COVID-19 Vaccines Are Here.

Now What?

How to plan, navigate, and communicate through the days ahead

This has been a momentous week for the COVID-19 vaccine. Distribution began in the U.K., Canada's health regulator approved a version of the vaccine, and now the Food and Drug Administration Advisory Panel has recommended approval for use in the U.S.[i] Millions of doses could be available in days, which is welcome news for a weary public.

With that development comes a host of strategic decisions for institutional leaders to whom employees, customers, and others are looking for direction.

Here are key considerations:

No two approaches will be alike

Crucially, each organization should first understand the ways its options will vary according to its specific industry and geographic requirements and norms. The legal environment and the state of public health vary. Plans need to suit the work a company does and the places in which it does that work – and the organization's role in developing policies and communicating about the vaccine should align with their brand voice and values and the role they play in employees' health and well-being. A quick landscape analysis is an effective way to get started here.

Assess availability and access

Much of an operational vaccination plan and employee or customer communications begins with the vaccine's actual availability. Early on, many employers and employees will find they have to wait their turn.

Any effort to move ahead in line brings with it reputational risks and opportunities, too. Many companies are already lobbying to get their employees early access to the vaccine. But it's worth noting that in the early days of the pandemic, some groups that were able to secure COVID-19 tests ahead of general availability won praise from their employees but experienced reputational backlash from the outside. Balancing perception on the pursuit of access to a vaccination requires careful consideration.

Plan for the plan

Based on different levels of access and availability, employers may find that all their people won't be able to receive the vaccine at the same time, so a graduated, data-driven approach will be called for. This is a place where stakeholder analysis can help define a singular policy to oversee vaccinations for employees, or perhaps multiple policies based on different work sites, roles and geographies. Policies about non-employees such as customers and vendors who enter company property also need to be considered.

Governments, community groups, unions and other external audiences will be watching what companies say and do. Clearly communicating a "plan for the plan" can help to forge ties, build confidence, neutralize criticism and help the messages resonate.

Recognize some communities' vulnerabilities – and their fears

People of color, particularly from the Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino/Latinx and Native American communities, are more susceptible to COVID-19 infection and its effects. Irrefutable data shows they are dying from the disease at rates disproportionately higher than the overall population. Factors that contribute to increased risk include discrimination; healthcare access and utilization; occupation; housing; and educational, income, and wealth gaps.[ii]

According to a new report published by the Urban Institute,[iii] workers from these communities are more likely than their white counterparts to have jobs that require them to work outside their homes and close to others, which puts them at greater risk of contracting and transmitting the virus. And people in these communities are strongly represented in the ranks of front-line workers whose duties carry the risk of direct exposure.

Mistrust of vaccines, medical institutions and the government is also disproportionate in communities of color, likely due in part to a legacy of historical acts of systemic racism in medical experimentation such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiments or the unauthorized use of Henrietta Lacks' tissue samples in the United States. The recent COVID Collaborative study finds that these issues make a real difference in the ways some people approach the question of vaccination. Only 14% of Black and 34% of Latinx people say they trust a vaccine to be safe.[iv]

Employers need to have a plan to build the necessary trust among these communities. Be transparent about why they feel the way they do and what you're doing to ensure safety for everyone, both within your company and in the communities where you do business. Ensure that these critical constituents feel seen and heard. Make this a shared priority internally, identify a champion within your organization and work with them to recruit advocates within these communities to address systemic issues.

Another issue is religious beliefs. Companies also have to give consideration to employees with religious objections to vaccines, bringing empathy and understanding to the entire population of colleagues and the diverse communities in which companies conduct their business.

Hold the line on data privacy

Rules about personal information, health data and privacy still apply during a global emergency – and yes, must be maintained during unprecedented circumstances.

The coming months may give rise to phenomena such as vaccination "passports" that attest to a person's status. Governments may ask people who have been vaccinated to share information via public registries – but what happens to that data? A policy that requires employees or customers to display proof of vaccination before entering an organization's properties may sound like a sensible precaution, but it carries dilemmas about privacy. The time to begin identifying and addressing these issues is now.

Carry 2020 vigilance into 2021

As much as we all wish for it, there is no pandemic light switch that will flip when the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve. Secondary, non-pharmaceutical precautions (such as masks and social distancing) will not end abruptly just because vaccines have begun to appear. Driving that point home when employees and customers may be weary of it needs to be folded into a vaccination plan as well.

Social and political resistance to mask wearing and distancing precautions that mounted during 2020 could grow more robust if audiences get the wrong cue from early vaccine availability. Continue to optimize the policies, signage and hard-won pandemic-era cultural norms that are working in your organization. Consider how to add engaging new messages to emphasize how vital it is for everyone to see these precautions through.

There are other measures to consider keeping in place in the long term. Employees and other people who rely on your organization may need emotional and mental support. The pandemic has spurred a rise in mental health issues that is not likely to abate just because some people have been vaccinated. During 2020, employers and health insurers alike have expanded and adopted the behavioral health resources that are available to support their constituents. Forward-thinking organizations will continue to make that expanded help available throughout 2021.

Be a bulwark against misinformation

Whether it emerges through error or from voices opposed to vaccination, misleading claims can do real damage to the coming national effort. That includes not only reports that are factually inaccurate, but also objectively true reports that direct people's attention in potentially harmful ways. For example, after the first group of British patients received doses of COVID-19 vaccine, some news organizations were quick to focus on the very small number who experienced adverse reactions.

An organization that takes on the responsibility of informing and guiding stakeholder populations is responsible for vetting the information it uses.

Think of misinformation the way you think of the virus itself: You didn't start it, but you have a responsibility not to spread it.

The path back to … normal?

The availability of a COVID-19 vaccine is a very promising development. At the same time, it will challenge organizations and communications professionals as they seek to keep employees safe and engaged and customers satisfied while managing vaccination availability, factual distribution of information, and heightened expectations from stakeholders.

Vaccination distribution may be out of the control of most organizations, but straight talk and clear plans are something every organization can – and should – deliver. Of all the moves COVID-19 has forced companies to make in the last year, these may be some of the most rewarding.

Ketchum can help your organization navigate this phase of the pandemic. For assistance, contact your client director or any of the leaders listed on the next page.

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[iii] https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/black-hispanic-and-native-american-workers-and-their-families-face-greater-coronavirus-exposure-risks-report-finds/ar-BB1bBnbi?ocid=uxbndlbing
[iv] https://www.covidcollaborative.us/content/vaccine-treatments/coronavirus-vaccine-hesitancy-in-black-and-latinx-communities