



Preparing For A Pandemic:

Developing An Inoculation Plan For Avian Influenza

Media coverage on avian influenza is nearing epidemic proportions. On March 16, 2006, *The New York Times* posed the question, "Is Business Ready for a Flu Pandemic: Anxiety is High, but Preparations Aren't."

With additional daily reports of bird slaughter and new cases of human infection and fatalities, the avian influenza issue has transcended media hyperbole. Business can't afford to treat the potential threat as if Chicken Little again claimed the sky is falling. A critical differentiation exists between avian influenza and past health threats, namely the potential for a pandemic to affect vast numbers of people and dramatically harm worldwide business and the global economy.

"For corporations, the impact could be massive, particularly if business is not prepared," contends Chris Liu, General Manager of Ketchum Newscan in Hong Kong. "Under an extreme scenario, factories, shops, and service centers could be closed down. Whole countries or markets could be under quarantine, allowing no imports or exports, and stock exchanges would be forced to close. The impact could be greater and more wide-ranging than the 2003 outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)."



UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT

Avian influenza is an infection caused by flu viruses that occur naturally among birds. Wild birds that migrate internationally carry the viruses in their intestines with no impact. Avian influenza is extremely contagious among poultry, such as chickens, ducks and turkeys, and usually results in death.

The H5N1 strain of avian influenza began sometime before 1997 in Asia, circulating in the poultry populations and causing a mild disease that went undetected. After months of circulation in chickens, the virus mutated to a highly

pathogenic form. The new strain killed chickens within 48 hours with a mortality rate approaching 100 percent. The H5N1 virus did not reappear until December 2003 when it was reported in Korea for the first time.

Subsequently, health officials worked to raise awareness based on key characteristics of H5N1:

- The virus has the ability to pass directly from birds to humans
- Once in humans, it causes severe disease with a very high mortality
- It has the potential to ignite an especially severe pandemic

Although bird flu is hard to catch, people can contract it by coming into contact with infected birds. Scientists fear the virus could mutate into a form that could pass easily between humans, triggering a pandemic in which millions could die.

Members of Ketchum's Global Issues and Crisis Network are tracking avian influenza developments and working with clients to develop preparedness strategies. "The reach of this potential risk is unlike anything we have faced in the era of global business," says Geoff Rowan, Managing Director, Ketchum Toronto. "In a matter of hours, a pandemic by its very definition could spread around the globe. No effective way exists to isolate it – or isolate ourselves from it."

For many, the debate over avian influenza recalls the SARS epidemic of several years ago, which quickly crossed borders in Greater China and rapidly emerged in healthcare facilities in Canada. "Some sectors are more vulnerable, particularly airlines, shipping and transport companies, and leisure facilities like amusement parks and large-scale shopping malls," says Simeon Mellalieu, Vice President, Corporate Practice, Ketchum Newscan Hong Kong. "Not only may their product be affected, but their services may potentially help spread the disease, as we saw with SARS. Those companies that provide the infrastructure to our society, such as hospitals, banks, utilities and retailers also will be rapidly exposed if services start to fail."

While the media and public health officials work to create a sense of urgency, corporations face the key challenge of an accelerated timeline. "While many pandemics offer a prolonged timeline to plan, the avian influenza pandemic is likely to hit much sooner than it will be possible to effectively plan and practice a response, produce enough of the currently available treatments, or undertake research to develop a vaccine for the

disease," maintains Claire Brough, an Account Director in Ketchum London's Healthcare Practice.

COMMUNICATIONS IMPLICATIONS

A corporate response to avian influenza will require full coordination between crisis response, risk management and business continuity, supported by strategic communications outreach to critical audiences. According to Laurie Mobley, a Vice President and Group Manager in Ketchum Washington's Healthcare Practice, and a former communications specialist with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, getting accurate information to those who need it could present a challenge. "As we saw with SARS, anthrax, and even the early days of AIDS, misinformation and fear can help facilitate the spread of disease," she says. "This environment also furthers the mindset of the 'worried well' that truly may not be at risk for infection."

Ms. Brough says the drawback to any form of communication is that, without proper context, the potential exists to further fuel anxiety. "The public is keen to know more about the disease and will be receptive to communications. However, because avian influenza has been positioned as a 'killer' disease, any communications might cause panic. It's essential that information be provided in a controlled, factual and instructive way as this will enable people to use the information gained proactively."

STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Rob Flaherty, Senior Partner, Managing Director, Ketchum Global Corporate Practice, sees three strategic priorities for companies preparing for a pandemic. "Companies must communicate their actions on business continuity, communicate effectively with employees, and work closely with the major global



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AVIAN INFLUENZA SCENARIO PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Scenarios — complete with communications objectives and strategies — should be developed around the potential for a pandemic. Potential scenarios could include:

- Country borders closed and/or flights to infected regions grounded because of pandemic
- Employees quarantined due to outbreak in a specific area
- Disruption of supply chain; critical services overtaxed
- Work stoppages resulting from death of employees
- Pandemic effects on operations in several countries at once
- Concern (real or not) that flu can spread through the company's products or services
- Backup facilities are closed because of flu outbreak in a region
- Company stock valuation declines as confidence in the industry wanes because of the pandemic

and domestic health and security organizations."

