

PRNews'



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Avoiding the Panic Pandemic: Why Preparation Is a Key Best Practice

By Drew Arnold

From the morning paper to the evening news, the media has been diligent about reminding viewers and readers to take precautionary measures against the H1N1 flu. Cover your nose and mouth when you cough and sneeze; quarantine yourself if you start to feel the symptoms; wash your hands and use alcohol based sanitizer. It is fair to say the U.S. population is aware of the dangers of a deadly flu. It is, of course, critical to prepare for a pandemic, but we must keep in mind that it is equally important not to panic.

Colleges and universities around the country have set up “infirmaries” for those students with swine flu symptoms. Elementary schools have asked parents to be vigilant and keep their children home if they suspect they have symptoms, in an effort to stay open throughout the flu season. Some parents have kept their children at home for fear that they would contract H1N1 at school. Healthcare professionals are on the alert, ready to volunteer their time and accept increased demand for care.

This is all to be expected when a pandemic is on the horizon, but what are the responsibilities of private, non-healthcare companies in this environment? How does a business continue to function while fulfilling the responsibilities for its employees’ health and safety? And what are the responsibilities of medical suppliers, such as companies that provide vaccines and medications for the flu?

Whose Responsibility Is It to Save the World?

A timely case study by INSEAD addressed the issue of corporate responsibility related to a H1N1 pandemic (“Pandemic: Examining the Limits of Corporate Social Responsibility”). INSEAD examines the steps that Roche, a Swiss pharmaceutical company, has taken to ensure the world will have access to its flu drug, Tamiflu, in the event of a worldwide flu pandemic.

If Roche had the ability to provide enough Tamiflu but chose not to produce it, and a flu pandemic sickened and killed a significant amount of people, the company’s reputation could forever be tarnished, jeopardizing its viability as a functioning business. Roche, aware of this

danger, and also presumably aware of the economic implications of having a large supply of flu medicine, manufactured and stored large amounts of Tamiflu.

It was a combination of Roche’s philanthropy and business innovation and foresight that make this a noteworthy story. Despite lack of interest from governments in the late 1990s, Roche set up a worldwide manufacturing network at its own cost to double its capacity of doses. The company also granted sublicenses to companies in China and India, shared technical knowledge with a South African firm and encouraged underdeveloped companies to develop a generic version of the drug.

In 2005, Roche donated to the U.S. and Switzerland enough doses to stop a pandemic at its source. Two years later, after the panic caused by avian flu, demand for Tamiflu skyrocketed. Roche was ready because its foresight had laid the foundation to meet an increased demand. The company’s early investment can be seen as a corporation acting responsibly, and it led to increased business success.

This case study focuses on the risk to Roche’s reputation if the company had not taken these steps, but if the discussion is about corporate responsibility, should the focus be on the company’s larger obligation to do right regardless of business objectives? Perhaps Roche is in a unique position, where its business goals and moral responsibilities work in harmony, speaking to the bottom line, financially and ethically.

“Companies are not philanthropic entities,” says Luk Van Wassenburhove, Henry Ford Chaired Professor of Manufacturing and Academic Director of the INSEAD Social Innovation Center. While his statement is correct, I would argue that it’s not as simple as philanthropy. Companies should be responsible entities, and responsibility requires philanthropy and community investment.

The Swine Flu and the Falling Sky

Much of the world was thrown into H1N1 pandemic-preparation panic, largely driven by social and traditional media. For example, *The Oregonian*, a major Oregon

paper, predicted that as much as 40% of the state could be infected. Twitter was aflutter in 140 character messages about the dangers of vaccination, the mildness or significance of flu symptoms and either the inflated or deflated threat of catching the virus. Since tweets can range from offhand comments to unsubstantiated claims, it's important for corporate leadership to receive and distribute trustworthy information to employees, who are subject to the world's varied information.

The Roche case study is an example of foresight and preparation from a corporation on a global platform. Business leaders and communicators need to employ foresight and prepare for a pandemic on their own territory. In the event of a true pandemic, the most important thing a business can do is focus on the security of business operations, starting with employees. Companies should have already dusted off and updated business continuity plans and employee communication plans.

Communication from corporate leadership is important to provide a steady voice to employees. Often a voice of reason, information disseminated by a trusted corporate presence may be viewed as more factual and less hysterical than information received through the media. Flexibility in corporate communications planning is critical. It is important to provide factors and contingencies if there is a pandemic in one region of the country or world where employees sit. Those employees must be communicated to differently than employees who are watching the pandemic from the other side of the world. It is equally important and often overlooked to communicate with stakeholders about business continuity plans.

It is the corporation's responsibility to provide a safe working environment for employees, and, further, to allow employees flexibility to meet the needs that a pandemic can place on individuals. For example, if schools are closed, parents might have to leave work to pick up their child. It is critical to communicate to employees what their options are and whom they can ask if they have further questions or an emergency situation arises.

The key to keeping employees and their families healthy is to stay on top of information from reliable sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and continually communicate with employees in a way that focuses on their safety, but does not create hysteria or inflated fears. **PRN**

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Communications Do's and Don'ts During a Pandemic

These are useful tips to keep in mind while communicating about a pandemic that has affected a business.

Do:

- Remember, good internal communication is vital.
- Keep open lines of communication with all stakeholders.
- Ensure a single point of contact for urgent information.
- Update your crisis plans.
- Test preparedness of procedures and personnel, especially pandemic response team.
- Minimize disruption; put measures in place to ensure business continuity.
- Demonstrate responsibility.
- Listen to experts, not to rumors.
- Utilize principles of risk communication—trust and credibility are key.
- Ensure that all communications are calm and rational.
- Provide regular updates.
- Communicate with clear, concise information.
- Create channels for your external and internal stakeholders to ask questions.
- Get information translated into multiple languages and ensure that it is culturally appropriate.

Don't:

- Panic
- Wait until your organization is affected.
- Assume that your crisis plan is up to date.
- Try to communicate when you have nothing to say.
- Ignore questions from staff.
- Always trust Twitter; having millions of people wrap up all their fears into 140 characters and blurt them out in the public might have some dangerous consequences, networked panic being one of them.
- Rely on traditional modes of communication.
- Make assumptions; what you think is obvious might not be apparent to your stakeholders