



ARTICLE

# Keeping connected: Social media for leaders in lockdown

Right across the world, health organisations, governments and businesses are tackling the unprecedented challenges related to the Coronavirus (COVID-19).

While the nature of the responses – from market to market, and organisation to organisation – have differed substantially, one thing has remained the same: a demand for strong and visible leadership.

People are fearful, confused and uncertain as to what the future holds. For businesses, this is as true for investors as it is for employees, and as evident with suppliers as it is for consumers. Corporate audiences are looking for clear guidance, regular communication and decisive leadership, and with social distancing and lockdown rules being put in place globally, they want this via the devices that are keeping us all connected.

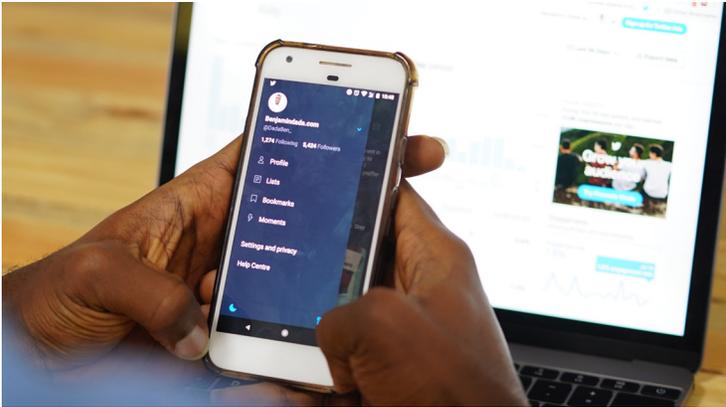
The companies who are getting this right are excelling at providing clarity through both internal and external communications, but above all they are now practicing what they have preached regarding the purpose of the organisation – providing real, tangible assistance to help beat the virus and ease the disruption. This is real leadership. Whether it be banks easing the immediate financial pressures, manufacturers changing their output to support healthcare systems, or consumer goods firms supporting the most vulnerable.

In these long days where so many of us are working from home, social media use has risen and leadership engagement on social networking platforms has become an essential part of stakeholder communications.

Over half of FTSE 100 CEOs are using at least one social channel yet many are missing an opportunity to provide real leadership as only eight of the CEOs to-date have communicated their position on the pandemic. For the leaders who are yet to take this step, what do they and their teams need to consider before using social media to communicate through this crisis?

## Keep it real

Being genuine is a vital part of connecting with followers as, now more than ever, social media users are seeking authentic experiences. Leaders need to be true to their values, communicate openly and honestly, and be responsible for their actions. This doesn't mean that CEOs must create all the content themselves. Rather it means regardless of who is drafting the post, by building a social media presence which reflects their offline persona, leaders can forge a deeper connection with stakeholders and encourage brand loyalty.



### Commit for the long-haul

Launching a social media presence is a commitment to an ongoing dialogue between a leader and their audiences. While some choose to launch their accounts around key moments or campaigns, trust and engagement is built over time and the most successful social media leaders are in it for the long run. In recent weeks, companies like BP and Unilever who have CEOs and senior leaders with established social media accounts have seen the real benefit of well-developed networks of followers. In practice, committing for the long-haul means planning ahead to ensure timely, quality content is shared on a regular basis.

### Read the room

The social media realm is constantly evolving; platforms change, new tools are introduced, and users come up with new ways of creating content. From day to day, if not hour to hour, behaviours and sentiment on social media can change – that’s been no more evident than the past few weeks as the audiences have lurched from confusion, to despair to anger as new stories populate their timelines. Leaders who closely listen to the mood music are most

likely to strike the right chord. This will help both avoiding reputational missteps but also increase your relevance. Listen before you talk.

### Aligned to company messaging

By its very nature a leader’s engagement will be distinctively different from a company’s corporate channels. Language, style and tone will, and should, all differ. That doesn’t mean that messaging shouldn’t be aligned though. Ultimately a leader’s social media profile should be working to support the broader business and communications objectives. While a leader may tell the narrative in a different way it should be the same narrative which is being told. At best, divergence in messaging between a company and its leader can be confusing. At worst, it can be seized on by company detractors as evidence of discord and disorder. The benefits of leadership channels are clear, but these channels must actively work for the good of the company as a whole.

### Stay human

Unlike a corporate channel a leader has the unique opportunity to create meaningful human interactions on social media. Companies can’t feel or empathise but leaders can, and demonstrating personality and emotion is likely to illicit a more powerful connection in return. Visual formats – particularly video – can be hugely effective, though during lockdown, this does require additional consideration about logistics, backdrops and tone. Above all, it’s emotion as much as logic which drives behavioural change and showing personality should be a core part of leadership social media engagement.

*FTI works with leaders across several large corporates and FTSE 100 companies. We develop and implement tailored leadership social media strategies that both work for each specific individual, and complement broader corporate communications channels.*

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