

ENGINEERED FOR RESILIENCE**COVID Communications in the Manufacturing Sector**

Peppercomm's deep-dive research into how communications leaders in manufacturing have found a way to survive and, at times, thrive despite pandemic disruption.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has severely disrupted every industry sector in the U.S., but none more so than manufacturing. While tens of thousands of businesses shut down or transitioned to remote work, many manufacturing organizations were considered essential businesses. This required them to navigate a complex, multifaceted approach to moving forward. And if they weren't deemed essential, they are now the first to be heading back to this "next normal."

Many frontline production employees were asked to return to the lines almost immediately, while their companies rushed to make changes to ensure their health. Engineers and technicians were forced to leave their critical work and collaboration spaces behind to work remotely. Office-based employees had to quickly transition to working from home.

This convoluted scenario has been especially challenging for communications leaders – but also very rewarding. The cliché "building the plane while flying it" does not even begin to describe the scenario these professionals have experienced over the past three months. Communicating to stakeholders – particularly employees – has tested the leadership skills, strategies and tactics of them and their teams as they've worked to keep people safe, healthy, well-informed, motivated and productive.

To take the pulse of these communications executives during the pandemic, Peppercomm conducted in-depth interviews with 10 communications leaders. We reached across a spectrum of manufacturing subsectors, from automobiles and home appliances to medical devices and electronics, to uncover challenges, solutions, best practices and the vision these leaders have of the future as we move out of the depths of the pandemic and into the "next normal."



“There Was No Playbook for This”

While every CCO had detailed crisis scenario plans, no one had a comprehensive blueprint for dealing with a lethal pandemic and the mandated lockdown of all facilities. “There was no playbook for this,” one CCO said. “We’ve been dealing with critical, complex issues...that most communicators don’t experience in a lifetime.”

When the lockdowns were announced, communications leaders sprang into action, working closely with executive colleagues and their communications teams to create new operational guides. Some CCOs benefitted from multiweek shutdowns of all facilities that gave them time to develop these plans, but others had to formulate them within a few days to help guide frontline employees back to work.

Most of the CCOs we spoke with collaborated with their CEOs on communicating the organization’s posture, mindset and principles – with employee wellbeing a high priority. Messaging stressed the use of PPE, barriers, temperature checks, social distancing, sanitizing and other safety measures. For employees asked to return to facilities to work on production lines, all requests were voluntary. No essential workers were mandated to return, but almost all did so. “We told people, ‘Look, you’re going to be safer here than at a grocery store,’” one CCO said. “Our facility staff is constantly cleaning the high-touch areas.”

Rather than take a command-and-control approach, all CCOs articulated principles from the top of the organization down to the frontlines but empowered regional and local staff to execute the processes and communications as they saw fit. “We called it freedom within a framework,” one CCO said. Headquarters pandemic task forces and communications teams developed tool kits and templates that could be used at individual facilities around the world to create everything from manager talking points to posted signs – and even translated into multiple languages as needed to ensure 100-percent awareness.

Executives Lead the Way

All the CCOs we spoke with indicated that the CEO was in the spotlight to communicate with staff on a global basis, communicating high-level leadership messages and direction. One CCO helped his CEO develop a three-part platform focused on helping employees feel safe, sharing successes of frontline workers and looking ahead to how the company is preparing for the future.

Other leaders noted that the entire leadership team, including the CHRO and communications executives, took a collaborative approach to reaching out to employees to drive key messaging. “We’ve been flexible to show leadership across the board,” one CCO said.

CCOs have also ramped up the cadence of communications and expanded the channels and platforms used by their organizations. C-level executives and regional leaders have been communicating with employees at least once a week. In addition to written communication, they are leveraging live, long-form-video town halls as well as shorter (10 to 15 minutes) video events featuring leader Q&A sessions. “We have been in hyper-communications mode,” one CCO explained.

One CCO’s team uses an integrated content management system for internal communications. This solution enables the group to push out messaging to all internal touchpoints simultaneously, including email, employee portals, internal social channels, the company’s Salesforce platform and even digital signage.

With high-level executive leadership in place, all communicators reinforced the importance of one-on-one management access and input within the manufacturing facilities. Inside the individual locations, where frontline workers may not have immediate access to video and email, managers are a critical link and are holding more in-person standup meetings and having conversations with employees on the production lines. They are using key messages passed down from headquarters and customized for their location. Plant newsletters and even traditional hard-copy signage also have been important media.

Encouraging Employee Dialogue

Of course, not all communications have traveled in one direction. CCOs are working closely with internal communications professionals to improve employee engagement by monitoring how workers feel and encouraging two-way dialogue, both person-to-person and via technology.

One CCO said employees are being encouraged to provide feedback directly to managers and/or executives either directly or anonymously. “We told them that there’s definitely no hierarchy when dealing with a situation like this,” he added. “If you’ve got ideas or concerns that can benefit everybody, please let us know immediately.” For example, employees are asked to be transparent about any risks they have to coronavirus exposure, such as a relative working in healthcare. They have assured there will be no negative repercussions, and they will have the company’s full support if they become ill.

