



## HOW APAC COMMUNICATIONS LEADERS ARE RESPONDING TO CORONAVIRUS

On 31 January 2020, the World Health Organisation classified the coronavirus outbreak as a “global health emergency”. That morning, Andrews Partnership assembled a group of communications professionals from 19 different organisations in Asia Pacific to understand how practitioners in the region have been responding to this fast-developing crisis.

### What measures have companies put in place?

According to our forum, companies are implementing most or all of these measures:

- Mandating 14-day self-quarantine for any employee visiting mainland China recently
- Encouraging homeworking for employees in Hong Kong and the mainland. (Some have made this mandatory for office-based staff.)

- Giving non-mainland staff the licence to determine if they're at risk and self-quarantine if they suspect so (e.g., if a family member has visited China recently, or if they themselves feel slightly unwell). Several companies have found a need to harden this messaging in recent days, with a “Don't be a hero” instruction to stay away from the office unless absolutely necessary.

- Outright ban on any travel to mainland China without the highest authorisation to do so (e.g., from CEO, Executive VP)

- Compulsory masks for any staff who cannot home-work (e.g., reception, facilities).

### What has been the high-level communication approach?

Our group most commonly cited three key requirements in managing this crisis:

**1) Having a balanced, two-directional internal communication process:** upwards to company leadership, so that informed decisions can be made and reassurances given that a plan is in place, and downward to staff, to communicate steps being taken, explain protocols, handle misinformation and maintain calm.

**2) The overwhelming internal need to institute a “single source of truth”:** With so much news saturation, internally and externally, employees need to know what is the one place they can always go to for the latest information – whether it is email, SMS, MS Teams, Yammer, or another platform.

**3) Getting the tonal balancing act right in employee communications:** Keeping staff up to date on all the latest news, decisions and measures, while simultaneously not overwhelming them and actively creating concern, is a



Catch-22 that needs to be constantly managed in every decision being made.

### What channels are companies using to communicate with employees?

- Most companies are focusing on email, as it's the most reliable and widely-accessed channel.

- The application Send Word Now was highly recommended, allowing companies to send voice, text, email and other alerts to any audience – and, crucially, get information back. One company has been able to use these responses to track where its employees are at any moment, and also use the polling capability to determine their recent travel history.

Since local governments in Asia-Pac have different protocols around the contagion, most companies are relying on some form of regional cascade model, with high-level central messaging on a regular basis to an assembled group of local leaders, who then tailor to their individual national audiences.

#### Key lessons/advice:

Some common lessons learned included:

#### 1) Be aware of unintended consequences:

Measures decided with the best intentions to provide reassurance – such as paying for a preventative deep clean of an entire office building – can actually spread panic among staff when they arrive at work to find masked officials in hazmat suits decontaminating everything. Be aware of the optics of your decisions, even positive ones.

#### 2) Have a process ready-to-go for investigating rumours:

Rumours can start – internally, from gossip, and externally from malicious actors – about rates of infection among your employees. Be ready to do full, quick investigations of such stories to be able to confirm or deny them before they get out of hand.

### 3) Clearly identify a 'single source of truth' for your employee communications:

During a health crisis, confusion and rumours breed virally too. You need to contain that contagion by centralising information as well as possible – a single, identified platform or channel that everyone knows is the most up-to-date source of information.

***“For the most important comms, we’ve supplemented email by using text messages, as well turning the email into PDFs to cascade through informal WhatsApp groups – because our teams tend to have their WhatsApp groups for discussion.”***

**Head of Communications,  
FMCG**

#### 4) Don't forget the rest of the world:

Everyone has a stake in this crisis, not just the Asia-Pacific region – either because of disruptions to supply chains, to travel and the bottom-line, family ties, or because you have global teams with reporting lines in other continents. Make sure overseas leadership at all levels, from senior to team management, are somehow kept regularly updated on what's happening.

***“Today is the 10th message we’ve sent out in a week. There’s a risk of staff getting more overwhelmed or more confused – or being made even more anxious, even though what we’re communicating is that it’s under control! So having a more tempered approach to the communications is important. And when staff want to know what’s the latest news, they can self-serve in the same place for it each time.”***

**Head of Communications,  
Insurance**

#### 5) Don't add fuel to the fire:

After weeks of daily messages – internally and via the media – staff risk being panicked simply by virtue of the amount of information they're digesting, even when the message itself is reassuring. Simplify and streamline messaging as best you can. And pivot on your role: Remember that your job is often to limit communication as much as it is to push information out.

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