



International Association
of Business Communicators
UK & Ireland

HALSTON MARKETING

The Changing Face of Crisis Comms: A COVID-19 Retrospective

A definitive account of the pioneering strategies implemented by the leading comms professionals at the heart of the UK's core industries.





1.0 Abstract

Thank you for taking the time to read this Halston Marketing whitepaper, in association with the IABC UK & Ireland and guest contributors. The paper is a collaboration of industry research and direct accounts from industry specialists.

The whitepaper will be delving into COVID-19's impact on multiple sectors from a crisis comms perspective. The piece will be following a timeline of events, first taking an in-depth look into the impact the pandemic has had on each sector.

The piece will then follow with month by month accounts of the pandemic from the perspective of comms professionals explaining their crisis comms strategies. These comms professionals work in various industries that were each impacted differently to establish how various markets/companies dealt with the crisis. Some of the sectors include finance, manufacturing, retail and travel.

Each section will include a retrospective account of a point in time during the pandemic and tactics used by the internal comms teams in terms of messaging and mediums.

Finally, the piece will conclude with a comparative look into each professional's strategy, distinguishing the differences and similarities between their methods and future predictions for their comms plans and for the industry as a whole.

Contents

1.0 - Abstract

2.0 - Collaborators

3.0 - Introduction

- 3.1: The Pandemic
- 3.2: In-Depth Industry Impact

4.0 - The COVID-19 Timeline

5.0 - Collaborator Perspectives: Month by Month

6.0 - Collaborator Comparisons

- 6.1: Reactionary
- 6.2: Peak of the Comms
- 6.3: Story Predictions
- 6.4: Impact on the Industry
- 6.5: Comms to Liken

2.0 Collaborators



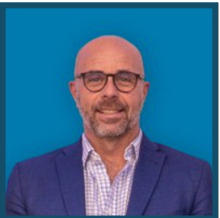
Laura Desert
*Internal Communications
Manager, CityFibre*



Lisa Gubbings
*Digital Communications
Manager, John Lewis
Partnership*



Howard Kraiss
*Internal Communications
Manager,
Johnson Matthey*



Ken Armistead
*Director of Corporate
Communications, PPG
EMEA*



Ann-Marie Blake
*Global Communications
Lead, Tier One Bank*



Rachel Tolhurst
*Head of Corporate
Communications, Amey*



Jeremy Albert
*Operations Manager,
Tour Operator*



Steven Murgatroyd
*Internal Communications
Manager, AXA UK*



Victoria Silverman
*Director of Business
Communications,
Refinitiv*



Toby Higgins
*Head of Communica-
tions, Network Rail*

3.0 Introduction

3.1 The Pandemic

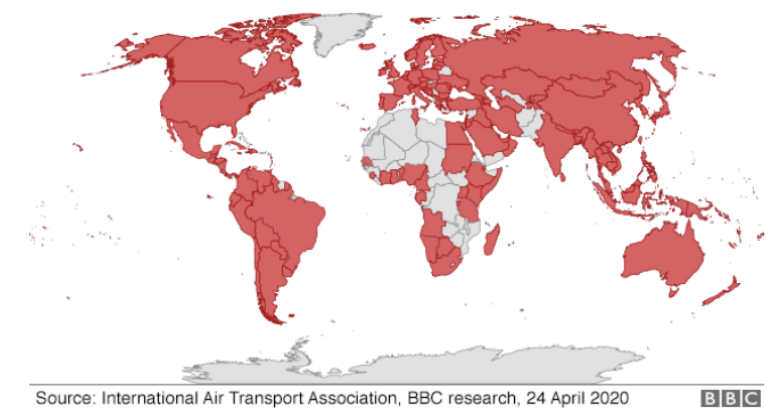
COVID-19 has had a global level impact that has not been experienced in living history. Aside from the catastrophic loss of life, it has led to drastic changes in the way people live and caused major economic impacts. Governments worldwide have already allocated more than \$13 trillion to stabilise economies and restart growth.

The UK economy is very much reliant on international trade, whether that is conducting business with international companies or relying on international supply chains for the import of goods. The pandemic instantly hindered all of this, with over 100 countries imposing non-essential travel restrictions and others powering down their operations as part of their lockdown procedure, reducing imports and exports.

The Office for National Statistics has been investigating the impact of the pandemic across various sectors. Due to the complete lockdown of non-essential activities, the majority of industries faced a decline in demand and only those that could continue to operate online or adjust to be considered essential were able to partly minimise the impact. The table demonstrates that the air transport sector has faced the greatest level of decline with a 92.8% drop, which is not surprising due to the suspension of international travel and the inability to operate in another form.

They are closely followed by travel agencies and operators, the hospitality sector and automotive traders.

More than 100 countries have travel restrictions due to COVID-19



The EU banned travellers from outside the bloc for 30 days in an unprecedented move to seal its borders because of the coronavirus crisis in March.

The ten largest industry falls in the services industries
Index of services, monthly growth, seasonally adjusted. UK, April 2020

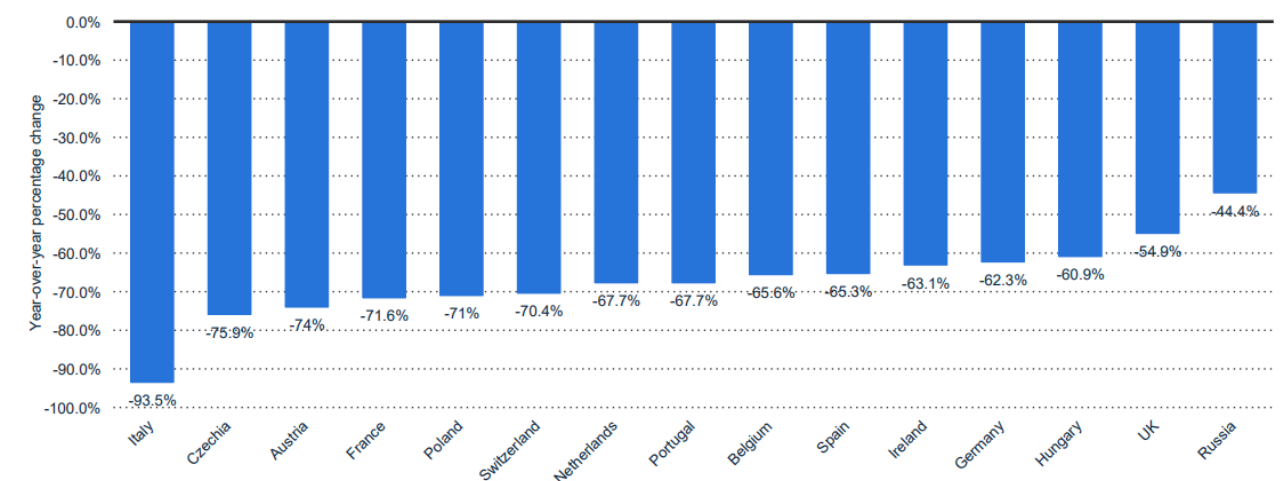
Industry	Growth
Air Transport	-92.8%
Travel Agency, Tour Operator And Other Reservation Service & Related Activities	-89.2%
Food And beverage Service Activities	-88.5%
Wholesale And Retail Trade, Repair Of Motor Vehicles & Motorcycles	-87.3%
Accommodation	-86.9%
Rail Transport	-70.4%
Other personal Service Activities	-60.0%
Creative, Arts & Entertainment Activities	-50.8%
Sports Activities And Amusement & Recreation Activities	-45.2%
Motion Picture, Video & TV Programme Production, Sound Recording & Music Publishing Activities	-42.1%

Travel & Tourism

The travel and tourism sector has taken a considerable hit due to the pandemic, with virtually every country going into lockdown or various forms of restriction from March to July, meaning holidays were not an option. The industry missed out on months of revenue during the peak summer months. Statista research demonstrated that the UK tourism sector has experienced a 50% drop across the board but they are expecting a drastic spike in 2021 due to the amount of re-arranged or new holiday bookings when lockdown restrictions are expected to ease.

Whilst the UK tourism sector has experienced a drop, European countries have experienced even greater dips as their economies are much more heavily reliant on tourism. Statista research demonstrates that Italy has been hit the hardest with a 93.5% drop in revenue per hotel room.

Year-over-year change in total revenue per available room (TRevPAR) of hotels in Europe due to COVID-19 in March 2020



However, since lockdown restrictions in the UK began to ease, staycations are reporting buoyant bookings. Luxury lodge specialist, Hoseasons has reported a 270% increase in year-on-year sales and their sister company cottages.com reported a significant 455% increase.

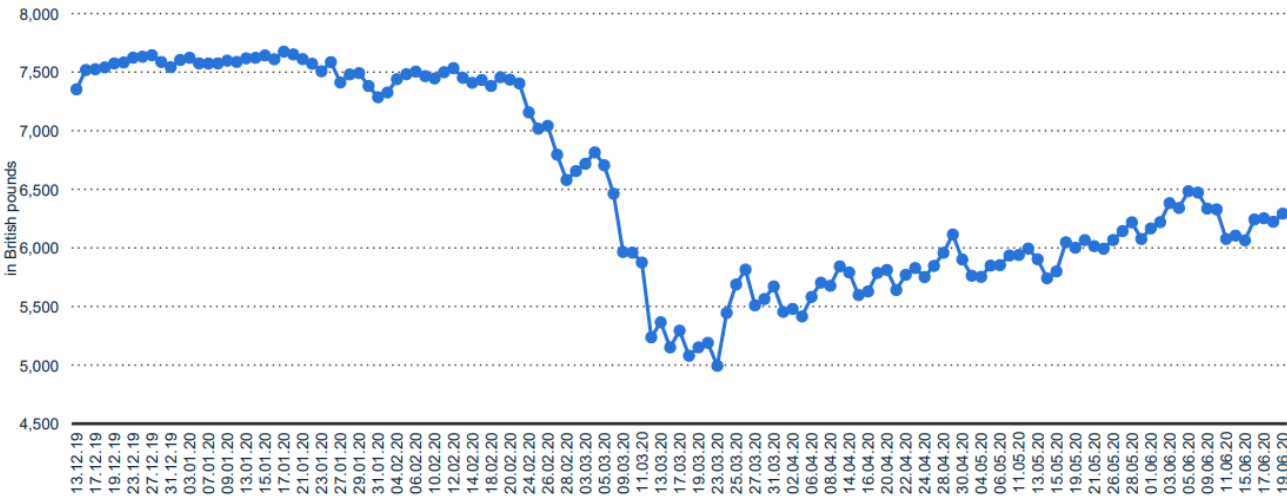
4.0 In-Depth Industry Impact

Finance

General uncertainty and a halt to businesses worldwide has caused a ripple effect on the financial sector. Some of Europe’s largest banks have experienced declines in their market capital, with HSBC experiencing the largest drop of £60 billion between December 2019 and April this year.

Alongside this, the stock exchange has become highly unpredictable in recent months. In times of uncertainty, stock markets always become volatile and the leading index of UK company shares plunged 25% in March, after Boris Johnson’s announcement around lockdown.

