Corporate Reputation and the Coronavirus

An Ipsos Point of View

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The big picture:

In early 2020, the world was introduced to the novel coronavirus. At first limited to a single part of the world, it has since rapidly expanded to become a global crisis. In the midst of all this, corporations, businesses and brands have an important role to play in mitigating the spread of the virus, as well as communicating effectively with the public about health measures and how products and services might be impacted as a result of the outbreak.

The full scope of the coronavirus's global impact remains unclear. Yet its destabilizing impact has been all too apparent, particularly in the areas of public health and on global markets.

Major events like this have the potential to reshape public perception about many areas of society, from government and health organizations, to corporations and businesses. To a large extent, there is no way to control events or outcomes that may flow from a major health crisis like the coronavirus. That said, there are a few steps that brands and corporations can take to mitigate potential impact on their reputation, all while prioritizing public health and safety.
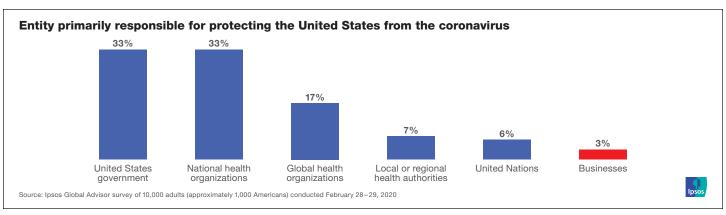
Given all the current unknowns, brands and corporations must be considering multiple scenarios as they plan for the weeks and months ahead. A few key questions to consider going forward: "What are we doing that could be seen as not 'doing enough' to mitigate or prevent the spread of the virus?" Another question: "Are we doing something that might be actively detrimental to public health and safety?"

Understanding public perception about the coronavirus

Considering how fast news around the coronavirus is evolving, understanding shifts in public perception about the virus is critically important. Brands and corporations seeking to protect public health, the interests of their employees, and the viability of their businesses would be well advised to stay informed about changes in public perception as the situation continues to unfold.

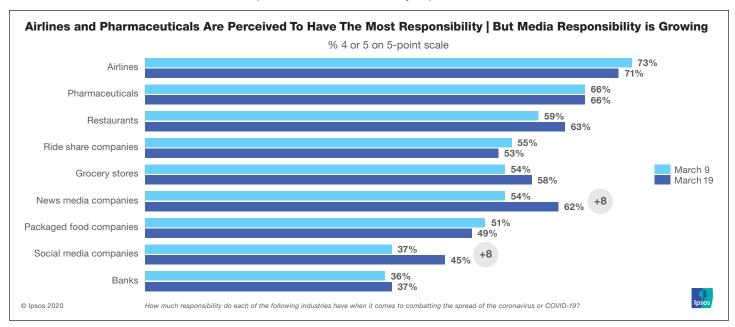### Public Expectations During Global Pandemics

Some good news for businesses amid all the uncertainty: the vast majority of Americans do not see businesses as **primarily** responsible for protecting the United States. Instead, the majority of Americans place that responsibility on the shoulders of the U.S. government and national health organizations.

Entity primarily responsible for protecting the United States from the coronavirus

Entity	Percentage
United States government	33%
National health organizations	33%
Global health organizations	17%
Local or regional health authorities	7%
United Nations	6%
Businesses	3%

Source: Ipsos Global Advisor survey of 10,000 adults (approximately 1,000 Americans) conducted February 28–29, 2020

However, this finding should not lull organizations into complacency. The operative word here is primarily. While not holding businesses accountable to resolve the crisis from a public health perspective, the public still expects brands and corporations to take all available measures to prevent the further spread of the virus, even if it impacts profits.

The industries that are in the spotlight is shifting as the COVID-19 crisis progresses. In our polling last week, airlines, pharmaceuticals and restaurants were clearly seen as bearing the most responsibility for combatting the spread of coronavirus.

As the crisis has shifted, media (both traditional news media and social media) are increasingly seen as being responsible for helping to stem the spread. While other industries are largely unchanged, the proportion of Americans saying that traditional media and social media are responsible has increased by 8-points.

Airlines and Pharmaceuticals Are Perceived To Have The Most Responsibility | But Media Responsibility is Growing

% 4 or 5 on 5-point scale

Industry	March 9	March 19
Airlines	73%	71%
Pharmaceuticals	66%	66%
Restaurants	59%	63%
Ride share companies	55%	53%
Grocery stores	54%	58%
News media companies	54%	62% (+8)
Packaged food companies	51%	49%
Social media companies	37%	45% (+8)
Banks	36%	37%

