressed themselves in a way that hadn't ever been seen before. Overall, most people were communicating how they were reacting to the situation or offering solutions.

#### **What has been challenging?**

Employees are craving attention and starting to talk as if they don't mind taking health-related risks than stay indoors for the long term. People are more emotional at work. They are distracted.

#### **Is there any planning underway for a possible second wave?**

Yes. While it is very difficult to predict, what this pandemic has taught us is that scenario planning is integral to success. We may not know what will happen but we're trying to look at the possibilities in several different ways in advance and evaluate potential solutions.

**What steps, if any, has your company taken to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employees? Their families? The broader community? How involved has your internal communications function been in these efforts?**

Our company has begun a pilot program, opening its doors to a small number of employees. The office is dramatically different. There is technology at the front door that checks for an employee's temperature. You must wear a mask. Elevators are limited to two people. There are signs dictating the flow of walking traffic. There is an abundance of hand sanitizers. There are limited stalls and sink that can be used in the bathroom.

**How have you been coordinating your response with C-suite leaders at your organizations?**

The coordination has been daily. We assembled leadership to identify the risks early on regarding employee safety. From there, we needed to assess the risk of our business and business partners. Then, we had to assess the appropriate technology platform to work with. Transitioning to video conferences and building that infrastructure wasn't easy. Determining how to best support employees is a daily question.

We're also constantly monitoring the impact via news and through employee surveys to get a sense of how our customers are reacting to employees. Decisions are made based on these research tools and through the collection of real-time, credible information.

**Which technologies have helped you and your team respond to the crisis, both internally and externally? Are there any that are hindering your efforts to respond?**

Microsoft Teams has been a big winner for our company. Phones and SMS are also used more than ever to interact. Hindrance can be in an IT team that lacks responsiveness.

**Tell us a bit about the role that corporate purpose has played in your company's response to the crisis?**

Working in accordance with our purpose at this very time has been a beautiful, new experience and gives me great confidence in what is possible for the future. By focusing on our key cultural beliefs, we found ways to best support our colleagues and our customers. I believe this is an opportunity to continue to accelerate the culture. We have been very intentional about focusing on culture.

## RETURN TO WORK

**How involved is this communication function in return-to-work preparation? What are some steps you're taking to ensure your employees are being taken care of in terms of the physical office space and psychologically in terms of feeling safe? How are you going to RTW?**

We're very involved in the development of communications in the forms of emails or Q&As or visuals that can help employees digest the large volume of content they need to know about this new norm. Our company is returning to work in phases. We started with a pilot program allowing a very small number of employees to enter the office. Next week, we'll open that program a little bit more. It is still uncertain when or if things will ever be back to normal, unless there is a vaccine.

**Is there anything changing with how your company is focusing on remote work? Or any changes the communication function in general because of COVID-19?**

Yes, our company wasn't 100 percent supportive of work-from-home. This situation has made people open their eyes to trusting employees to do their jobs remotely. The communication function has always been one that has been appreciated, but for us the function changed a bit. We began offering operational solutions because the main "operation" was now communicating in a new way.

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## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

**We saw in our latest survey that 40% of communication executives perceived employee productivity to be down (25% said it had increased), but overall, there was a significant increase in employee satisfaction, trust, collaboration, and engagement. How do you think it has been in your company and why?**

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.

**What are your most effective channels of communication and how are you seeking employee feedback during COVID-19?**

Surveys. A short survey. They don't mind telling us how they feel if it only takes five minutes. Anything more is harder to achieve.

**In our most recent survey, we saw that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in some companies are taking a backseat to handle the crisis. How are you ensuring DE&I remains a priority or have you had to put your efforts on hold?**

I think D&I has increased at our company given the recent times and also because some of our D&I programs were already operated remotely since we have employees across the U.S. We would gather via video conferences for our D&I program meetings.

## CONCLUSION

Leading and looking ahead through COVID-19 demands increased transparency, communication, and adaptability.

Communication leaders are preparing for the return to the workplace; however, knowing the correct method to do so is challenging given the unpredictability of the virus. Additionally, a rise in civil unrest following the death of George Floyd has increased demands for action and positive change in companies.

As some messages from external stakeholders and leaders have become inconsistent and contradictory, employees and other internal stakeholders have turned to their employers as a reliable source for accurate information. Communications leaders have responded to employees' bids for increased communication through virtual town hall meetings, increased CEO messaging, among other methods.

In addition to an increased focus on internal communication, the current environment has put pressure on organizations to embed diversity, equity and inclusion practices into the core of the organization rather than treating DE&I as an add-on or a "nice to have." Many communication leaders said they are working with other functions within their organizations to strengthen and improve DE&I efforts.

As a result of these crises, executives across multiple industries have recognized the key and vital role that the communication function and public relations agencies play in the success of the organization. Although the future is uncertain, organizations that involve communication in executive-level decision-making will have greater odds for a successful outcome.

## METHOD

This is the third research report released by the Institute for Public Relations and Peppercomm focused on COVID-19. The first two reports were based on quantitative surveys of communication executives; the first report focused on how businesses were handling COVID-19 while the second report studied employee engagement during COVID-19. This report includes interviews and posts from 30 industry executives that were conducted through email and over the phone from May 21 to June 25, 2020. Due to the sample size and qualitative nature of this report, the results cannot be generalized to all communication executives.

For more information, visit the webpage:

<https://instituteforpr.org/leadership-perspectives-covid19/>