

Advice Note

Digital Executive Leadership During the COVID-19 Crisis

BRUNSWICK

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DIGITAL EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATIONS ADVICE AND EXAMPLES

Business Case

80 percent of employees and 90 percent of financial readers expect to hear from a CEO on social media during a crisis, according to Brunswick's [Connected Leadership research](#).¹

- **Leverage a fast and direct connection** with stakeholders at global scale.
- **Leaders can control the message** precisely, offering authoritative guidance without mediation.
- **Digital channels are two-way.** Leaders can demonstrate they feel the pulse of stakeholders.
- **Meet stakeholders where they are** – online, on their phones, on social media.
- **Convey emotional connection and authentic leadership** with formats like video in ways that static, broadcast formats such as email, corporate memos, or press releases cannot.
- **The need for connection to management is amplified** in a crisis and exacerbated by social distancing and remote work arrangements.

Best Practice

- **Know Your Audience.** Ensure the audience is front of mind when considering your public messages, be it customers, employees, or investors. Write or speak with [clear, simple language](#) at the reading level of your audience.
- **Empathy and Confidence.** In times of crisis, it is vital the tone remain empathetic, calm, and sincere. Content should be [factual, relevant, and useful while avoiding speculation](#). Many employees may feel powerless in the face of crisis. Consider empowering them with specific, practical actions they can take and concrete resources from the company or elsewhere.
- **Remain Authentic.** Ensure the [executive's voice shines through](#) the communication. In most instances, crisis communications must go through a series of reviews. However, it is vital that the message is delivered with authenticity by the executive.
- **Move Swiftly.** The news surrounding COVID-19 is moving fast, and carefully crafted messages created a week in advance are already outdated. To ensure the content is relevant, monitor the conversation closely and consider the context prior to posting. The tempo of updates may be high during phases of the crisis. Creating an [Instagram Stories Highlight](#) is an easy way to keep your updates organized.
- **One Message, Many Audiences.** Publish your message through the executive's primary social media account if available and reinforce via your other corporate social media accounts and internal channels. Be sure to mirror any messages in one location on your website as a [reference location](#) and consider earned and paid media amplification in some contexts.

¹ Connected Leadership (2019), Brunswick Group, <https://www.brunswickgroup.com/connectedleadership>.

- **Be Brief.** Your most important messages should be placed within the [first 200 words](#) of a post, blog, or email (one mobile phone screen) or 30 seconds of a video. What must the reader/viewer *know* and what must they *do* next?
- **Consider Video.** Since at least 70 percent of communication is nonverbal, video can improve the effectiveness of your message and the emotional connection with your audience. This is especially important in a crisis where text-only communications may be perceived as flat or soulless. Video is also prioritized by social media algorithms, increasing the likelihood that the message actually reaches your audience. [This does not require more than a phone](#), so long as you have a steady shot, clear audio, and publish the content in a timely manner. Upload caption files in any number of other languages for a fraction of the time it takes to translate a press release.

Key Themes

- **Changes to Policies Related to Employees or Customer.** As companies work to implement revisions to standard operating procedures, such as working from home, sick pay, travel cancellations or facility closures, executives have kept stakeholders up-to-date online.
- **Culture.** Executives are showcasing the resiliency of their organizations, demonstrating empathy, and providing reassurance, often through specific personal observations and stories.
- **Corporate Contributions.** Executives are highlighting how their companies are contributing to the greater good through the contribution of new products and services, the application of their expertise or financial donations.

Leading Examples

42 percent of the top 50 Connected Leaders among S&P 500 and FTSE 350 public companies have employed social media to communicate key messages about COVID-19 to their stakeholders, and many more have communicated via corporate and internal channels.

Employee Advocates

From communicating timely updates to corporate policies to global workforces, to highlighting the importance of their work during this time, these executives are championing their greatest asset—their employees.

- Dr. Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, CEO of ADNOC Group – [LinkedIn via brand channel](#)
- Bernard Looney, CEO of BP – [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#)
- Chris Kempczinski, CEO of McDonald’s – [Instagram](#), [Instagram Stories](#)
- David Solomon, CEO of Goldman Sachs – [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#)
- Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart – [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#)
- Hans Vestberg, CEO of Verizon Communications – [Instagram](#), [Twitter Live](#)
- John Fallon, CEO of Pearson – [LinkedIn](#)
- John Furner, President and CEO of Walmart U.S. – [Instagram](#)
- Manny Chirico, Chairman and CEO of PVH Corp. – [LinkedIn](#)
- Mary Barra, Chairman and CEO of General Motors – [LinkedIn](#)

Customer Champions

Corporate leaders, especially in the travel and hospitality sectors, are continually emphasizing the importance of their customers as they share updates on changes in policies.

