ASIA THE FIRST CHAPTER OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC; A NEW PHASE OF COVID-19 COMMS

In the third of our roundtables on communications strategy through the coronavirus outbreak, Andrews Partnership last week convened communications practitioners from 30 different Asia Pacific organisations to talk about their current crisis comms strategies.

The comms journey so far for Asia Pac practitioners

We have seen notable shifts in emphasis over the last six weeks of roundtables:

• **Phase 1 (Late January):** Our first meeting with the group, at the apex of the crisis, was typified by tireless activity to establish message and channel control. The group was unanimous about the critical success factors at this juncture: implementing a "single source of truth" internally, then working daily to judge the right balance between giving employees too much information and not enough.

• **Phase 2 (Mid-February):** In our second meeting, we noted that most companies had established a regular comms process, and were now focusing on fine-tuning — how to involve global teams more; how to move beyond supportive words to staff-positive action (e.g., delivering personal welfare packs to employees' homes). Isolation policies had also largely hardened, with most companies now enforcing (or strongly encouraging) home-working in affected regions.

• **Phase 3 (Early March):** With procedures matured, in the latest session we have noticed a shift in focus again – away from the constant employee-risk management of the early weeks, and towards business-management issues (e.g., client relations, supply chain disruption). There is also a new, notable emphasis on preparing the future – on CSR and outreach in affected regions; and on laying the ground for the day, hopefully soon,

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when normal office life will be resumed.

New developments in "Phase 3"

• Office working slowly becoming available: We heard that several companies are now accommodating some employees returning to the office, when they feel comfortable, or are preparing to offer such a provision in the next few weeks.

- Employee sensitivity first: These companies frequently specified that their central focus in this move would be to maintain sensitivity to workforce concerns, with teams and employees allowed to decide for themselves whether or not to take up the offer. To doubly ensure safety, one company is asking teams to pitch their office-working proposal to the company's global steering committee for COVID-19, to ensure objective rigour around the workplan and provisions.

- Creating the space for employees

to return: The two standard frameworks for re-implementing office work are workforce segmentation and a graduated return. For example, one company, which in January was forced to rapidly move its Shanghai service-centre operations overseas to allow Chinese staff to self-isolate, is now offering precisely 50% of these employees the chance to return – on the basis that a half-full office will give each employee enough physical space to remain safe from infection. Other companies are following the same procedure, splitting the workforce into nominated "red" and "blue" teams, or "A" and "B" teams.

- Not forgetting the commute: A constant theme through the crisis is the way it has compelled firms to meet their duty of care to employees outside the office (e.g., sending care packages to people's homes). One specific instance of this, when considering the return to office working, is the daily commute. At least one company, therefore, is now paying for taxis for those those staff who want to return, to allow them to avoid public transport.

- Caveat – things may yet change again: This "return to work" policy was not universal across companies in the region. And, of those beginning to roll it out, all stated that they were doing so slowly and with constant reviews, conscious that it might have to be quickly reversed in the event of another outbreak.

• One eye on Europe: The growing outbreaks of COVID-19 in Europe and the US were frequently cited in this week's roundtable, and are clearly now a central consideration for many in the region.

- Asia-Pac delivering new kinds of value: This shift brings positives – there is now a common feeling that Asia Pacific teams will soon be delivering new value to their organisations, having already created countless resources, FAQs, articles, policies and crisis plans, enabling comms colleagues overseas to respond to outbreaks from a position of strength.

- The centre of control is shifting: However, with this also came a sense (especially for those in companies headquartered in Europe/US) that control over global crisis communications was now shifting out of Asia Pacific and back towards HQ.

Current standard policies and procedures

• Travel: All companies in our group continue to have restrictions on travel – either outright embargos,

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> *"With the European spread, I see our centre of crisis comms pivoting back to Global HQ now and away from APAC, with all regions continuing to supplement this with local comms based on local government guidelines "*
>
> **Head of Comms, Professional Services**

- Any internal meeting involving 25 or more people from different teams or locations must be moved to a virtual environment.

- For external events, the cut-off is 100 people. Events involving that number, occurring until the end of March, are under review and subject to cancellation or deferment (if the company is hosting the event), or cancellation of attendance (if the company is only involved in a speaker or delegate role). Various communications have been pre-prepared for these sudden cancellations.