FTSE 100 Index UK from December 13th 2019 to June 19th 2020
(in British Pounds)

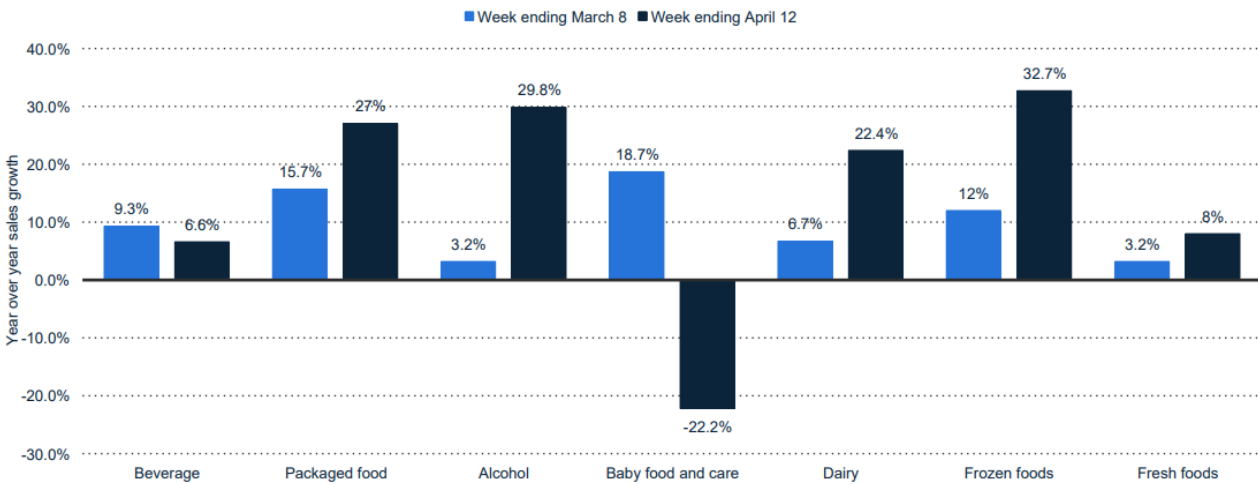


Although it’s difficult to predict when the UK economy will recover to pre-lockdown levels, when restrictions began to ease in June, the British economy still managed to grow by a monthly 8.7%.

FMCG

Whilst many industries have been experiencing a decline, the FMCG sector has been at the other end of the spectrum, dealing with extreme spikes in demand. Supermarkets in the UK have been faced with panic buying and coping with Christmas level demands in March and April. As shown in the graph, every area of edible groceries experienced an increase in sales compared to the previous year and when there was any decline it was mainly due to the lack of stock availability.

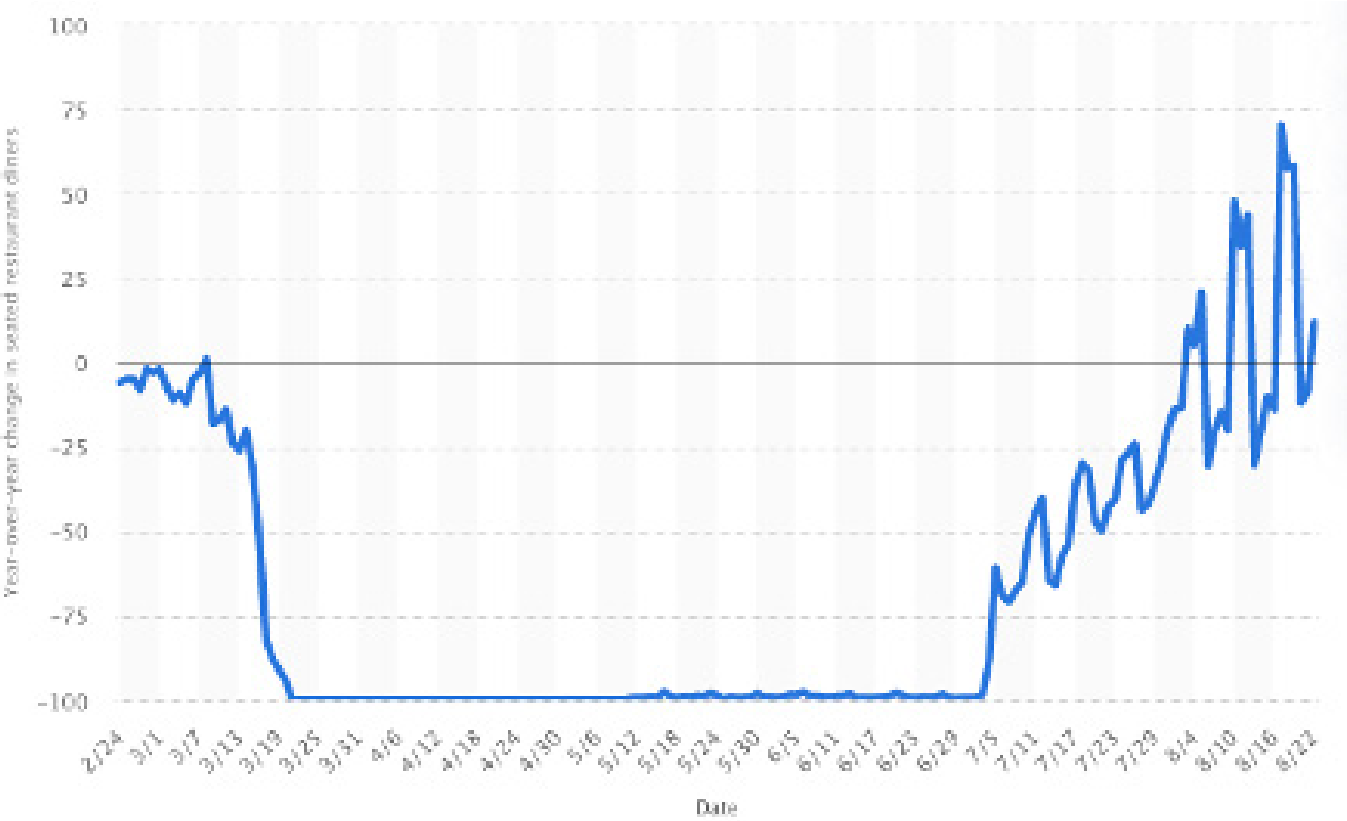
Year on Year changes in sales of edible groceries due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom in March and April 2020, by category



There was not only an increase in store sales, the online delivery options for many of the major supermarkets were overwhelmed with demand. With many people avoiding shopping in stores due to the fear of contraction, they were opting for the delivery option instead, leading to unprecedented demand for online delivery that even caused websites to crash. Since then, supermarkets chains like Tesco and Lidl are conducting major recruitment drives of around 30,000 members of staff to be able to expand their delivery capabilities.

Hospitality

The hotel industry was considered to be one of the hardest hit due to the pandemic and according to research conducted by Mckinsey, recovery could take until 2023. Economic hotels are expected to bounce back quicker than luxury hotels due to better demand and lower operating costs.



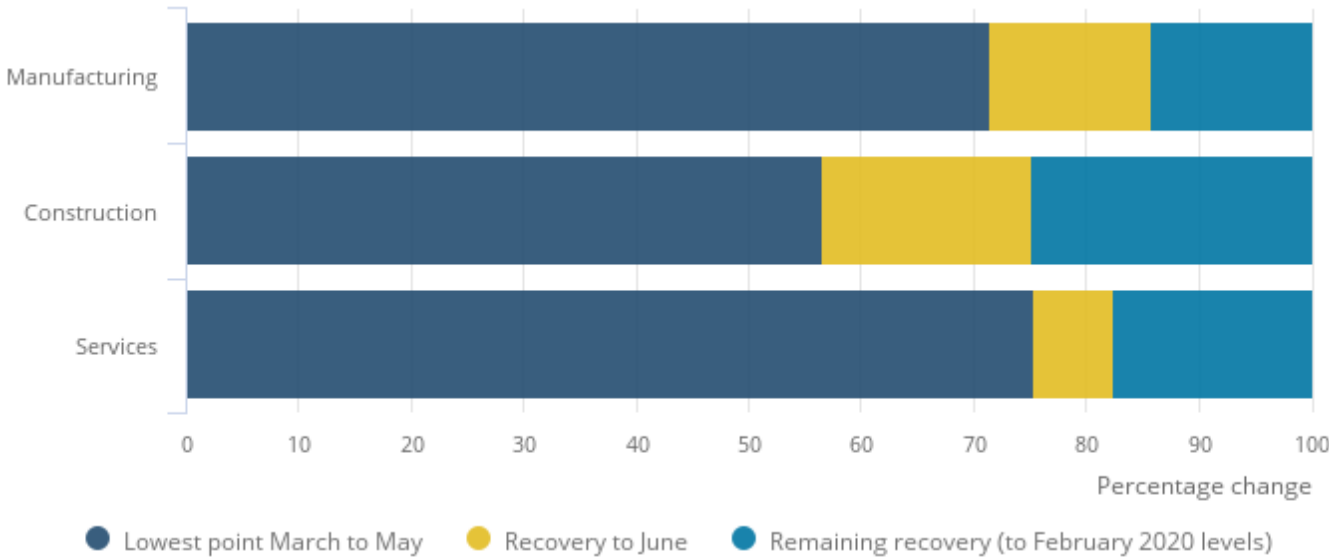
Aside from hotels, restaurants were also asked to limit their operations to take away only at the beginning of lockdown. As demonstrated in the graph, there was a complete drop in seated restaurant dining, however, a substantial spike in August. In June, the government began to ease restrictions to allow indoor dining at a reduced capacity to maintain social distancing. The real driver behind the growth in August can be attributed to the government’s ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ scheme. After only two weeks in, government statistics showed 35 million meals had been bought on the scheme.

Although these figures may not continue to be as high after the government scheme has ended, it could have proven to be beneficial to boosting the confidence of the public to return to some version of normality.

Manufacturing

In March, the manufacturing sector faced a 56% decline in output in Quarter 2 according to Make UK. However, there were some disparities in the figures when it was broken down by sector level. For example, manufacturing businesses that supply into the likes of automotive and aerospace came to a complete standstill, whereas those working in the food sector were working flat out to meet supermarkets’ demands. Whilst many of the other sectors had no option but to completely shut down, many manufacturers were highly reactive and adapted their operations to produce essential items like PPE, ventilators and hand sanitiser so their business could continue to run.

Figure 3: Despite growth in June 2020, the three main indicators remained significantly lower than in February 2020



Although growth was demonstrated in June, some manufacturers were still finding it difficult to rebound back to pre-lockdown levels. Much of this has been attributed to the difficulty in maintaining social distancing at full capacity, the lowered demand and the heavy reliance on supply chains from the Far East.

Aside from the drop in output, this pandemic has forced manufacturers to change how they operate from reconfiguring factory floors to ensure safety to sourcing new suppliers and in some cases implementing technology to become more efficient.

Technology

The pandemic has had two alternative impacts on the technology sector. Those that are electronic manufacturers have been heavily disrupted due to the impacts on their supply chain. Whereas those that provide technologies that are beneficial to remote working have experienced a rise in adoption as around 70% of the British public is now working from home and many firms have had to speed up their digitalisation process. Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella said “We saw 2 years’ worth of digital transformation in 2 months.”

Communication and collaboration solutions have experienced historic levels of growth, but it has exposed issues with infrastructure and security. Cloud-based solutions have also become pivotal in the implementation of solutions through remote interfaces and increased automation.

KPMG has predicted that even in the recovery phase we can expect technology companies to remain in high demand to supply the remote working environment in terms of reliability and fast connection, cyber security, maintaining customer experiences and accelerating IoT and AI.

