

WHETHER IN POLITICS OR PUBLIC HEALTH, we've witnessed the real-world consequences of disinformation and misinformation. When directed toward businesses, the costs differ but are no less tangible—meaning that confronting and combating misinformation now has to be on every leader's agenda.

Why is it a CEO's job to grapple with misinformation? In part, because they're expected to. In a recent Brunswick survey, 53% of US respondents agreed that "CEOs and business leaders should do whatever they can to stop the spread of misinformation, even if it comes from public officials." Yet only 25% of respondents thought business leaders were doing a good job of stopping that spread.

3M shows how this can be done well. Following a 2020 White House tweet that suggested the company



Modern Management of Misinformation

was dropping the ball on N95 mask production—and ordering they cease exports to Canada and Latin America to ensure supplies for the US—3M's shares slipped by around 2.5%. CEO Mike Roman took to Instagram and LinkedIn to set the record straight: 3M was producing as many masks as possible for the US market, and halting exports carried significant humanitarian implications. After working with the administration to reach a deal and amplifying it via social media, the company's stock climbed 5%.

Even when facing lower-profile challenges, silence carries reputational costs. More than four out of 10 respondents believe "trust in businesses and their leaders" are harmed the most by disinformation, while Brunswick's Connected Leadership research finds that 87% of employees and 92% of financial readers say it's important for business leaders to communicate on social media to correct misinformation.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach for how to do that, but there are a few universal principles to inform your preparation and response.

First, understand where you're vulnerable. Consider where your products, operations or objectives intersect with, and potentially run counter to, established misinformation and disinformation actors.

Second, prepare for the most likely and the costliest scenarios. Consider how you'll respond to

When your company is under attack, leaders need to correct the record.

CRAIG MULLANEY is a Brunswick Partner, an experienced advisor and a *New York Times* best-selling author.

CHAD GIRON is a Director at Brunswick's specializing in digital strategies content development. Both are based in Washington, DC.

variations on those scenarios. Rehearse your game plan under time pressure. New software allows you to practice handling simulated social media posts or doctored YouTube videos. A real threat is unlikely to mirror your rehearsal, but the act of planning is more valuable than the plan itself.

Third, build capabilities and trust before you need them. Most misinformation gathers momentum on social media. That's where you'll need to be able to respond. At a minimum, make sure you have a dedicated leadership account on Twitter, LinkedIn, or another social media platform. Better still, develop trust with your stakeholders by consistently engaging when you're not in the middle of a crisis.

One counter-intuitive word of wisdom: deprioritize fact-checking. Correcting misinformation with facts is sometimes necessary and straightforward. When environmental activists faked BlackRock's annual CEO letter in 2019 via a bogus email, for example, the company quickly took to Twitter to say the letter was fake and that the real one was forthcoming. Simple and effective.

Yet facts aren't as useful at countering lingering misinformation issues or persuading conspiracy theorists. Here, new evidence tends to be reinterpreted to reinforce existing beliefs—or simply disregarded altogether. Shift your target—heart, not head—and tone. Our internal research has found that statements of an organization's values or stories of its positive contributions prove more effective than facts and figures. "When dealing with people," Dale Carnegie wrote 85 years ago, "remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion." It remains sound advice for CEOs—and not only in their campaigns against misinformation. ♦