Other leaders have increased the frequency of employee surveys from once or twice per year to quick pulse checks every few weeks. Digital platforms, such as Facebook’s Workplace, have become critical tools for measuring employee sentiment. This type of technology enables organizations to disseminate content and gauge how employees like, comment and share it to evaluate how they are feeling and change the communications approach to optimize it in near real time.

Developing Plans to Return to the Office

While the majority of manufacturing personnel work on the production lines, of course there are key employees who are working remotely. All the CCOs we spoke with are already deep into plans about who should return to an office or lab environment and when. They also indicated they are leading the way with empathy and understanding for those stuck at home.

They have been very deliberate and careful in their communications with remote employees and will continue to do so at least until a reliable vaccine is developed and distributed. Most CCOs noted that, until then, no one will be forced to return to a lab or office who does not want to return. Some communicators are beginning to message as to what that may look like, including asking employees to attest they have no symptoms and instituting a screening system before they can return to a facility.

All CCOs said beginning to communicate a potential phased approach to repopulating office spaces, with only a small percentage (i.e. under 10%) of employees comprising the voluntary first wave. It’s important to note that these will include engineers, technicians and R&D professionals who either need to be or are far more productive in their labs. However, the vast majority of employees will not be invited back until it’s absolutely safe.

More Lessons Learned From the Pandemic

Our research with communications professionals uncovered many best practices and strategic adaptations they have made – both for the short term and long term. Among the most compelling are:



Mundane communications on the wane

The days of the one-to-many quarterly town hall meeting driven by executives may be over. Manufacturing employees have become accustomed to more frequent high-touch engagement, more two-way dialogue and more personalized communication from the C-suite down to their individual managers. This trend is likely to continue.



More is more

With so many constituents scattered both geographically and across communications platforms, leaders have learned that it is impossible to over-communicate during a crisis. They have learned that employees consume information in different ways, so leveraging all messaging channels multiple times has become the norm.



Consider individual viewpoints

Different people responded to the pandemic in different ways, including along political and ideological lines. Communicators must account for individual points of view when driving toward a collective outcome that will benefit the entire organization, even to point of convincing employees to take actions they don't feel are necessary for them.

Finding the North Star

In such uncertain times, we asked CCOs how they helped inject certainty into their outputs as communicators. One critical component was how they gathered the most trusted information to then distribute to their internal stakeholders. Most of them pointed to the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as their gold standards. On top of those, many CCOs relied on regional, state and local governments for information.

Interestingly, two CCOs also relied on their organizations' internal medical experts for up-to-date data and to help them interpret information coming from WHO and the CDC. One company had an existing medical officer, while another hired one specifically to deal with the pandemic. "We kick off every meeting with our chief medical officer sharing his best practices and what he's hearing in the medical community," one CCO said.

For some CCOs, another North Star in the search for certainty was the company's purpose – their reason for existing over and above making money. One executive at an appliance manufacturer stressed the pride their employees have expressed at making products that are helping consumers live more enjoyable, more efficient lives while stuck at home. A CCO at a medical device manufacturer said his employees have been reminded of the deep and lasting significance of the products they are making here in the U.S. "Some used to not feel good about being a U.S. manufacturer because buyers always have threatened to move their business offshore," he explained.

"Now we are being recognized and our need is abundantly clear. This shows how critical and incredible our employees are."



Rethink everything

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the opportunity for leaders in manufacturing to take a step back and evaluate their entire communications strategy. What is working? What isn't? What do stakeholders need to hear moving forward — and how? All can be evaluated and adapted as necessary. “The business toolkit needs to be different. And why not?” said one CCO. “If this is not the time to pull the tablecloth out from under the dishes and say, ‘What should we be doing?’ when is the time?”

Envisioning the Future

When we discussed what the future would look like for these CCOs in terms of their roles and how their organizations will operate, they considered both immense challenges and great opportunities.

One factor that CCOs were unanimous about is that communications in manufacturing will continue to be more vital than before the pandemic, and employees, in particular, will need a high level of engagement until a vaccine is released. “An employer can play the role of providing decisiveness and clarity people can't find anywhere else,” one leader explained. “Politicians and scientists are all over the place. An employer can provide consistency.”

Some CCOs are involved in examining the future role of office space and how that will impact communications. Even when a vaccine becomes widely available, will employees want to return to an office and sacrifice the new work-life balance they have built during the pandemic? “Some people want to be back to normal, while others are saying this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to change how work works,” one executive said. “We need to find the right balance.”

A prime example of a company discovering new ways to operate comes from the North American division of an overseas manufacturer whose roots date back more than 100 years. There, management has emphasized the need for office employees to work in one location. But the pandemic has opened their eyes to new possibilities. “Working from home has worked so far. We were better equipped than our hesitant culture or management believed,” the communications leader said. “We were not willing to push before. This forced us to, and we rose to the occasion. Our executives have stepped up, as well, leveraging video like never before. Maybe it's not a 100-percent solution, but it's doable.”