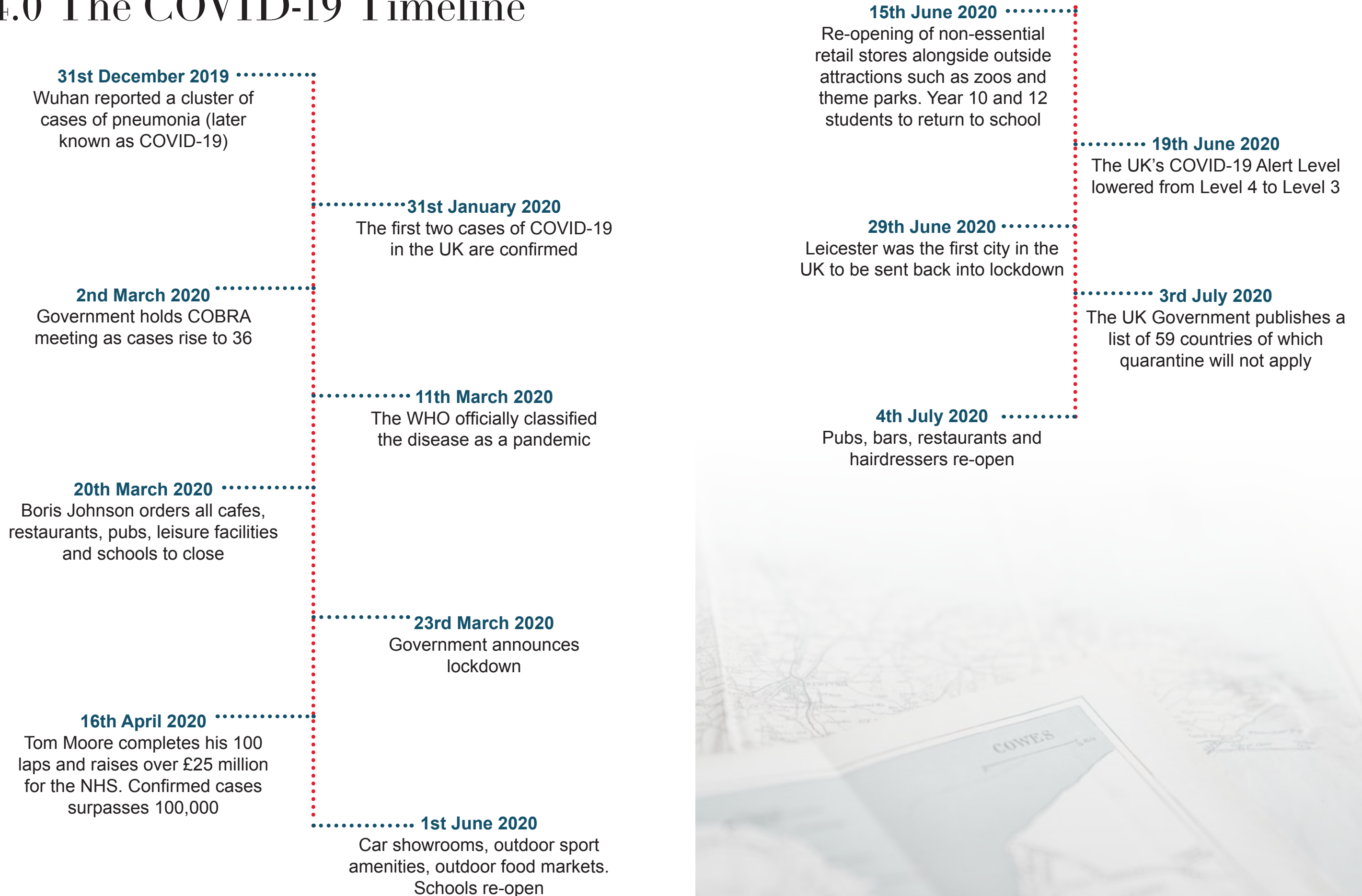
Impact on Comms

With such a widespread impact, every sector has felt the pressure to respond to the crisis to keep their businesses wheels in motion. The internal comms teams have been in the thick of it all, responding to the ever-changing situation to relaying instructions and information to their workforce, which in some cases could be thousands of employees. They are responsible for determining the key messaging and ensure everyone is engaged and aligned.

This pandemic is truly something that no comms professional has ever come across before. Due to the unique nature of the crisis, it made the perfect topic to investigate to understand how comms teams handled the situation and what can be learnt for the future from a comms perspective.

Our research involved interviewing internal comms professionals to gain their first-hand experience of the event and how they managed comms from a crisis perspective. We take an in-depth look into each contributor’s crisis comms strategy, in terms of when they took action, the type of messaging that was relayed, the comms mediums used and the engagement level from employees. The research will follow a timeline, focusing on one company at a time to understand how crisis comms strategies changed as the months progressed.

4.0 The COVID-19 Timeline



5.0 Collaborator Perspectives





Ann-Marie Blake
*Global Communications Lead,
Tier One Bank*

At the time, the company was planning on hosting a number of global engagement events starting in China. The events were due to take place in January-March, however it was early January when the first rumblings of the virus began to surface.

“At this time, we didn’t appreciate the seriousness of the virus and thought we’d be able to move the event a few weeks into February.”

However, it began to turn around the time of Chinese New Year when the team in China were asked to work remotely for the foreseeable future.

“From our side (in the UK), we continued to plan to run a series of face to face events, however, there was a ban on travel to China, which soon extended to Hong Kong and Singapore, meaning we needed to re-think our approach. Our teams were working from home and to save bandwidth, we were limited in what we could do with video conferencing.”

Comms Messaging

Initially, the UK didn’t have a lot of visibility around how things were unfolding as the communications to impacted teams remained at a local/regional level focusing on operational details. Global communications were orientated around informing other colleagues to be sensitive to teams in the region who were working from home or at contingency sites.

Financial services are really hot on business continuity and contingency planning, ensuring that if anything happens, everyone knows where they need to be and what they need to do.

January Milestones

10th January 2020

The WHO published an official report on the virus (explaining how countries can detect, test and manage any possible cases)

28th January 2020

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises against all but essential travel to Mainland China

31st January 2020

The first two cases of COVID-19 in the UK are confirmed

“The comms began to elevate and took a more serious tone when travel restrictions became stricter. This is when it began to impact the whole business rather than just Asia. It started with ‘only travel if completely vital’, then ‘if you have to travel to Asia, self-isolate on your return’, then it was a complete travel ban to China, which quickly became a complete ban on all travel.”

The comms moved away from business continuity to instructional messaging, focusing on topics around travel restrictions, wellbeing guidance and where to find information.



Comms Mediums

To distribute the comms, teams were broken down via the chosen messaging, some continued to focus on business continuity whilst others began to focus on COVID-19 related comms.

The team utilised a range of internal comms techniques to relay the messaging to their thousands of team members.

Hub

Towards the end of January, the team created a central hub on the intranet that contained all information surrounding COVID-19, as a single source of the truth. It included a range of advice, from the government and the WHO. The hub included a range of business and health instructions such as avoiding contact or how to move to remote working.

Text

For all immediate information and instant updates like office closures, SMS texts were sent to all relevant staff.

Posters

For those who still needed to attend offices for essential reasons, posters were placed in ambient positions such as bathrooms with washing hands reminders.

Email

When dealing with a specific issue, emails were relayed to all relevant colleagues. For example, when responding to a crisis, like a confirmed case in an office, emails were sent to staff reassuring them and communicating instructions on floor closures and self-isolation.

Check-in Sessions

Managers have been holding check-in sessions with their teams via video. These conversations were very focused upon well-being.

Questions were being asked how they are coping with remote working, if they need help and if they have access to computers.



Howard Kraiss
Internal Communications Manager



Johnson Matthey is an international speciality chemicals and sustainable technologies company headquartered in the UK. It has more than 30 sites and locations across the world and over 15,000 members of staff.

Howard manages all communications and engagement activities for Johnson Matthey's biggest sector, Clean Air, coordinating and relaying comms messaging strategies across this global business.

At the beginning of February, it was business as usual. They had recently opened a brand-new plant in Poland and there were big plans to invite a number of senior signatories including high ranking Polish government and British Embassy officials, to the grand opening in April. In the first week of February, Howard had also planned a business trip to Japan.

China was off limits but travel elsewhere in Asia was not restricted. However, by the time they reached the end of the month, the situation had drastically shifted. The trip to Japan was off, with all travel to Asia now restricted, and travel anywhere was beginning to be questioned. Plans for the Polish site opening were soon to be put on hold.

Comms Messaging

Due to the international nature of JM, and with COVID-19 impacting different regions at different times, there had to be communication targeted appropriately for different locations. In February, there were more regional based comms related to COVID-19 in Asia, whereas Europe received a mixture of business as usual messages alongside a growing number of travel related instructional comms.

February Milestones

23rd February 2020

The DHSC confirms 12 total cases in the UK.

29th February 2020

Around 442,675 calls were made to NHS 111 in the last week of February.

"It was recently after Chinese New Year and we instructed the Chinese staff members to remain home for another week and not come back to work. There was a lot of Health and Safety related communication going out to that region as well. Aside from these, there was messaging to other locations telling them not to travel to China at the beginning of the month, which quickly changed to a full travel ban for Asia."



Comms Mediums

The following mediums were used to relay the specific messaging chosen for each region.

Via Leadership

For those staff based in factories, ability to reach via email is lower. Therefore, information was relayed by leadership members on the shop floor.

EHS Briefings

The team hosted EHS meetings to inform employees on the new changes to procedure and the social distancing instructions they must follow.

Microsoft Teams

Teams calls were chosen as a way to help build morale, helping teams connect, as it's the closest alternative to social interaction. They wanted to understand how employees were coping with remote working, if they need help or access to computers.

Emails

Emails were used to communicate key information on international travel for those based in other countries. Important HSE information was distributed to those in China alongside instructions for remote-based staff.



Jeremy Albert
*Operations Manager,
Tour Operator*

The company organises major airlines' tour options worldwide. They have a £100m turnover, over 70 members of staff and offices located in London and Manchester.

At this point, the possibility of going abroad was becoming very slim, with many locations already off limits. This instantly put immense pressure on the travel sector to both react to the changes and co-ordinate them to the customers who were jamming the phone lines.

"It was a difficult time, as soon as you put a strategy in place, it would change again. The strategy was changing on a daily basis. It was difficult to predict what to do next and it was becoming frustrating as we weren't able to offer real concrete advice."

"We were not even entertaining new business; we were purely dealing with existing bookings trying to refund or rearrange. Then we had the added complication of customers who were stuck in various destinations, the repatriation operation was as complicated as it was urgent. Then it was a case of availability on flights."

Jeremy was communicating with suppliers to understand what their new procedures were in order to make strategic decisions on behalf of the business and relay the information back to the staff.

Comms Messaging

"It was a mixture of trying to keep staff as informed as possible whilst looking after their welfare."

March Milestones

5th March 2020

Over 100 cases confirmed - first death

11th March 2020

The WHO officially classified the disease as a pandemic

16th March 2020

Boris Johnson advises all but non-essential travel within the UK and avoid contact

20th March 2020

Boris Johnson orders all cafes, restaurants, pubs, leisure facilities and schools to close

23rd March 2020

Government announces lockdown

On the welfare side, it was letting them know the managers were there to support them. It isn't nice dealing with customers shouting at you and around 40/50 calls waiting in line, so when they are dealing with a problematic call, they can assign it to their manager, helping to take the sting out of those difficult conversations."



Comms Mediums

The following mediums were used to relay the specific messaging chosen for each region.

Email

The predominant form of contact was via email. Jeremy emailed employees regarding any recent changes and redirected them back to the COVID-19 folder.

COVID-19 Folder

This was a dedicated folder that was created to host all the latest policy documents from airlines so staff had the most up to date information at all times that they could relay back to the customers.

Debrief Sessions

At the start of every day, the team began with a quick debrief to run through the activities for the day and ensure everyone was prepared.



Lisa Gubbings

Digital Communications Manager



The John-Lewis Partnership is a British company that operates John Lewis high-end department stores and Waitrose supermarkets. They have around 80,000 Partners and a £10 billion turnover.

“We had a watchful eye on COVID-19 quite early on, and we had groups already dedicating time to monitor the situation in January. We have overseas offices in Hong Kong, so it struck us earlier on. In normal business matters, we were just coming out of post-peak and preparing for the end of the financial year.”