Chris Nelson, SVP/Director Issues & Crisis Management, Ketchum New York, believes companies in which a pandemic would affect the core business, such as poultry companies or quick-service restaurants, should start by enhancing safeguards to ensure the maximum level of protection for customers and consumers. "They should also create crisis plans for key scenarios, such as a

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPONSE TO A PANDEMIC



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PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

To prevent outbreaks, companies that have completed threat assessments should communicate with their employees about what they can do to protect themselves and promote healthy practices:

- Getting enough vitamins and minerals in daily diet
- Washing hands or using hand sanitizers in bathrooms at work
- Handling poultry products properly or sanitizing work surfaces where poultry is prepared

REACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS TO ACTUAL CRISIS SITUATIONS

In preparing crisis plans, companies should consider all audiences and develop communications about the company's response and what each audience can do to be a part of the solution:

Employees - Instructions for complying with company response efforts and safety guidelines

Investors - Communications about business-continuity efforts; consider how to communicate about impact of staff illnesses or the effects of large numbers of health claims on company benefit plans

Customers - Communications that demystify the disease, put risks in context, and provide clear and understandable information about what the company is doing to protect people

SPECIALIZED COMMUNICATIONS

Companies dealing with poultry products should adapt their crisis plans for communicable-disease situations (e.g. salmonella, E. coli, listeria, campylobacter) to include specific communications for situations involving avian influenza.

consumer contracting the illness from the company's product," says Mr. Nelson. "For every other type of company, business-continuity planning is a minimum requirement. Every company could face worker shortages or illnesses among key executives and should be prepared. In conducting vulnerabilities assessments, companies should look at every corporate system or business that could be affected by a pandemic, and develop business recovery options for each system or business and crisis response capabilities against each potential scenario."

The Ketchum experts agree that government bodies and NGOs must be involved and that all parties will need to share information. Companies concerned about the risks of avian influenza should turn to risk managers, business-continuity planners, crisis managers, and possibly epidemiologists. Company risk managers and crisis

managers should read bulletins from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Companies should work to integrate their emergency-preparedness plans with appropriate government bodies," says Mr. Rowan. "They need to understand how public resources will be allocated during times of crisis, and they need to understand what reactions and trigger points government agencies will have. At what point will public transportation systems be affected? When will governments recommend that employees stay home? How will scarce resources and services be apportioned?"

Mr. Mellalieu says sorting through

information provided by global and local organizations poses a key challenge. "The World Health Organization is the de facto authority on avian influenza, but local health authorities and agencies also are providing more guidelines and advice. All corporations should be consulting these guidelines now to prepare their responses, if they haven't done so already. In Greater China, a number of top medical and microbiological experts in leading universities in Hong Kong and mainland China have

INFORMATION RESOURCES

World Health Organization – www.who.org

Centers for Disease Control – www.cdc.gov/flu

UK Department of Health – www.dh.gov.uk

US Government – www.pandemicflu.gov

National Institutes of Health – www.nih.gov

US Homeland Security – www.whitehouse.gov

KETCHUM AVIAN INFLUENZA TASK FORCE

Ketchum has assembled a global task force of issues management and healthcare specialists to help clients address the avian influenza situation. They represent a broad range of expertise in risk communications, preparedness planning, food safety, public health policy and infectious diseases.

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been providing advice that corporations should look at."

Ms. Mobley believes orchestrating communications among response organizations will be critical. "From a public health perspective, the seamless coordination of communications between local, state and federal agencies as well as the public at large is going to make the difference between containment and escalation of fear and further disease spread," she says.

To assure an effective response, corporate silos must be dismantled, asserts Tom Barritt, Global Director of Ketchum's Issues & Crisis Network. "Crisis planning on avian influenza requires breaking down the barriers that often exist in corporations between departments and across regions. The type of miscommunication often encountered in day-to-day business operations would intensify in a pandemic. It will require the diligence of senior management to assure that communications channels stay open, and employees don't fall back on bad communications habits."

Indeed, global businesses face unique risks that require serious consideration. "One theory right now holds that international employee interaction could make global businesses conduits for the spread of diseases," says Mr. Nelson. "That could produce significant numbers



"Unlike terrorism, disease affects everybody regardless of nationality or religion. This clearly differentiates avian influenza from the terrorism threats that have claimed the world's attention since 2001. The affects of avian influenza could be infinitely more disastrous."

of illnesses within individual companies and result in work stoppages. A second type of risk might involve the illness or death of senior operating executives. Yet a third might be work stoppages at suppliers or vendors critical to the business."

Many will draw on lessons and tools leveraged during past epidemics. "During SARS, video-conferencing sales skyrocketed, so some business sectors do stand to benefit," says Mr. Mellalieu. "As is the case of any natural disaster, a fine line exists between taking an opportunity and being seen as exploitative. The greatest challenge will be identifying what constitutes "doing the right thing." One wrong move and you will be seen as either not doing enough or being crass. At the same time, smart and timely application of Internet or mobile communications would be most opportune. And like SARS, opportunities could emerge for strong efforts in corporate social responsibility that are managed subtly and appropriately by corporations with the right resources and suitable platforms."

In the end, business must continue to operate, and Mr. Liu emphasizes, address that most important audience – the customer. "Maintaining the quality of service that customers expect when faced with the circumstances of

a depleted workforce or an interrupted supply chain will be the greatest challenge. Preparedness plans will need to go far beyond basic risk management and response and include long-term campaigns for managing expectations among customers."