

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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