“I think it was around the 15th when the Government advised against all non-essential activities. This is when we started to see a serious impact on Waitrose due to people panic buying and stock piling. We were experiencing shopping volumes larger than Christmas without the detailed preparation. All of a sudden it was a case of how we deal with this situation.

“Whereas in John Lewis it was more about following government guidelines to limit contact. We had to pause close contact services on our beauty counters and staff were no longer allowed to enter customer’s homes for services like kitchen installations. We were implementing interim measures to close parts of the stores. Between the two areas of the business, we had very different guidance going out at the same time.

“When John Lewis stores were officially told to close, it would have meant furloughing a huge proportion of the workforce. However, with such

March Milestones

5th March 2020

Over 100 cases confirmed - first death

11th March 2020

The WHO officially classified the disease as a pandemic

16th March 2020

Boris Johnson advises all but non-essential travel within the UK and avoid contact

20th March 2020

Boris Johnson orders all cafes, restaurants, pubs, leisure facilities and schools to close

23rd March 2020

Government announces lockdown

high demand in the Waitrose stores, we allowed some employees to continue working for that side of the business.”

Comms Mediums

Each member of the comms team was assigned a specific area of responsibility and each team was spinning out information for their given audience. To relay the messaging across both groups, a range of mediums were proposed.



Hub

Hosted on the intranet, the hub was designed to host all the information related to COVID-19, which was accessible to all 80,000 employees.

The hub was constantly being updated with the latest information, with around 30 updates per day at the peak. The hub was broken down by business area that hosted specific guidance for that audience. On the 15th when the hub was first launched, it had 75,000 views within the first week, with 60,000 partners accessing it (75%). In the first month of its launch, there were around 12,000 daily views. Between March and April, the hub received 180,000 views.

Feedback Form

To understand how people are interacting with the hub and what features they liked and disliked, the comms team sent a feedback form to all Partners, which received a 95% feedback rate. From this, they made amends to the design and layout to optimise user experience.

Email

Alongside the government updates, the comms team also sent out more strategic messages from senior leadership like updates from the Chairman. They would share their personal thoughts on what lockdown has meant for them, alongside thanks to all the partners who are working through this. There was also messaging around wellbeing.

Newsletters

Newsletters were sent out each day with all the latest changes to all the different areas of the business, redirecting them back to the hub. They refrained from sending multiple emails when new updates arose and focused on one to avoid losing engagement from Partners. For those that continued to work, they would receive updates around how stores could operate safely.

Keeping Connected Hub

The team also created a central space for keeping people connected, whilst working from home or for those furloughed.

- **Partnership Radio** - Once a week they would do shout outs of individuals and thank you to the teams. Any partner was able to send in a suggestion of someone they would like to nominate.
- **Virtual Exercise Classes**
- **Partnership Awards** – For the first time they held the awards as a virtual ceremony, with people presenting on the live stream.

“We wanted to make sure there was a balance between operational messaging and more supportive messages, so regardless of their situation they felt connected to the business. I think the big thing for me was that we tried a lot of new and different methods, which we wouldn’t have done if it wasn’t for the pandemic I think it pushed us to think outside the box and now we have a lot of different tools that we can use in the future.”

“Due to the varying and complex messaging, we wanted to create a central place that would host all the information and be a single source of truth.”

“Changes to policy and guidance were the biggest draw as employees are always interested in changes that impact them directly.”

“It was a manic time especially for those working on the shop floor. When the rest of the world is being told to stay at home and you have to continue going to work it can be difficult to process, so we wanted to be sure Partners felt supported.”



Laura Desert
Internal Communications Manager
CityFibre

CityFibre is the UK's largest alternative provider of wholesale fibre network infrastructure and the builder of Gigabit Cities.

Due to the foresight of their CEO, the internal comms team at CityFibre were already preparing for the possibility of a lockdown and developing a plan of action.

“Our CEO was aware of things early on. We were mindful that we needed to get ready and we were preparing ahead of many of the government guidelines. Our CEO had already asked us to set up a team to address any business continuity risks in relation to the situation. In this week we were already having daily calls with the dedicated team, that included members from HR, Internal Comms, IT, and Compliance, and was led by a member of the Executive Team.”

Preparing for the Crisis

“We ran a simulation as a drill for lockdown. We developed a hypothetical scenario where one of our employees had tested positive, meaning a confirmed case in an office. We asked people from three of our offices to work from home. We were planning this exercise and had an agile team leading the simulation, which meant we were able to make decisions quickly and prepare for what was becoming a very likely real-life scenario.

“The purpose of the simulation was really to test our ability to respond to a crisis and gain feed-

March Milestones

5th March 2020

Over 100 cases confirmed - first death

11th March 2020

The WHO officially classified the disease as a pandemic

16th March 2020

Boris Johnson advises all but non-essential travel within the UK and avoid contact

20th March 2020

Boris Johnson orders all cafes, restaurants, pubs, leisure facilities and schools to close

23rd March 2020

Government announces lockdown

back from employees to determine how they would be impacted if this was a real-life scenario. For example, we asked people to think about how their productivity would be impacted and if they might have issues with equipment and home set-up.”



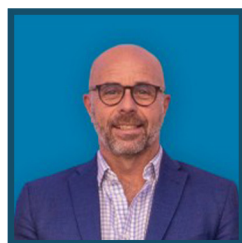
Simulation Process

To begin the first simulation, an email was sent to all applicable employees at 6:30 am which included instructions on how they should proceed.

“It explained that we were monitoring the COVID-19 situation very closely and as part of our precautionary measures we had decided to run a business continuity exercise. We were conducting this exercise to evaluate our business continuity plans in the event of a major viral outbreak. We created a hypothetical scenario to follow, and employees received communications throughout the day, telling them to read instructions carefully and take action when required.”

Following the simulation, we collected feedback from participating employees and found that, understandably, most of them did not access their work email before getting into the office, so they had missed the first email. In the following weeks, the response team ran a second simulation where they applied the lessons learned from this first drill.

“We actually ran a second simulation the following week. For this one, we trialled an SMS service which allowed us to text employees on their personal phones. Due to the character limit, this was a short message telling them to check their emails before coming into the office, but it was enough to reach more people in time.”



Ken Armistead

Director of Corporate Communications



PPG is an American Fortune 500 company that supplies paints, coatings and speciality materials globally. Headquartered in Pittsburgh and operates in over 70 countries.

Ken leads all employee communication, media relations and corporate social responsibility for the Europe, Middle East & Africa (EMEA) region.

The EMEA region for PPG consists of over 40 facilities and around 15,000 employees. When the pandemic broke out, the PPG team needed to develop messaging that resonated with a diverse audience and create content to engage different markets, given cultural and language challenges.

In April, PPG had temporarily closed many of their EMEA factories and were coordinating the closure of several more or at least reducing their capacity in response to the COVID-19. A lot of consideration had to be put into the communications strategies within the different countries in EMEA. In terms of plant closures specifically, they considered the following:

"First and foremost, many of our challenges were dictated by local government legalisation, so if the country went into complete lockdown such as the early cases in Italy and Spain, we would close factories in accordance with their guidelines. Secondly, we had to adapt our operations to reflect the changing demands in our markets. Some were flourishing in support of the pandemic and some were suffering as a result of the economic downturn around the world. Another driver was absenteeism, so if people were

April Milestones

3rd April 2020

NHS Nightingale Hospital opened - Excel London

8th April 2020

More than 9 million employees are expected to be furloughed under the government scheme

16th April 2020

Tom Moore completes his 100th lap and raises £25 million for the NHS. Confirmed cases surpasses 100,000

22nd April 2020

Matt Hancock announces 'we are at the peak' of the outbreak

taken ill or just suspected to be affected by the virus or shielding in isolation, then those plants were also impacted.

"Some of our business were experiencing an increase in demand due to their supply chain involving essential goods. Our packaging coatings business experienced increases in demand, which was being driven by higher demand for packaged food and beverage products. There were also higher levels of demand from DIY stores for paint, due to people being in lockdown and the increase in homes and garden DIY. So, we had a mixed range of impacts but the positives not compensating sufficiently for the negatives.

"Furthermore, we experienced many dilemmas at the time. For example, we have over 200 stores here in the UK and the customers were desperate for us to stay open and support their business, whereas we needed to follow government guidelines and protect our staff, so we had to take into account the situation and opinions of many stakeholders."

Comms Messaging

"In early April, we were really driving home the messaging around hygiene, social distancing

The Changing Face of Crisis Comms: A COVID-19 Retrospective

and protecting staff in a work environment. We then moved to a second phase of communications whereby employee engagement became another key driver for communications. By mid-April, we had many employees working remotely, some on furlough and others still working. We were sensitive to the fact that we were running the risk of leaving some employees disconnected. For example, our shared services team of around 600 employees in our Brno, Czech Republic, facility were all suddenly working from home, so we started engaging with them through our digital channels and proactively supporting their remote working capability and well-being.

"We were running various competitions such as best remote working photos with the funniest caption and baking competitions to keep morale going across the team in Brno. However, in the UK we had some people who couldn't be connected digitally, so we created weekly postal deliveries of newsletters to keep them informed and engaged. We had to adapt slightly to different countries, profiles and people.

"In April, the signs of recovery in China did create a sense of optimism in our messaging, because when we were going through some really tough weeks, China was beginning to emerge on the other side. So, we would relay positive messaging around how their facilities had returned to nearly full capacity. China also helped us in the sense of best practices when it came to minimising transmissions in the work environment."

Comms Mediums

The team utilised a wide range of communications channels to ensure they could reach all employees to drive home the health and hygiene messages and maintain high levels of engagement. Below are some of the channels used:

Hard copy documentation

Old school hard copy news bulletins worked well for the manufacturing sites in the UK, where news and information was delivered by post.

Email

For those based in office facilities and with good remote connectivity, like the team based in the Czech Republic, email was the most effective solution.

Social Media

The team leveraged company social media channels to drive engagement and enable employees to interact with content.

Posters

For sites that remained open, poster campaigns were used primarily to drive home the key messaging around health and safety guidelines, hygiene and social distancing.

Video Conference Calls

Every Tuesday morning the regional leadership conducted a conference call involving the top 250 leaders of the EMEA region. This ensured everyone was working in synergy and were kept informed on international changes, priorities and the business impact.

"We aimed to use as many different channels as possible to connect to people regardless of their circumstance. I also think the employees have acted very resourcefully, for example, I have seen plant managers that have been forced to work from home and creating video content for their staff."



Rachel Tolhurst
Head of Corporate Communications



Amey is a leading supplier of consulting and infrastructure support services in the UK and internationally. They have been in business for nearly 100 years and have over 16,000 team members across the UK.

"I would say things were starting to settle at this point and we were working on pieces around remote working and wellbeing, asking employees through pulse surveys how it has been working from home and how they would feel about returning to the office, which included around 6,000 employees."

"We started to notice that remote working was affecting people's wellbeing, they may be living in a shared house, trying to home-school children, or may be living on their own and missing the work environment. We found that 15-20% out of 2,500 respondents were really keen to get back to work and the rest were not interested in going back to work."

We were also looking into what would need to be done to prepare the offices for re-opening and how it would operate in terms of social distancing, it's like setting up in a new world."

Comms Mediums

The team at Amey delivered messaging using a combination of platforms to gain as much coverage as possible, alongside conducting surveys to gain insight from employees.

April Milestones

3rd April 2020

NHS Nightingale Hospital opened - Excel London

8th April 2020

More than 9 million employees are expected to be furloughed under the government scheme

16th April 2020

Tom Moore completes his 100th lap and raises £25 million for the NHS. Confirmed cases surpasses 100,000

22nd April 2020

Matt Hancock announces 'we are at the peak' of the outbreak

Web Portal

They set up a web portal which every employee could access, it included a COVID-19 section which contained:

- Remote working information
- How to manage a team during a pandemic
- Wellbeing & safety
- Community volunteering section
- Educational resources for those home-schooling children
- Q&A section

Yammer

They used the internal social network platform, Yammer to relay messaging to employees but also to conduct Q&A sessions with chief executives.