Other CCOs noted that the empathy and understanding organizations have displayed for employees will need to continue to be communicated even as the pandemic wanes. “Every person's day is different based on their unique situation, and we are learning we can manage that,” one CCO said. “We need that to attract the best and brightest.”

Another CCO pointed out that even as offices reopen, some employees will be unable to come back due to personal issues such as childcare or a high-risk person in their home. Organizations will need to communicate with those employees on a very individual, human level in order to make them feel secure and motivated.

Finally, for the foreseeable future, many companies will need to continue to learn how to communicate effectively with employees so they can continue to innovate, create authentic dialogue and be inclusive despite being scattered among production facilities and homes. “The pandemic has completely changed the way we communicate. You can't just get in a room and talk about something, one CEO explained. “We've needed to look at all aspects of how and who we communicate with, look at what is most effective in this situation. How do you build culture when everyone is not in the room together?”

Success Formula: A Solid Foundation + Flexibility

Our research identified two inter-related factors that have been important for CCOs and their teams to successfully adapt to new communications requirements during this pandemic. The first is a solid foundation of trust, esprit d'corps and technology developed and built before the crisis hit. The second is the ability to be eminently flexible when the crisis was reaching fever pitch.

As communicators have been forced to work from home while dealing with personal issues such as caring for older parents or young children, CCOs have noticed that the ones who were closest before the pandemic are better able to bridge the miles between them now. This has enabled them to collaborate more closely than they ever have before.

“We have learned the importance of culture
and cohesion within a team going into a
crisis and the dividends that pays,”
– said one CCO.

Several leaders noted that teammates who have found it difficult to be as productive at home as they were in the office – single parents, for example – are being lifted up and supported by their colleagues. “Team building and trust building and camaraderie ahead of a crisis,” said another CCO. “We see how critical that is.”

In addition, processes and technology already in place have empowered people to stay in close contact and for leaders to monitor sentiment. Teams already using Zoom and other collaboration solutions were ahead of the game. In some facilities, production-line employees were already receiving company news via using smartphone apps, which have become critical during this crisis. Organizations that did not use these tools before the crisis have accelerated adoption of them – and they are here to stay. Communications leaders will need to adapt their future strategies to them. Even more traditional notification channels that have been useful in the past, such as phone trees and text messaging, are proving they are still more than worthwhile today.

Flexibility has also been key to not only surviving but thriving during the pandemic. One CCO noted that his team is charged with engaging employees who are spread across the spectrum of emotions. The half of the staff who are working remotely feel guilty about the other half who are on the production lines. Some teams are working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, while others are on their standard 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekly schedule. At the same time, these homebound employees are experiencing some cabin fever and burnout.

This has required the communications team to be flexible in the way they engage with personnel and adapt messages and tactics based on feedback into how employees are feeling. For example, one organization originally mandated the use of video for all collaborative meetings. They have now made video optional for all employees unless they are the person speaking in order to avoid video fatigue.

CCOs have also noticed that their own teams require flexibility and are leaning into leading in new ways. “We have talked for a long time about managing outputs and not hours,” one said. “We are learning in real time how to do that. It’s not an 8 to 5 day. Every person’s day is different based on their unique situation, and we are learning we can manage that with the right teams committed to each other and their outcomes.”



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Communication is the Antidote to Uncertainty

The manufacturing industry in the United States has played a pivotal role in leading the country amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Manufacturers have heroically responded to the abrupt and unforeseen supply chain interruptions. When we saw that supplies would run low, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) quickly launched our “Creators Respond” relief effort, identifying inventory and production capabilities of emergency supplies so that federal and state agencies could mobilize tens of millions of pieces of personal protective equipment. Manufacturers pivoted product lines to meet nationwide healthcare and essential needs. Today frontline workers are rapidly producing masks, testing kits, gloves, ventilators and more. In these extreme circumstances, our sector has seen an unprecedented level of collaboration, even as leaders within these companies face difficult challenges, balancing nationwide consumer demand and the health and wellbeing of their workforce.

In this unprecedented climate, purposeful communication is the antidote to uncertainty. Our employees and colleagues, our customers and members, and the broader public are entitled to purposeful, timely and valuable communication. The NAM has provided the platform for companies to share practices, disseminating information among manufacturers to meet various federal guidelines. We’ve helped manage the flow of information between government officials and manufacturers stepping up to help relief efforts. And through our in-house news team, we have educated and engaged the public on how the industry is responding to this global pandemic. The NAM and manufacturers across the country have been supporting a cause greater than ourselves — and telling that story matters. It inspires others to action, builds trusts and reassures the public. In times of anxiety and fear, that makes a profound difference.

For more on manufacturers’ COVID-19 operational practices, visit the NAM’s Manufacturing Leadership Council’s resource page at mlcouncil.com/covid-19