Maintain the Health of Your Corporate Reputation Amid COVID-19
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A good corporate reputation is built over years but can be lost in a matter of minutes.

In my line of work, we help organizations focus to build, promote and protect their reputations through all kinds of milestones. But in the coming weeks and months, milestones will turn to minutes, and the abundance of uncertainty over the course of this crisis will present defining moments for corporate reputations all across the country.

Corporate reputation often prioritizes the people on the outside. Organizations are used to worrying about how the media, their customers and stakeholders will think of them. One of the biggest mistakes an organization can make is to treat its most pivotal audience, its employees, as an afterthought.

We counsel clients to consider employees their best brand ambassadors – what employees say about you can be more important than anything else in defining what external audiences think about your brand. They’re a genuinely trusted source of information – after all, they’re the ones who know your organization best. They know if you walk the talk; they know how the proverbial sausage is made.

It’s not news that the millennial and post-millennial generations won’t have and haven’t had (let’s not forget that the older millennials are rapidly approaching 40) the same kind of long-term relationships with their employers that Boomers and even some Gen Xers benefitted from. This workforce is flexible and mobile, willing to change jobs with increasing frequency, and in many cases, eager to do so to build new skills and gather valuable experience. The market for talent is competitive; employers looking to attract and retain the best talent have to offer not only competitive compensation, but a workplace that meets the needs and desires of its people. A strong corporate reputation – built on the foundation of a good corporate culture – matters.

As COVID-19 concerns spread across communities, filling traditional and social media with images of panicked shoppers gathering supplies and advice for worst-case scenario planning, we’re all getting more than a little anxious about what the next few weeks and months could bring. With public health officials advising for more social distancing, self-isolation and quarantines, there’s a lot to feel anxious about. The economy is taking a hit. Job security is top of mind. Organizations need to communicate with their people – and their communications need to be accurate, timely, consistent, and most importantly, empathetic.

The financial markets are important, to be sure, but your people – and their physical and mental health – should/must be the first priority.

Cities and provinces are declaring states of emergency, and we’ll soon see a transition from voluntary business closures to mandatory shutdowns. Schools have already been shut down – in some cases “indefinitely” – across the country. Employers need to immediately figure out reasonable accommodations for parents of school-aged kids, as daycare centres and camps have all followed suit. The federal government is working hard to figure out interim support for contract and hourly employees who need to stay home from work, but employers should play a role too, even if it’s simply planning for and communicating job security assurances once all the public health measures are over.
Employees with pre-existing health issues, immune-compromised household members, or mental health concerns also need to be accommodated with empathy and respect.

Not every organization will have the luxury of the tech giants to offer employees a $1000 stipend to set up a home office, but at the end of the day, every organization must be able to say that it did what was decent and reasonable to meet the needs of its people.

That starts with providing calm, consistent and timely communications to employees, based on accurate information provided by Health Canada and other public health authorities.

It means being open about your business continuity plans and reassuring employees that there is in fact a plan in place to get through challenging times. It means following public health guidelines around social distancing, implementing cloud-based access to files and company resources, moving to digital meetings and events, and creating a system to monitor, gather and respond to employee concerns in real time.

This is a major inflection point for corporate reputation. How organizations treat their employees in the midst of this crisis won’t only be remembered, it will define their brands long after the panic subsides.