Pulse Surveys

They are conducting monthly surveys to gauge how employees felt around working from home and the possibility of going back into the office. This was published on the intranet, Yammer, text and their portal.

Emails & Text

Both these communication forms were used to inform employees of any updates and redirect them back to the long form content that was hosted on the portal.

"During this period, the engagement across all channels increased. It was a very immediate topic that people genuinely wanted to know about and understand how it impacted them. In the first three weeks, the portal received 25,000 hits, our CEO video call received 4 times the usual amount of people dialling in and our Yammer usage went up by 4,000%."

Comms Messaging

At that point in time, there was a range of messaging being relayed to employees. Some of the core topics were:

Testing

"Information around testing came out that week, but it was incomplete and some details were unclear such as, would the individual arrange it themselves or does the company organise it for them? Also, in terms of evidence for sick notes, you were only able to obtain a sick note from a doctor. It was a case of catching up with the government which wasn't always easy and communicating it back to employees as clearly as possible."

Positivity

"We were continuing to deliver positive stories across social media and internal comms. For example, our waste collection team experienced a dramatic increase in demand. In a sense, it was like doing the Christmas collection every single week. There was also a lot of positivity from the public; messages or rainbows in windows and a lot more gratitude and kindness towards the front-line workers, which was lovely."

"We also shared many stories around our community impact, where our people were going above and beyond to do extra things in their communities. Our parent company Ferrovial started the 'Ferrovial Together COVID-19 Fund' which donated millions globally. They donated money to numerous charities such as the Trussel Trust and a research institute in Oxford working on a vaccine. This developed positive stories for both external and internal purposes and really gave our people a sense of pride in our public service."

"We were monitoring the positive stories across social media and our benchmark for engagement is around 1.7% and we had been getting an average of 6% (over 42% for a Facebook post thanking our frontline workers!) and over a million impressions on the content we have put out so far."

Business as Usual

"We did an online award winner announcement for an internal engineering design award. We also have an initiative called 'Directors' Hotline' which is where for each business unit, two hours a week an executive member is on duty to answer calls."



Steven Murgatroyd
Internal Communications Manager



AXA UK & Ireland is part of a French multinational insurance firm that engages in global insurance, investment management and other financial services.

During June, AXA UK&I planned to re-open 5 of their offices to a smaller number of employees, 300 in total. It was especially important for those who had joined the company since the beginning of lockdown and still required vital face-to-face training to properly fulfil their role. To conduct these training sessions, the employees attended the office for half a day and then left to continue working from home.

“The business is running as well as it possibly can be with everyone working from home so there’s no rush in bringing people back. We made a commitment early on that anyone who is unable to work from home will continue to receive full-pay and we didn’t furlough any employees.”

“We have found that some people are desperate to come back, and some people are happy to continue working from home for the foreseeable future.”

Comms Messaging

“We assigned a senior manager to each office and classified them as the site lead. They became the main point of communication. Emails were sent to these employees around how they could support employees in the office. We also created ‘Welcome Back’ packs which included images on all the changes such as designated desks and routes. These were created on a local level for each individual office.”

June Milestones

8th June 2020

New quarantine rules for those entering the UK (self-isolate for 14 days)

15th June 2020

Re-opening of non-essential retail stores alongside outside attractions such as zoos and theme parks

19th June 2020

The UK’s COVID-19 Alert Level lowered from Level 4 to 3

29th June 2020

Leicester was the first city in the UK to be set back into lockdown

Aside from these, we also created an online L&D training module for everyone who’s going back into the office so they are aware of all the new rules and how to follow them. It explains what we will be doing as an employer and what is expected of employees.”

“Every two or three days we have a crisis call with the Health & Safety team and HR team where we map out key areas and receive updates on where they are and what they have been working on. At the same time, the Management Committee met two/three times a week to discuss a broad range of things.”



Comms Mediums

The team created a clear strategy around which channels would be used for each type of communication, below are the core channels that were chosen.

Email

Emails were predominately used for big announcements.

“One of our recent announcements was that we gave everyone 10 extra holiday days to use for volunteering. We chose email as the engagement level is slightly higher.”

Sharepoint Site

They developed a central Sharepoint site that hosted all relevant and updated information.

“We’ve got around 8,500 employees who can access our Intranet and over 7,000 have interacted with the site.”

Video

“Our greatest success in terms of channel we’ve used is video. So, we started to create vlogs with the CEO. They’ve gone down really well with employees because they get to see the CEO in his own space and understand and connect with them bit more because suddenly, they are in the house. It was more of a general update around what he had been doing that week, such as the meetings he’d attended and anything related to wellbeing including some impromptu interruptions from his daughter!”

Wellbeing App

The company has released a wellbeing app over the course of this crisis, approved by the NHS. They have also given all employees access to an app which allows appointments with a doctor at any time over video. Employees had an unlimited number of appointments they could use over a specific time period.



Toby Higgins
Head of Communications
NetworkRail

Network Rail owns, operates and develops Britain's railway infrastructure. They manage over 20,000 miles of track, 30,000 bridges, tunnels and viaducts and thousands of signals, level crossing and stations.

Network Rail have an expansive communication division that consists of 350 comms professionals across the country. In his role covering Yorkshire and the North East, Toby works on the relaying messaging to thousands of employees and in the pandemic, worked continuously to keep both employees and external stakeholders up to date with latest news and guidelines.

As part of this, the team coordinates both external and internal messaging, which in normal circumstances would usually correlate. However, during this month the messaging was very much at opposite ends of the spectrum.

External

"Externally we were still trying to communicate to passengers the rules involving public transport. On the 15th of June, the government announced that face masks must be worn on public transport. So, there was a big push around public awareness, there was a lot of visual reminders around stations including posters and social distancing stickers. We also began to increase the number of trains that were running in order to abide by social distancing."

Internal

"COVID-19 wasn't a major focus in internal comms for June and it was only being managed by a smaller dedicated team by that point. We had then refined it down to one weekly update

June Milestones

8th June 2020

New quarantine rules for those entering the UK (self-isolate for 14 days)

15th June 2020

Re-opening of non-essential retail stores alongside outside attractions such as zoos and theme parks

19th June 2020

The UK's COVID-19 Alert Level lowered from Level 4 to 3

29th June 2020

Leicester was the first city in the UK to be set back into lockdown

that included the latest COVID-19 information, with the intranet still being updated daily. The focus became around a company reorganisation that was planned in March but was postponed due to the pandemic. The other main focus in our messaging was around returning to the offices. We wanted to set a level of expectation around when people may return and what people can expect when they do and try to help prepare them. We were also looking into how we can replicate some of the aspects that are being lost when remote working. Employees were mentioning that they were missing out on the cascade of information that they would pick up on in the office."



Comms Mediums

To cascade the chosen messaging to both external and internal stakeholders, specific mediums were chosen that would be most effective for the chosen audience.

Internal

Intranet

The intranet was used to host all relevant updates around COVID-19 and the company as a whole. It was updated daily to ensure it was in accordance with the latest government guidelines. They had lots of policies and processes that needed to change and evolve, so they hosted all this documentation in one place online.

Teams

Microsoft Teams was used as the primary communication for team meetings. The comms team coordinated specific messaging and information to line managers which was then cascaded down to their teams.

Company-Wide Emails

Before the pandemic, Network Rail sent emails out locally with separate regions receiving different messaging. However, to create unison they opted for company-wide emails that were sent to all 40,000 employees. It also offered a great way to signpost employees back to the intranet where the majority of content was held. They experienced increased levels of engagement during lockdown months, with a rise of 15% in open rates.

Conference Calls

To reach a large proportion of the workforce at once, the company ran a conference call on a hosted facility where 3-4 people ran the discussion that was outputted to a mass audience of 150 people. This platform removes interruptions from guests, and they can request to ask questions. They found this was the most effective medium for co-ordinating messaging to large audiences.

External

Posters

To maintain social distancing and ensure people wear face coverings on trains, posters are used across both the stations and on the trains themselves to increase awareness.

Face-to-Face Briefings

The company conducted face-to-face briefings with masks and social distancing in place with politicians and senior stakeholders to demonstrate the latest changes such as the new railway route in Middlesbrough.

"I would say that email was the most effective as this is the primary form of communication staff are used to receiving. We found conference calls to be more effective than Teams for larger groups as people begin to disconnect where there is more than 10 people, and it can be difficult to engage people."

6.1 Reactionary

Although the official lockdown wasn't announced until the 23rd of March 2020 in the UK, COVID-19 was spreading in Asia as early as November 2019. From insight gained through our interviews, we've highlighted the key dates when COVID-19 first impacted our collaborator's businesses and if these companies took proactive steps ahead of government guidelines.

December 2019

Jeremy Albert, Operations Manager at Tour Operator was already dealing with COVID-19 related cancellations

..... **15th February 2020**

COVID-19 was first being mentioned in comms conversations

24th February 2020

PPG - COVID-19 was first mentioned in business calls

..... **25th February 2020**

Axa has the first covid-19 comms meeting

13th March 2020

Refinitiv closed all offices

..... **16th March 2020**

'Tier One Bank' stopped all business travel

16th March 2020

Johnson Matthey & Network Rail moved their offices remote-based

..... **19th March 2020**

John Lewis suspended all home services

6.0 Collaborator Comparisons

This section of the research will be comparing the impact COVID-19 had on the different industries from a first-hand perspective and investigating the professional's future predictions for their businesses and more specifically, their comms.

From the timeline, you can see that the travel sector was the first to experience challenges due to the pandemic. At this point, the tour operator interviewed was dealing with alterations and cancellations of holidays in the Asia region.

"We first started dealing with problems related to COVID-19 in December, but it was just focused in China and other bordering countries at this point. We had to be reactionary. As soon as we had an indication of a location being impacted, we needed to identify what sort of bookings we had in that part of the world. So, we had to instantly put in place internal policies so staff would be prepared to handle the situation."

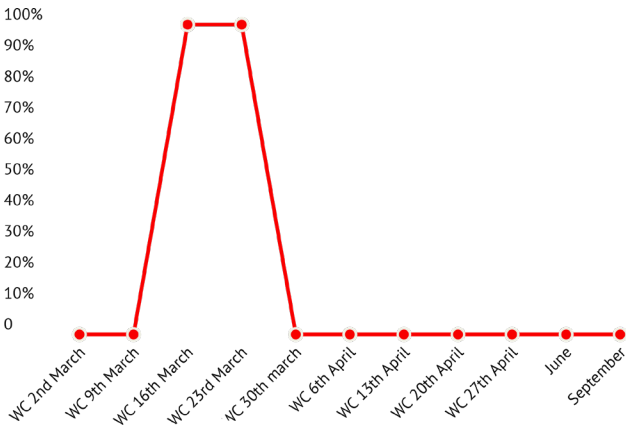
"When COVID-19 started to shut down the entire world, the policies were changing every few hours." – Jeremy Albert, Tour Operator

As a company with many international locations across Europe The Middle East and Africa, PPG was dealing with the pandemic's impact earlier on, and from the dates, you can see just how quickly the situation escalated. From the first mention of COVID-19 in late February, to closing locations in Italy in mid-March, then one week later complete lockdown in the UK.

