Top-Line Findings from “COVID-19: How Businesses Are Handling the Crisis” Study

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- More than half (53%) of the respondents said COVID-19 had a “moderate” or “major” impact on their business operations. Looking down the road, 83 percent are “moderately” or “extremely” concerned about the potential impact of COVID-19 on their company.

- More than three-quarters of respondents (81%) said the communication function has been “very important” or “important” to their company’s COVID-19 response.

- 30 percent said their organization was “very” prepared for COVID-19, while 55 percent said they were “somewhat” prepared; 41 percent said their communication function was “very” prepared while 46 percent said they were “somewhat” prepared. Only 3 percent said their organization or communication was “not prepared at all.”

- More than half of respondents (57%) said their crisis communication plan specifically covers an infectious disease outbreak, while 44 percent said it did not. 10 percent of respondents did not have crisis communication plans at all.

- Three-quarters (75%) of respondents said their communication function was “very involved” in communicating internally, while 58 percent of respondents said their communication function was “very involved” in communicating externally.

- Employees were the top priority for communication executives as 81 percent said they were a “high” or “essential” priority for the communication function. Companies made efforts to increase sanitation practices, including, in some cases, thermal/temperature scanning to detect illness. Increased communication around practices and company changes through managers, internal platforms, mobile apps, and hotlines were also noted by respondents.

- Health-related agencies were the most trusted sources of information during the COVID-19 crisis. International Health Organizations (e.g., World Health Organization) and federal agencies within countries (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or National Health Service) were trusted “a lot” by nearly three-quarters of respondents.

- Social media, online health websites such as WebMD, and country leaders such as presidents and prime ministers were the least trusted sources of information. More than half of the respondents said they had “not much” or no trust in social media (81%) and country leaders (56%), such as presidents and prime ministers. Only 5 percent of respondents referred stakeholders to country leaders for additional information, while only 2 percent directed them to social media.
• When using words or phrases to describe how the media is covering the COVID-19 crisis, 60 percent used variations of terms such as “hype” or “sensational.” Only 16 percent praised the coverage as being “accurate” or “balanced,” while the remaining sentiment was neutral or mixed.

• The CEO was identified as the primary communicator about the COVID-19 crisis by nearly half (49%) of respondents. Significantly fewer respondents noted other C-suite executives in this role: CCO (12%), CHRO (10%), and COO (8%).

• If the communication team is part of the cross-functional team, three functions were identified by more than half of the participants to also be on that team: Human Resources (77%), Operations (67%), and Legal (52%). 3 percent of respondents said the communication function was not part of a cross-functional team, and 6 percent said their company did not have one.

Methodology: The Institute for Public Relations conducted an online survey of 300 communication executives and senior leaders from March 5-10, 2020 to find out how their company and their communication function are responding to COVID-19. The margin of error based on the sample size is +/- 6%, but please note this was not a random sample.

To give context to the survey, as of March 11, more than 120,000 people were infected with COVID-19 around the world, with more than 4,600 deaths. On March 11, the World Health Organization updated the classification of COVID-19 from an epidemic to a pandemic.

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