

PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN TIME OF COVID-19 NAVIGATING A NEW REALITY

When the news of first cases of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China hit the media in late November 2019, few could have imagined that in just over four months almost all of Europe would be in lockdown with people being ordered to stay at home and economic activity almost completely frozen.

IMPACT ON EU PUBLIC AFFAIRS

As Covid-19 spreads across Europe, bringing with it devastating human loss, European governments put the lives and safety of their citizens first by adopting restrictive measures in an effort to contain the pandemic.

In Brussels, the European institutions followed suit, with the European Parliament slowly reducing its activities from the beginning of March. Soon after, all European institutions instructed their employees to stay home. Life and doing business in Brussels changed overnight. Flagship policy priorities such as the European Green Deal, the Industrial Strategy, the Circular Economy Action Plan and the wider digital package took a back seat to the need for an EU-wide effort to tackle the public health threat and economic fallout from Covid-19. The policy agenda narrowed. Meetings and events were postponed or cancelled.

While it is hard to say when regular business activities will return, what is clear is that even once we have successfully emerged from the Covid-19 health crisis, the social and economic impact will linger for a long time, bringing with it new priorities and ideas forward.

As the situation progresses, European institutions are finding ways to adapt: the Council changed its rule of procedure to allow for decisions to be made via written procedure. The European Parliament adjusted its procedures to enable remote voting in the plenary. Across all the institutions, videoconferencing replaced meetings in person.

Public health remains a top priority, and a few initiatives, e.g. the consultation on the Digital Single Act or GDPR review, have already been postponed.

However, with time the institutional agenda will try to find its way back to a changed reality. Already today, there are voices arguing in favour of moving forward with the European Green Deal and putting it at the centre of the EU's economic recovery.

As we ease into this new reality, the European Public Affairs community is trying to support its business objectives while finding new ways of working and communicating on public policies. Some trends become progressively evident as the unprecedented lockdown advances.

CRISES CATALYSE CHANGE

The greatest social changes emerge from global crises. The current situation could have the potential to transform the way Public Affairs is approached in Brussels and elsewhere.

As Public Affairs professionals, we need to be open to changing the way we communicate not just with decision and policy makers but with society as a whole. We need to challenge ourselves and go beyond the established practices and methods we have relied on so far.

While in-person contact will remain important – and we will all be craving it after a long lockdown period – we will see remote stakeholder meetings, virtual conferences and events, endure well beyond the lockdown and most likely become the norm.

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NAVIGATING A NEW REALITY

A NEW SENSE OF PUBLIC GOOD

Over the last few years Weber Shandwick has promoted a new approach to Public Affairs, drifting away from ‘generating direct influence’ to ‘driving change through value generation. We are convinced that the emergence of a new sense of social belonging and public good – the general support for healthcare professionals expressed every day, in every city is a clear testimony – will prove this approach right.

Even more so than today, companies will be expected to showcase their contribution to society beyond the generation of wealth or employment. In this sense, positioning a specific business or sector as a generator of public benefits will be essential to its efforts to drive policy change. From a practical perspective, companies will be expected to contribute positively to policy-making, instead of trying to block decisions.

CORPORATE NARRATIVES WILL NEED TO ADAPT

Mitigating the impacts of the crisis and contributing to the social and economic recovery will top the institutional agenda for months and years to come. However, European institutions will press on with the delivery of their flagship initiatives – the Green Deal, Circular Economy, Sustainable Finance, Digital Strategy – alongside specific programmes to foster a rapid recovery.

Against this framework, companies and businesses will need to incorporate their contribution to the economic and social recovery into their messaging.

In the same way that climate change topped policy priorities and public concerns, leading all companies to become vocal on the issue, companies active in the public policy arena will be asked to elaborate on their respective role in tackling the crisis, as well as on their efforts to contribute to the coming recovery. This should be done with a certain degree of humility, carefully calibrating the importance that a given company or sector actually has on these fronts.

TIME TO ADAPT

Contrary to what could have been expected, the lockdown did not bring about a period of quiet allowing for deep introspection and wide-ranging strategic reviews. While these exercises are taking place, it is important that they happen in parallel to fast decision-making and efforts to adapt to a very complex new reality.

This adaptation to changes, which are likely to remain once economic activity resumes, should include a diversification of the channels Public Affairs professionals traditionally deploy in Brussels. Now that the potential of virtual meetings and events are being fully tested by necessity, we hope to see an increased use of these ‘new’ – and more cost-efficient – platforms replacing in-person gatherings. In the same vein, the value of digital communications in the field of Public Affairs in Brussels has become an unquestionable truth, making it necessary for all stakeholders active in the EU policy arena to equip themselves with all the assets, tools and resources necessary to deploy fully integrated campaigns.

Furthermore, these times of unprecedented crisis show that employee engagement can play a fundamental role in consolidating company culture and collective responsibility to respond to society’s needs – something that can have a positive impact on the way a company presents itself to policy makers.

We do not know how long this crisis or its consequences will last. We do know, however, that given its reach, in geographical, economic and social terms, it will change the way businesses interact with all its audiences.

Being a firm believer in constant change for the public good, Weber Shandwick is committed to supporting companies, organisations and citizens in adapting to these new times, helping our clients to navigate a new and complex reality and maximising their positive impact on society.