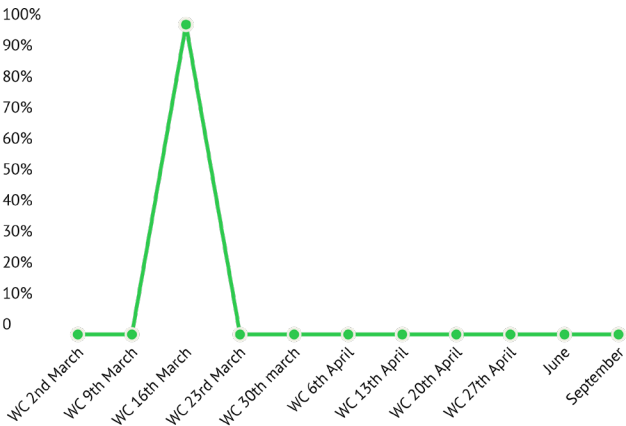
6.2 Peak of the Comms

We asked all the respondents: ‘When was the busiest time in terms of workload between January and June?’

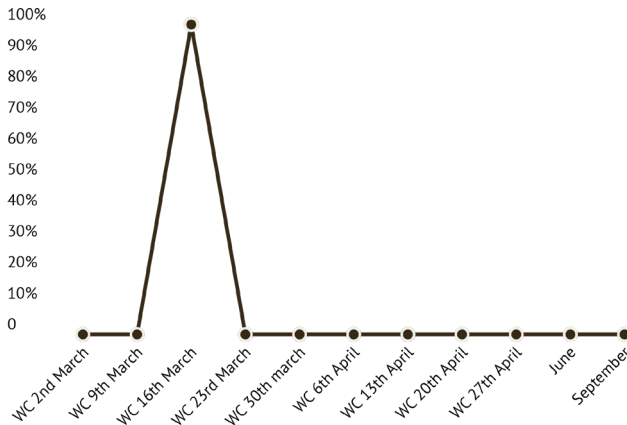
Tier One Bank



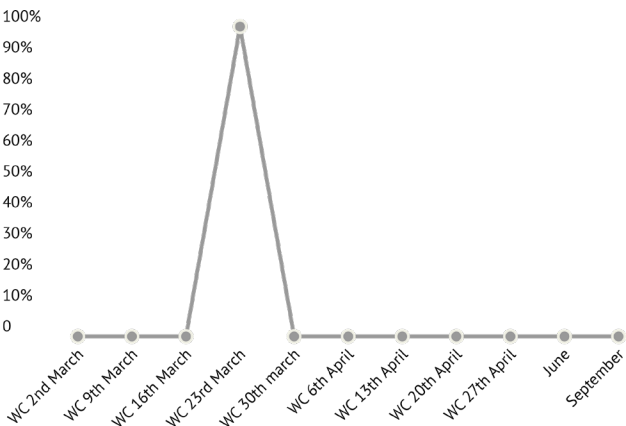
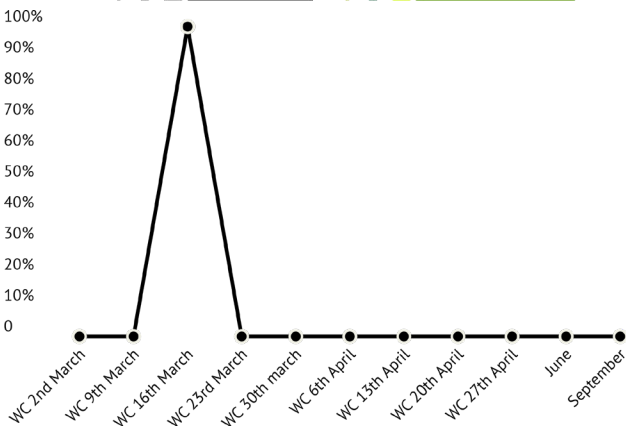
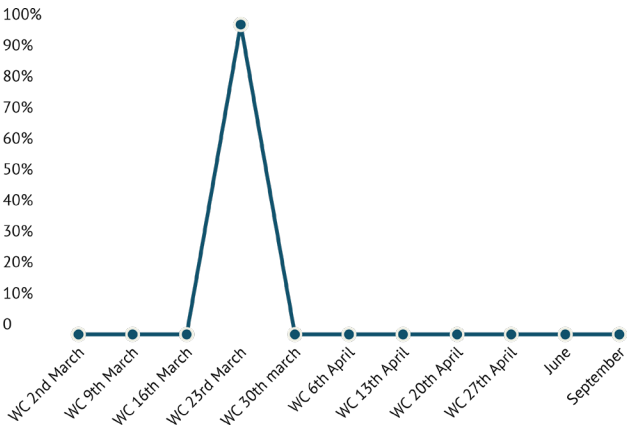
CityFibre



Tour Operator



Johnson Matthey



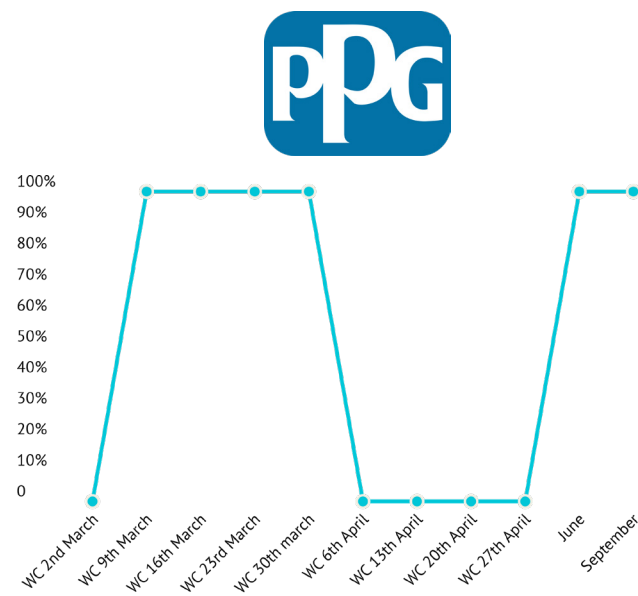
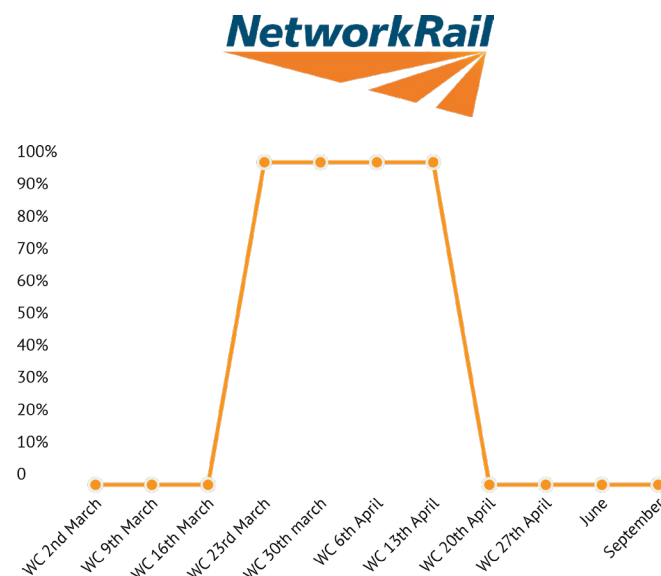
“I can recall a web conference on the 24th of February and one of the questions was around COVID-19 because our Chinese business was in the middle of the outbreak and the facility was closed down during February.”

“In Europe, Italy was the country where the first plant was temporarily shut down in mid-March.”
– Ken Armistead, PPG

As the situation escalated at such a rate, many of the companies had no option but to be reactive and respond to the government guidelines that were constantly evolving. Now that the dust has started to settle, the comms professionals are taking the situation into their own hands and planning to be proactive in the months ahead.

“I think we were definitely very reactive to begin with; but we also tried to be proactive where we could be. We wrote a lot of draft version of comms ready for when the Government announced school closures, lockdown etc. It meant we could move quickly.

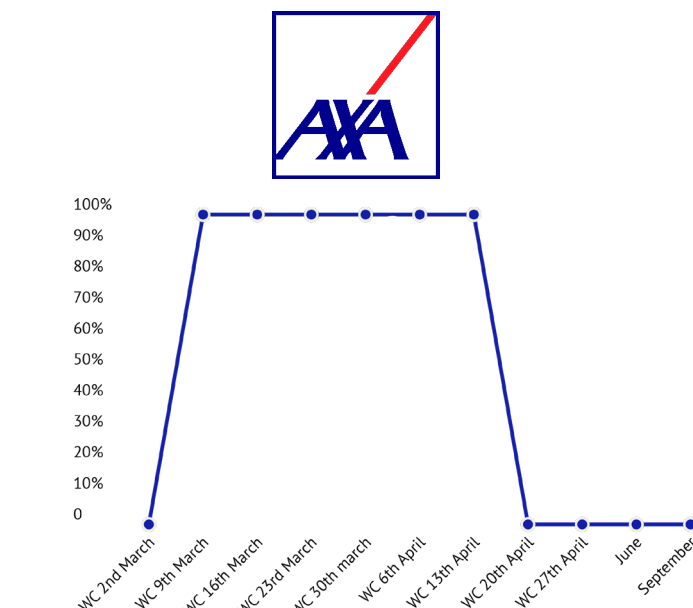
“When school closures were announced, we were able to get comms out within an hour to confirm our position to employees and what it meant for them. We are now in a fully proactive position where we are planning a four-phased approach to fully re-opening offices and how to communicate these to the team with a clear approach around channels.”
- Steven Murgatroyd, AXA



As predicted, many of the comms professionals were busiest following the week of lockdown. During this period, the government was releasing hundreds of updates and documentation for each specific industry. It was the comms team's responsibility to review the updates and understand exactly what applied to their business and determine their response.

"At this point we sent 250 pieces of communication over 75 days, with a least one email a day."
— Steven Murgatroyd, AXA

"The real impact started when the virus became more widespread in Italy. In the second week of March, it had escalated to all of Italy, by the third week it was affecting all European



countries. At this point, we were dealing with around 1,400 refunds in one week." — Jeremy Albert, Tour Operator

"Many of the Government updates weren't released until later in the day, so we published content the same night around 10pm so people would be informed by the next morning and in the case of lockdown we sent messages that night so people wouldn't come into the office the next morning." — Rachel Tolhurst, Amey

Ken from PPG raised an interesting perspective; that rather than just that one peak, they experienced three notable spikes in comms, one of which is still to come.

"I would say there have been multiple phases, one of which, we're still in now. The first phase was around keeping people safe, the second phase was around engagement and the third phase will be more focused around business sustainability and preparing for the future. Each of these I would consider a peak in comms, each lasting a number of weeks. These phases also acted like a wave across Europe when each country moved into each one of these phases separately." — Ken Armistead, PPG

Primary Steps & Focus

The weeks leading up to and preceding lockdown caused major disruptions to businesses. The comms teams had to establish how they were going to adapt and ensure all employees were informed on what needed to happen. This was a huge undertaking as many of these companies had to move all of their offices to be remote-based or continue key worker operations. For many, these messages were going out to thousands of employees.