> *"We're reviewing on a week-by-week basis. Our management team meets every Thursday to discuss the situation, and then they inform colleagues what's the next plan of action"*
>
> **Head of Comms, Transport & Logistics**

> *"With external comms, we have had a few customers who asked us about our preparedness and BCP plans. As a connectivity provider, with landing stations and points of presence across Asia, key customers needed to know if we are prepared to keep their businesses going as well as our own."*
>
> **Head of Comms, Major conglomerate**

or bans on all-but-essential trips.

- **Internal events:** Large company events have largely been cancelled or postponed. Currently, most have taken action on events until at least 1 April, but some have gone as far as pushing August conferences back to October. All are in a process of constant review on all upcoming events.

- **Client events:** Major client conferences have mostly also been postponed, cancelled, or moved to virtual environments.

- **Supply chain meetings:** One major global clothing retailer spoke of the challenges of the 'milestone' meetings in the cycle of product development, requiring large groups, internal and external, to come together to look at samples, product lines, etc. The company has decided that, through April, those will now all be done virtually.

- **Policies:** An example of one events/meeting policy at a professional services firm:

- **Week to week cycles of review:** During the peak of the crisis in Jan/Feb, companies talked about daily (or even hourly) monitoring of COVID-19 policies and procedures. We now hear most commonly of these being reviewed on a week-to-week basis in well-established forums.

External message management
COVID-19 has created countless external communications demands on practitioners too.

- **Regulators:** The regulatory needs around coronovirus have often been onerous – with different jurisdictions requiring different regulatory responses at different stages. One company said that its comms team has had to step up and play an active role in this process during COVID-19, working closely with crisis-management teams and country management to keep regulatory communications consistent with all other messaging.

- **External partners/vendors:** We have heard repeatedly of the procedural, financial and legal-liability headaches for those businesses that routinely deal B2B with vendors, suppliers or clients. "A large part of our comms work," says one retailer, "has been the thousands of external vendors and factories with questions about our business – what our policies are; and what we're mandating in terms of how we expect to work with them." The company's solution has been layered messaging – major comms from head office to the

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CEOs of external partners; location-specific messaging to external leaders in local sites; and very clear guidance for all their own employees about how to talk to external partners. Everything is translated into multiple languages, to ensure message consistency. "We've had a very positive response from our partners, mostly because we're connecting with them on a different level – not just about business but about the safety of their own workforces as well."

• **Media relations:** For many companies, the potential media footprint during this period is higher than during normal times. That brings benefits but also risks, they say, especially in highly regulated businesses, and with

tensions high and misinformation plentiful. One company says it has now put in a couple of additional layers of approval for any content that goes out to the media, to double-check that the company isn't inadvertently walking into a reputational hazard.

Channels

• **Email continues to dominate:** Although COVID-19 has forced companies to test their virtual environments and other online channels to the limit, email continues to predominate as the core 'single source of truth' for most organisations.

• **The return of recorded video:** With the limitations of isolation and quarantining, recorded video messages from executives seem to have made something of a fashion comeback, mentioned by several as a way of continuing to establish a sense of the face-to-face through the crisis. One company reports that a recent video on the crisis from its CEO had the highest view-count of any media across the organisation.

• **Rumour mill:** One company has introduced a very popular "COVID-19 Rumour Busters" section to its intranet. When deluged during the Q&A section of its quarterly town hall recently – with more questions than could be answered live – the comms team siphoned many of the questions into the Rumour Busters site to answer them, since so many fell into the category of unsubstantiated rumours or potentially dangerous solutions.

Lessons in morale: Nothing in recent years has tested comms teams' IT channels quite like COVID-19 and its sudden swathes of remote working. Yet sometimes the traditional channels are what have come to the fore most. With role modelling such a critical factor in employees' willingness to flex-work or self-isolate, and trust so central to morale during a health scare, one practitioner noted that his biggest learning has been how little influence central communications has on engagement compared to the influence exerted by local leaders – the people employees trust the most and whose behaviour they are most likely to follow. As a result, this company is now planning to do much more COVID-19 communication through line management channels in the coming weeks than it has at any point to date.