- Arne Sorenson, President and CEO of Marriott International – [LinkedIn](#)
- Brett Schulman, CEO of CAVA – [LinkedIn](#)
- Chris Nassetta, President and CEO of Hilton – [LinkedIn](#)

- Ed Bastian, CEO of Delta Air Lines – [Instagram](#)
- Marc Benioff, CEO of Salesforce – [Twitter](#)
- Shai Weiss, CEO of Virgin Atlantic – [Instagram](#)

Community Leaders

While sharing vital safety information and business updates, a key theme throughout these executive communications is the importance of community and unity during trying times.

- Adena Friedman, President and CEO of Nasdaq – [LinkedIn](#)
- Ana Botín, Executive Chairman of The Santander Group – [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#)
- Francesco Pugliese, CEO of Conad – [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#)
- Jonas Dahlberg, CEO and President of Transcom Worldwide – [LinkedIn](#)
- Kevin Johnson, CEO of Starbucks – [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#)
- Mike Perry, President and CEO of Hallmark Cards, Inc – [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) via brand channels
- Robert Iger, Chairman of The Walt Disney Company – [Twitter](#)

Problem-Solvers

As it relates to their industries, certain executives are particularly well-positioned to use digital channels as thought leadership platforms, proposing solutions to challenges posed by COVID-19.

- Adrian Cheng – [Instagram](#), [Instagram Stories](#), [Facebook](#)
- Anant Agarwal, Founder and CEO of edX – [LinkedIn](#)
- Guo Guangchang, Chairman and Co-Founder of Fosun International – [LinkedIn](#)
- Dan Rosensweig, President and CEO of Chegg.com – [LinkedIn](#)
- Jake Wood, CEO of Team Rubicon – [LinkedIn](#)

Philanthropists & Activists

The following executives are using their digital channels to announce philanthropic initiatives and call on others to act.

- Eric Yuan, Founder and CEO of Zoom – [LinkedIn](#)
- Mark Zuckerberg, Founder and CEO of Facebook – [Facebook](#)
- Peter Gerber, CEO and Chairman of the Executive Board of Lufthansa Cargo AG – [LinkedIn](#)
- Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet – [Twitter](#)
- Tim Cook, CEO of Apple – [Twitter](#)

Other Examples

Many leaders outside large corporations have found effective and creative ways to use social media.

- Restaurateur, chef, and philanthropist José Andrés documents the progress of World Central Kitchen's support to communities via [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).
- Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, has been widely lauded for his regular updates to citizens across social media including [video](#) in multiple languages.

ABOUT BRUNSWICK

Brunswick is a strategic advisory firm focused on helping companies navigate critical issues. Along with a worldwide team of experts, we have a deeply experienced team across China who can advise on capital markets related implications of the COVID-19 outbreak. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

Business and Society	Business Resilience	Employee Communications	Investor Engagement	Healthcare	China
Meaghan Ramsey Partner, London	Paddy McGuinness Senior Advisor, London	Jonathan Dong Partner, Beijing	Amelia Pan Partner, London	Charis Gresser Partner, London	Yan Mei Senior Partner, Chair of China, Beijing
Stacey Chow Director, Hong Kong	Lisa Foley Asia Managing Partner, Hong Kong	Nick Howard Partner, London	Tim Daubenspeck Partner, New York	Will Carnwath Partner, Head of Singapore	
Liz Dahan Director, Washington DC	Kate Holgate Partner, Head of Hong Kong	Rebekah Metts-Childers Partner, Chicago	Elaine Li Partner, Hong Kong	Yi Zhou Director, Hong Kong	St. John Moore Partner, Head of Beijing
Christophe Guibeleguiet Partner, London	George Little Partner, Head of Washington DC	Katharine Crallé Director, New York	Jerome Biscay Partner, Paris	Hubert Kümper Director, Berlin	
	Fiona Claire Littig Partner, Munich	Kristin Sadowski Director, Frankfurt	Felix Morlock Partner, Frankfurt		
			Cara O'Brien Partner, Hong Kong		
			Cynthia Meng Partner, Hong Kong		