"When working with such specialist chemicals and precious metals, you can't just flick a switch and instantly shut a plant down. At one plant they had around 120 steps to undertake to a safe closure, so a skeleton staff had to go in on shifts to safely shut down operations. This meant additional communication for those that continued to work and go into the factory compared to those that were immediately able to work from home."
— Howard Krais, Johnson Matthey

"For the first month, in March it was quite difficult to try and establish a standpoint as there were people working from home whilst others had to continue to work onsite."
— Toby Higgins, Network Rail

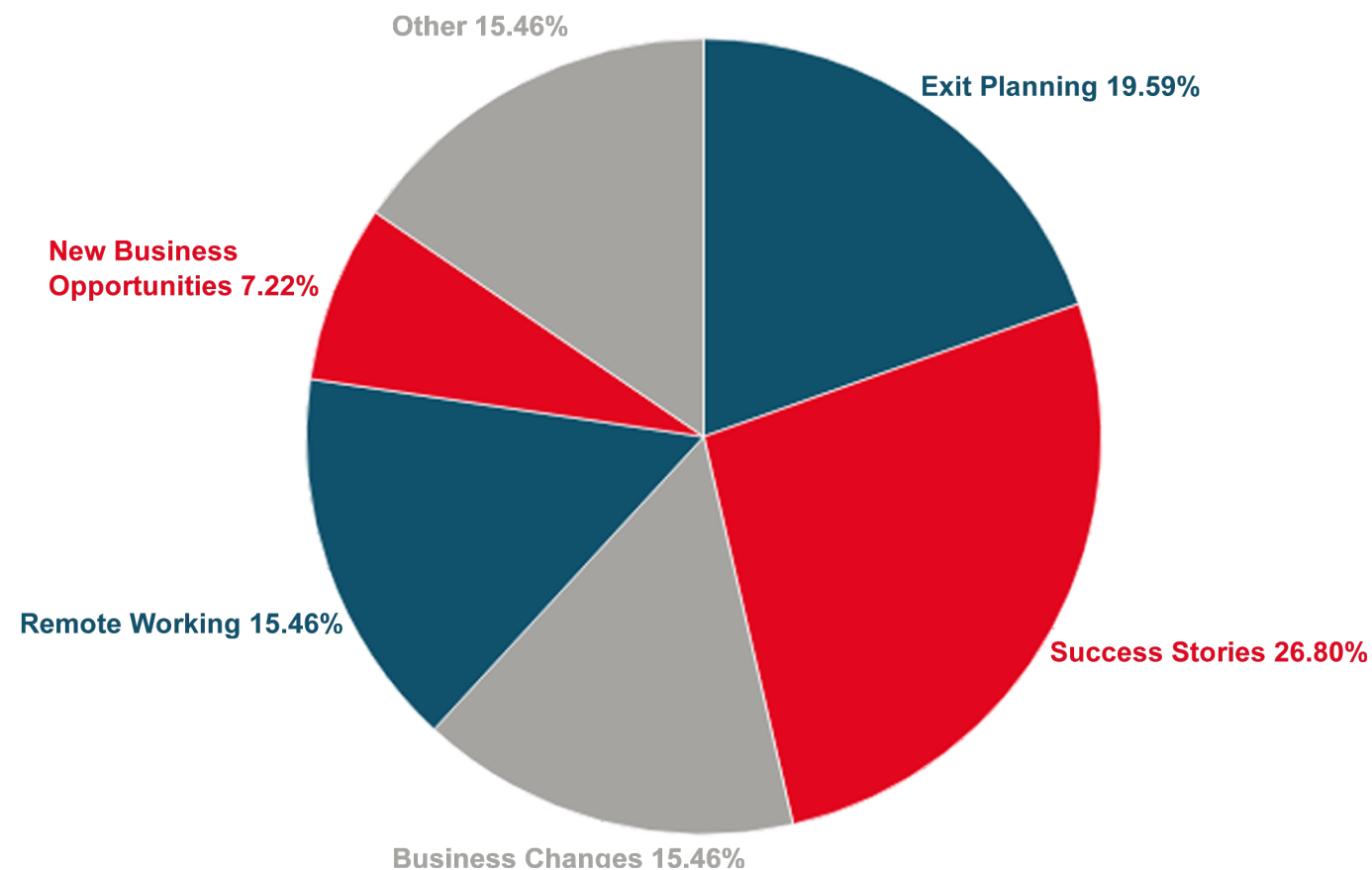
"The IT department did amazing things enabling desktop computers to be taken home and refurbishing old laptops. There was a massive movement of communication around moving everyone to home-based working, alongside a lot of reassurance and messages from leadership." — Rachel Tolhurst, Amey

“At the beginning of the year, only 30% of our employees could work from home, as we weren’t a massively laptop-based culture, whereas now it’s 96%.” – Steven Murgatroyd, AXA

Another interesting insight that came from this question was how this pandemic has presented some new business opportunities that they can now pursue as a new revenue stream.

“On both sides of the business we have seen a drastic increase in our online services, and I think that will continue. Moving our home services to virtual appointments has really taken off. For the first time ever, Waitrose received 150,000 orders in one week. The more delivery slots we offer, the more they are being booked, showing real growth for online deliveries. People are changing their shopping habits. For John Lewis, going online was a necessity, but for Waitrose food deliveries, it’s a choice. I think there will be stories around how we’ve adapted our business offerings to fit the new environment.” – Lisa Gubbings, John Lewis Partnership

6.3 Story Predictions



To understand how the comms messaging would develop over the coming months, we asked the collaborators to predict the type of themes they expect to see within their comms stories

From the graph, you can see that many of the contributors are planning on developing messaging around ‘success stories’ and the positive events that have happened across the business.

“We will continue publishing positive stories to keep up morale and engagement.”
– Ken Armistead, PPG

“I think we will continue to run positive stories, especially about our public service, the ways we are helping communities and helping the UK get back up and running again.” – Rachel Tolhurst, Amey

“Some of our people in Macedonia have been using 3D printing to design face masks and

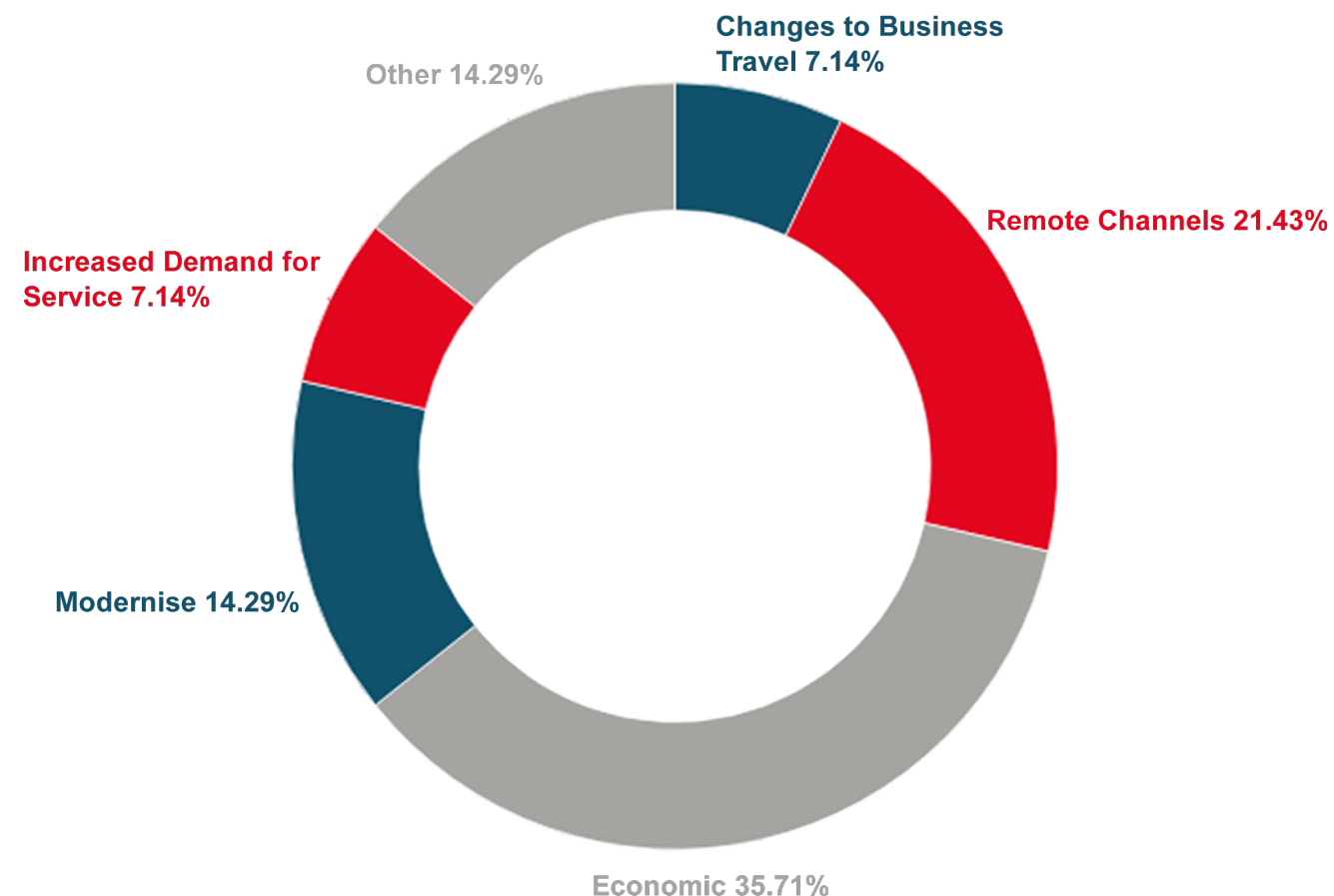
other PPE. This is a great example of a story we could publish to demonstrate how our company and staff have been helping local communities.” – Howard Kraiss, Johnson Matthey

Another common theme that appeared within the research was messaging around re-opening offices and changing their operating model to be more flexible in terms of remote working. Many larger companies still don’t plan to return to the office until the new year as their workplaces host hundreds of members of staff.

“I think we will change the way we work and introduce a working from home policy. I think we’ll communicate to people that the company will become a lot more forward thinking in that respect.” – Toby Higgins, Network Rail

“We ran a company-wide survey to understand what people wanted to do in terms of returning to the office. The feedback was interesting, as many people said they’d prefer to work from home in the future.” – Laura Desert, City Fibre

6.4 Impact on the Industry



There is not one industry that has not been impacted by the pandemic in one way or another.

With so many businesses forced to close, there's been a subsequential economic impact. We investigated from a first-hand perspective how those involved felt the pandemic had impacted their industry. The economic impact was a core theme that appeared within the answers and some industries took a substantial hit.

On his reaction to the question, Ken Armistead, PPG said: *"Our industry has been affected dramatically, with the general impact on global economies, the reduction in industrial output and a reduction in travel to name but a few, but some sectors are impacted more than others."*

Another business in the study, whose supply chain sells into the automotive sector is Johnson Matthey: *"We had to shut down 80% of our factories. You can see the impacts on the automotive sector, and as part of that supply chain, we cannot be immune to that. I think there's*

a very tangible economic impact and how we respond to that is going to be really important."
– Howard Krais, Johnson Matthey

The travel sector has been described as one of the worst hit industries during this pandemic. With complete suspension to holidays and non-essential travel there is no opportunity for income.