© Ipsos 2020 *How much responsibility do each of the following industries have when it comes to combatting the spread of the coronavirus or COVID-19?*
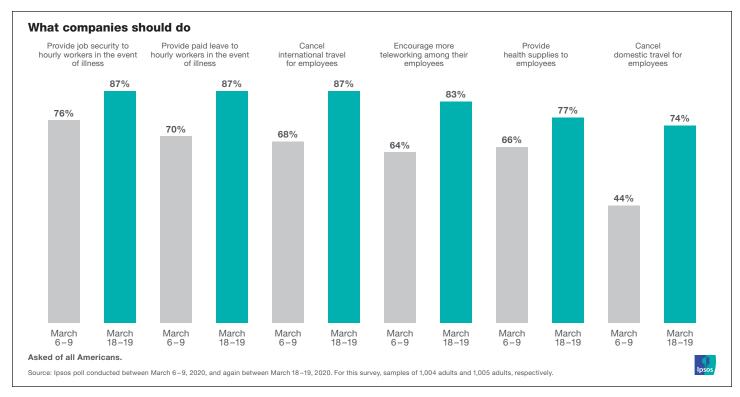
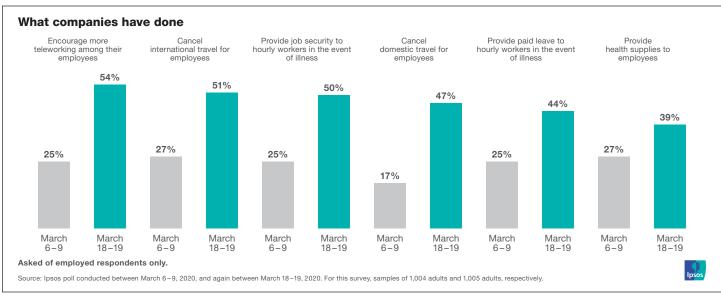## Perceptions of what businesses are doing

Since adult Americans tend to spend the majority of their days at work, minimizing the risk of contagion in workplace settings is particularly crucial. The policies that businesses implement could have a significant impact on the ultimate trajectory of the virus globally and within the United States.

There is growing consensus that businesses should take proactive measures to protect public health, with close to nine in ten Americans agreeing that businesses should provide job security and paid leave to hourly workers and cancel international travel for employees.

Across the board, the majority of Americans support businesses adjusting their activity to slow the spread of the virus. Public support for businesses taking steps to slow the spread of the virus has only grown since Ipsos began tracking these trends a week ago.

What companies should do

Provide job security to hourly workers in the event of illness		Provide paid leave to hourly workers in the event of illness		Cancel international travel for employees		Encourage more teleworking among their employees		Provide health supplies to employees		Cancel domestic travel for employees	
76%	87%	70%	87%	68%	87%	64%	83%	66%	77%	44%	74%
March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19

Asked of all Americans.

Source: Ipsos poll conducted between March 6–9, 2020, and again between March 18–19, 2020. For this survey, samples of 1,004 adults and 1,005 adults, respectively.

More than half of Americans say that their employers are now encouraging telework and have canceled international travel for employees. Additionally, employed Americans report a spike in domestic work travel cancelations.

What companies have done

Encourage more teleworking among their employees		Cancel international travel for employees		Provide job security to hourly workers in the event of illness		Cancel domestic travel for employees		Provide paid leave to hourly workers in the event of illness		Provide health supplies to employees	
25%	54%	27%	51%	25%	50%	17%	47%	25%	44%	27%	39%
March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19	March 6–9	March 18–19

Asked of employed respondents only.

Source: Ipsos poll conducted between March 6–9, 2020, and again between March 18–19, 2020. For this survey, samples of 1,004 adults and 1,005 adults, respectively.

Many businesses are adjusting their activities, but Ipsos research indicates that there is still a discrepancy between what Americans think businesses should do and what is happening on the ground.

U.S. Public Affairs
The Big Picture

What can be done?

Given all the unknowns in the current environment, it can be challenging to prepare for all possible scenarios. That said, there are a few concrete steps that can be taken to minimize negative outcomes, both to public health and to company reputation.

Below, we offer a set of recommendations based on our expertise in brand and crisis management:

1. First and foremost, combat misinformation:

One of the greatest dangers in our digital era is the spread of misinformation. It is all too easy for false—but flashy—information to spread like wildfire online if it captures the public's imagination. Any organization with a digital presence must be vigilant to correct or reduce misinformation about the coronavirus.

Social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, have taken steps to limit the spread of misinformation. This includes posts intended to sell bogus products that purport to cure or treat the coronavirus, or sensationalized posts intended to drive traffic to websites by preying on the public's fears.

The public is increasingly placing responsibility on traditional and social media to limit the spread of the virus. These companies in particular must be vigilant about their actions and sensitive to missteps.

2. Understand your company's risk profile:

In the current environment, it's crucial to undertake a top to bottom evaluation of potential risks. By understanding how your organization contributes to the broader public health and information sharing platforms, a company can take steps to minimize the crisis.

3. Open and consistent communication:

Transparency is crucial in the current environment. Not only is the spread of misinformation potentially injurious to public health, but it can also be damaging to consumer trust. Smart companies will understand that it is best to proactively communicate with all stakeholders, both internally and externally. A few areas to consider going forward:

(a) Prepare a communications plan

(b) Craft and disseminate timely and relevant statements from company leaders about the crisis to internal and external stakeholders

4. Know what public and employee expectations are:

It is vital to stay informed as the situation continues to evolve, and with it, public perception. Ipsos offers cutting edge research on public opinion, as well as a host of social media tracking tools, to stay connected with what the public is thinking and saying about the virus, and the impact it has on perceptions of companies.

Contacts

Jason McGrath
SVP and Head of US Corporate Reputation
Jason.McGrath@ipsos.com

Trent Ross
Global Chief Research Officer, Corporate Reputation
Trent.Ross@ipsos.com

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