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Point of View



Why Supply Chain

Communication Can Make or Break B2B Brand Reputations

COVID-19 THRUSTS OFTEN-INVISIBLE BRANDS ONTO PUBLIC STAGE

Melissa Kinch, Managing Director, Technology, Ketchum

As the global pandemic continues, the world wearily watches for what essential goods and beloved consumer products will and won't be available because the ingredients, components or materials they are made of are in short supply. Consumers are taking to social media to post about spotting

scarce products, COVID-shame the hoarders, and address brands directly. These shortages are thrusting supply chains and the often-invisible (to consumers) companies that make up those chains into the spotlight. For these B2B brands, how they tell the story of their supply chain materials can have a major impact on their reputation, their investors, their employees, their customers and their regulatory environment long-term. What are the communications principles and triggers that B2B brands should follow during this time of unpredictability and unexpected scrutiny?

Put People First

The human story of the supply chain is paramount and must be factored into how and when B2B brands communicate. How is your brand protecting employees on the front lines of manufacturing or production during COVID-19? How are you protecting the local communities in which your employees live and work? For the general public, how is your company making decisions about who will and who will not get essential products, ingredients or materials?

When the economy recovers, people will remember how you treated your employees and how you told their story. In particular, the way you treat the most entry-level and front-line workers will be remembered. Are you positioning yourself to be an employer of choice long-term? Will you be proud of how the world remembers your story about your people? Even if you are now forced to cut positions, your actions and words can make a difference.

For the end consumers of the products and essential goods you help manufacture, you need to translate your messages in ways this broader public can understand – and believe. Further, many B2B brands' customers need help explaining why products are slow to come to market in ways that their own consumers believe and trust.

Transparency – Show, Don't Just Tell

What is essential to telling this human story is transparency – and answering the questions people really have. More and more, the world is demanding transparency and an understanding of how you are treating people and products. Media want behind-the-scenes access, especially to manufacturing facilities, because their audiences are nervous, uncertain or unaware of what is going on. Think about creating videos and graphics to demonstrate how you are taking care of people, how you have changed your processes and what specific actions you are putting into place. Video can be a powerful tool. Employee stories and first-person narratives also can show transparency. At a minimum, providing information about clear processes and procedures to keep people safe will help.

One additional way to think about transparency is being clear on supply availability over 30-60-90 days – how can you provide regular updates to key audiences through communications?

Don't Confuse Customer Communications with Local Community Communications

Most companies are releasing global statements or responses to COVID-19, but there is also an appetite for how a company's response impacts people locally. In the communities where your employees live and work (or where you may have a manufacturing facility, distribution center, etc.), you have a different level and type of storytelling than the business messages you share with your commercial customers. Your local communities, families, politicians and others want to understand the human impact of your supply chain process. Your customers want to understand the business impact (primarily). One-size-fits-all communication does not work.

And if you ignore or mishandle local communications, your brand could be labeled as not caring – which can quickly devolve into a negative national or international story.

Assess What People Truly Understand – Don't Assume

Don't assume you know what people understand or believe. For effective communications, it is important to use research to benchmark that information.

This will help guide your messaging and storytelling. Benchmarking can be as simple as an online listening exercise about key topics on social media or a brief quantitative survey.

Will consumers understand that they can't get a cleaning or hygiene product if all supplies are diverted first to healthcare or frontline workers? Will they understand when their favorite product isn't available at the grocery store because of product rationalization? If they are struggling to buy food for their families, will they understand when agriculture products are destroyed or left to rot because of lack of demand or processing? In most cases, they will not – and they, along with their politicians and the media, will begin to look for villains and heroes in the story.

Companies that take the time to educate consumers on supply chain issues will build trust outside of the B2B ecosystem. What role does your brand play? How do you help your customers communicate? How are you doing business differently to meet changing times? You must tell the public your story if you hope for understanding or, at a minimum, not to be painted as a villain.

Can You Show Urgency?

During a time when everyone is “waiting and seeing” what happens, brands that can show smart action and a sense of urgency around processes, sharing data, protecting jobs, etc. are well recognized.

Be Prepared for Supply Chain Issues to Clash with Sustainability Goals and Global Politics

The broader CSR lens will be changed for a good deal of time, if not forever. Many companies have to slow down or put on hold their sustainability goals to stay profitable and keep their people employed. In some cases, the supply chain challenges make those sustainability goals temporarily impossible. What is your brand’s role in making decisions and changing policy that impacts the environment or societal goals that were important to many stakeholders just a few months ago but put on the backburner for some as the human toll of COVID-19 grows? Are you reevaluating your sustainability story and goals? Have you updated public-facing positions? Are you working with your customers on the right story to tell over the next 12–18 months? What do your customers and the broader public still expect?

Global Supply Issues Could Be Pushed to the Forefront of Political Clashes

If your supply chain issues have grown more complex because of trade issues or shortages from places like China, be prepared to be thrust into the spotlight even if you are normally behind the scenes. The political environment, especially around COVID-19, puts many brands in a story they don't want to be a part of. And this will continue through the U.S. 2020 Presidential Election. Do you have a vulnerabilities assessment and response plan in place if you get caught in the politics? Are your communications and government affairs teams in sync on these issues?

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Want to discuss how your supply chain is impacting your brand reputation – now and for the future? We're poised and ready to analyze the complexities, opportunity areas and transparency levels of your communications approaches. Recommendations we make together can solidify the role of your supply chain in communications strategy in ways that are flexible, agile and relevant for the current business climate.

About Ketchum

Ketchum is providing data intelligence and coronavirus communications counsel to clients in Asia, Europe, Latin America, Canada and the U.S.

As a leading global communications consultancy, we combine the deep industry and specialty expertise of boutique firms with global reach to find unexpected connections that lead to lasting relationships and work that matters. The most creatively awarded firm in our industry, we're equal parts human-centered and business-focused, empathetic and intelligent. For more information, visit www.ketchum.com.

For more information about our approach to technology communications, please contact:

Melissa Kinch
Managing Director, Technology
+1 310 437 2516
melissa.kinch@ketchum.com

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