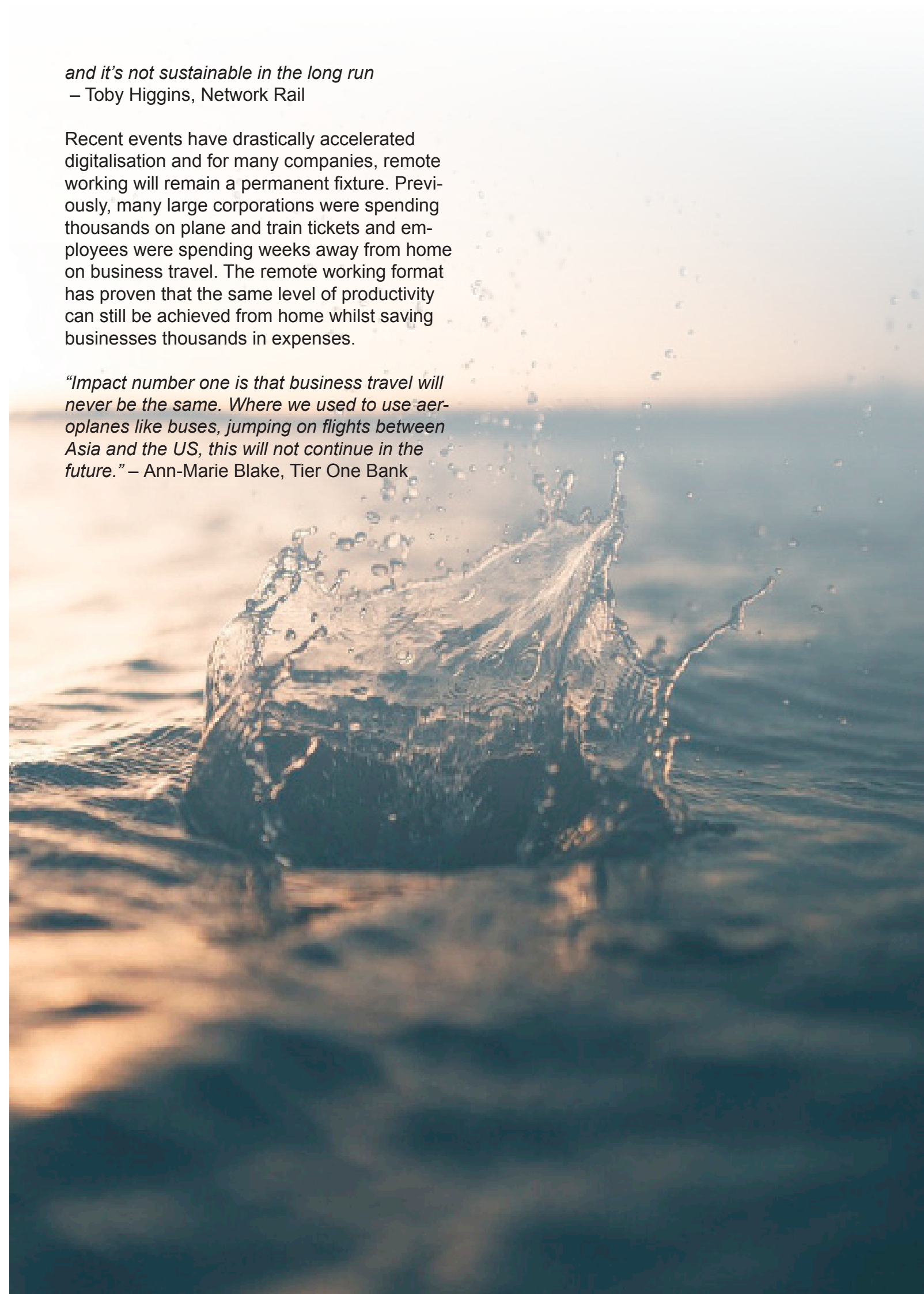
"Nearly killed it. We have only just come through the Thomas Cook scenario, strikes and the collapse of Flybe right into this." – Jeremy Albert, Travel Operator

"While we are running close to the number of trains we were pre-COVID-19, passenger numbers are still way down at commuter times - albeit they are starting to grow slowly, particularly around evenings and weekends as the leisure sectors have reopened. . I think there is going to be a massive change with regards to how the industry operates. The government continues to spend billions propping up the transport sector

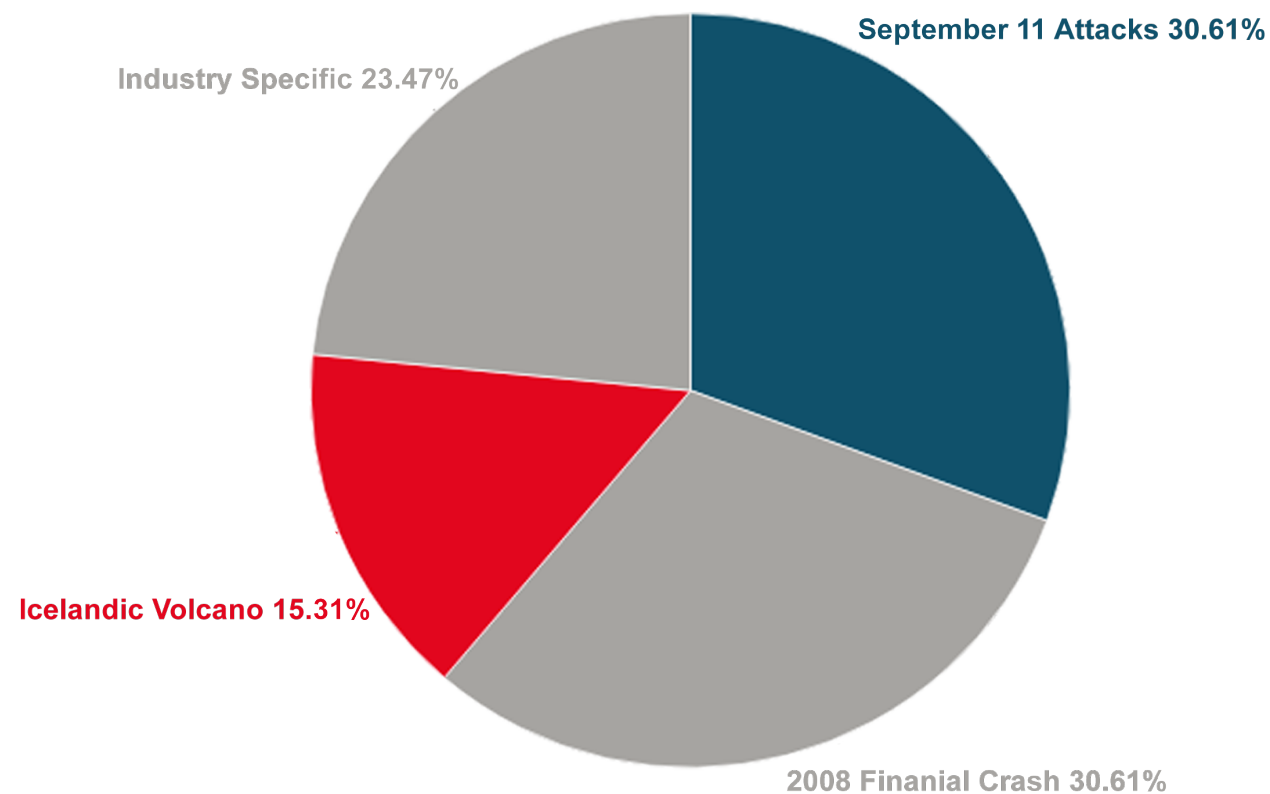
and it's not sustainable in the long run
– Toby Higgins, Network Rail

Recent events have drastically accelerated digitalisation and for many companies, remote working will remain a permanent fixture. Previously, many large corporations were spending thousands on plane and train tickets and employees were spending weeks away from home on business travel. The remote working format has proven that the same level of productivity can still be achieved from home whilst saving businesses thousands in expenses.

"Impact number one is that business travel will never be the same. Where we used to use aeroplanes like buses, jumping on flights between Asia and the US, this will not continue in the future." – Ann-Marie Blake, Tier One Bank



6.5 Comms to Liken



The pandemic was truly a black swan event and although no comms crisis can truly compare, we wanted to understand how COVID-19 likened to other crises they have dealt with in the past.

"I have never dealt with a crisis like this. From Christmas level shopping volumes and the increase in online shopping crashing websites to the closure of John Lewis stores, - each of these would have normally been a crisis in itself." – Lisa Gubbings, John Lewis Partnership

"We are in a perpetual crisis, moving from one thing to the next, but never had anything to this scale. It is the uniqueness of sending everyone home that sets it apart."

– Toby Higgins, Network Rail

"This pandemic is nothing like I have ever seen before. The main difference between each of these crises is you can't predict what is going to happen next. For now, the world has stopped." - Ann-Marie Blake, Tier One Bank

Although everyone agreed that this was a truly unique crisis, there were some similarities in the responses around large-scale crises they had been involved with. From the graph, you can see that 9/11 and the 2008 Financial Crash were the most frequent responses, which is unsurprising due to their global and lasting impact.

"I go back to 9/11 which is one of the worst situations I have ever had to deal with. Anything that happens elsewhere in the world has an impact on travel, so we are used to dealing with problems. Yet, we have never had a situation where no-one can travel."

- Jeremy Albert, Tour Operator



7.0 On Reflection

This pandemic is a crisis like no other and will be studied and analysed for years to come. From a comms perspective, it will be a learning curve that will influence and drive how comms professionals react to crises in the future.

Central Point for Communication

This pandemic escalated at such a pace and there were so many external factors at play that's why it was easy to get lost. It's integral to implement a crisis-response team that responds to the changes, filters business-specific information and creates a strategy that will communicate all essential information to employees.

Whilst many of the contributors used different methods, this is one factor that remained the same. They each created a central area for communication to be managed. Each company developed chains of command, some had team members that solely dealt with COVID-19 updates and at the peak, they held daily crisis meetings to review the latest information and develop a plan.

For example, Refinitiv had a team of three people that were purely dedicated to COVID-19 related comms and they became the central point for other comms team members. Network Rail used their pre-established hierarchy structure for messaging so there was an instant chain of command.

Quick Thinking

No test, simulation or contingency plan truly fit this event and initially, the teams were being led by outside influences. This meant that they had to think quick on their feet.

The challenge presented by the pandemic can be used as a lesson for the future and improvements will inevitably emerge, so they can refine their processes. Once the crisis has come to an end, it will be important to review actions and strategies taken throughout and seek feedback from staff. The interviewees were already discussing sitewide surveys around how employees felt about their approach during the pandemic. Some had outreached to employees already or planned to in the coming weeks, so they can collate the results and critique their strategy.

Out of the Box

From the discussions, it became apparent that many of them had stepped outside of their normal realm and had begun using new methods, mediums and new content ideas that they hadn't explored before the pandemic.

Aside from the normal email and text, comms professionals had started to use video calls, conference calls, Yammer and central online hubs.

Due to the pandemic, the office atmosphere had been lost and a lot of people felt disconnected. There was a huge focus across the contributors to really drive engagement and think of new, fun stories and activities that helped to recreate the office environment from home.

Some of the ideas included:

- Exercise classes
- Best home office competitions
- A company radio station
- Home schooling sessions
- Wellbeing apps

The team at John Lewis even developed a 'Keeping Connected Hub' that was a central space dedicated to keeping people connected and hosted positive stories and business updates in a social environment.

Wellbeing

The pandemic, of course, has been taxing and has impacted many people's mental health. Many of the comms professionals took this into consideration and a common topic throughout their messaging was around welfare and ensuring employees were looked after during lockdown. This was both from a health and safety perspective alongside mental wellbeing.

One of the contributors held check-in-sessions between managers and team members that were focused on well-being, seeing how employees were coping and if they needed any assistance.



7.0 Conclusion

The global pandemic demonstrates how vital it is to have an effective crisis comms strategy because without one, everything begins to fall apart. In any situation you need unity, so when everyone is completely detached, this becomes even more vital. Without a constant supply of updates and information, people become disconnected from the business, which could result in panic, employees working in separate directions or losing motivation and productivity.

When dealing with a crisis, leadership needs to look at internal communication from the perspective of their employees and have empathy. The communication must be timely, transparent and frequent. In a crisis, the team will be handling an influx of questions, so they must ensure the communication strategy answers these queries and provides reassurance.

Employees are a business's most important asset and that needs to be reflected in internal comms.

“Communication is really critical. In times of crisis, there needs to be honest, authentic and open communication. That is what we tried to do, we tried to connect with as many people as possible, in an authentic and honest way.”

– Ken Armistead, PPG

The Changing Face of Crisis Comms: A COVID-19 Retrospective

A definitive account of the pioneering strategies implemented by the leading comms professionals at the heart of the UK's core industries.

HALSTON MARKETING



International Association
of Business Communicators
UK & Ireland