

Is Your Firm Ready for the Coronavirus?

The time for your firm to be prepared for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is now. Evaluating the potential impact on your business at all levels requires thoughtful and deliberate preparedness and understanding.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has told the public to expect community spread of the coronavirus in the United States, and new cases are being announced in the news daily. The World Health Organization (WHO) has raised its risk assessment worldwide to the highest level. At the time of writing this article, there were more than 111,000 global cases (the majority in China) with infections in more than 111 countries and territories, including more than 550 in the U.S. – and these numbers are increasing almost hourly. Worldwide, economic markets are experiencing great fluctuations from fears about the impact this virus may have on the businesses that are your clients.

Even before the news from the CDC and WHO, our clients had communicated their worries to us about how the virus would affect their firms and disrupt business operations, and how to best manage communications. As the virus continues to spread, firms are canceling partner meetings, postponing conferences and seminars, and issuing HR policies for employees who may contract the virus or show symptoms.

Coronavirus Crisis Communications Tips

The coronavirus is both a public health and a PR issue. Here are some PR tips to help you manage the possible impact of the coronavirus on your organization.

Look to the CDC: In crafting your messaging to stakeholders, it's important to avoid the spread of misinformation and follow the recommendations of reputable public health organizations [such as the CDC](#). Use the information and guidelines provided by these sources to share timely and accurate information with your stakeholders and make thoughtful business decisions to prevent further spread of the illness to mitigate disruption of your business. The CDC has provided a [detailed FAQ](#) as a helpful resource.

Have a Plan: It's important to be informed and ready to act, since unanticipated twists and turns will be revealed with each news cycle. You should first assess the potential impact of the coronavirus on your business, which will vary depending by industry, location of operations and other factors. Continuously monitor the media and news from public health organizations to stay abreast of any new developments or safety guidelines. Assemble a preliminary crisis plan based on recommendations of public health organizations in case the spread of the disease reaches any part of your organization. With situations changing daily and new outbreaks happening daily, timing and speed are critical for responsiveness.

Communicate Internally: Let your employees know you place a priority on their safety.



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First, speak with your HR department about policies regarding employees who may have been in contact with the virus, contract the virus or show symptoms of the virus. Next, be sure to **communicate internal policies** promptly, clearly and in a balanced manner. Make sure that travel policies are clear in terms of where employees can travel to, for what reasons, with what required authorizations, etc. Also, be clear about your policies regarding telecommuting or working remotely – how they will be reviewed, where they apply and how they will work. At Jaffe, our team has worked remotely for almost 30 years and we know firsthand that this does not affect work product negatively, but can actually increase efficiency and productivity.

It's also a good idea to increase employee access to sanitizing and antibacterial cleaning products and information about preventing the spread of germs. Make sure to cite only reliable sources in company communications. Consider placing posters that advise employees to stay home when sick, educate about how to properly conduct hand hygiene, and provide guidance on dealing with coughing and sneezing.

Communicate with Clients: It's important to provide information and assurance about the steps that your business is taking to ensure quality and operations control, and what actions you will take if your operations are affected by the spread of COVID-19. This is the height of tax season, and, if yours is an accounting firm, you will want to assure your clients that their taxes will be handled on time or detail what you will do if you can't file their taxes on time in the event your firm is affected by the virus. In any rapidly evolving crisis where there is significant uncertainty and the facts can change quickly, it is important to assure clients that your organization is taking formal steps to monitor the situation and is committed to providing updates promptly as necessary.

Make Information Easy to Find: If you are looking to distribute information, make it easy for people to find. The best place to put urgent policy news is on the homepage of your website, with a link to more information. Make certain the information is prominently displayed. You can also distribute communications to your stakeholders via email, and leverage social media to get your message out. Make sure that your primary forms of communication all have an easy-to-navigate route to your actions and personal health-and-safety recommendations.

Assess Company Events: Conferences, conventions and trade shows around the world are being canceled or postponed as attendees and organizers voice concerns about the coronavirus. If you are monitoring the situation to determine whether you will cancel a conference or seminar your organization is hosting, keep your list of attendees and speakers regularly updated in the meantime. Provide them with a link to a webpage that provides frequent updates on the event. If you are hosting an event, placing signage prominently and use social media to deliver reminders and messaging encouraging proper handshake, cough and sneezing etiquette. Consider providing information about where to find local health providers.

By following health agency guidelines, keeping employees informed about disease-prevention best practices and maintaining an open flow of communication with clients, your firm can protect itself from business and reputational fallout from a health crisis like the novel coronavirus. If you need any assistance with developing a coronavirus public relations or crisis communications plan, contact Carlos Arcos at carcos@jaffepr.com and

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