Beat: News

Fighting Coronavirus: Corporate Social Responsibility Put to the Test

Companies join the fight

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USPA NEWS - The COVID 19 coronavirus spread all over the world, and so did universal panic: there are daily reports of thousands of new infections and hundreds of deaths. Many cities - and sometimes entire countries "" have been locked down; flights, important, official or festive international events have been cancelled. Most importantly, normal social, economic and everyday life activities have come to a sudden and brutal stop.

Europe has become a new epicenter of the infection in recent weeks, while the number of cases is also going up in other parts of the world. Experts offer various tactics for dealing with this problem, but there´s one thing they all agree on: the pandemic is spreading at a phenomenal speed, and to defeat it, we must join forces and be one step ahead. "You have come together to confront the defining health crisis of our time: We are at war with a virus that threatens to tear us apart - if we let it,"? says Dr Tedros Adhanom (1) Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization.

The rapid and coordinated response tactic is especially important in densely populated regions where people can move freely. One of these regions is Europe, which is characterized by a high population density (2) compared to neighboring countries, as well as the relative openness of borders within the Union. In peacetime, these characteristics are a definite advantage. However, they are becoming a serious obstacle in the fight against the pandemic in the current crisis situation, despite all the restrictions imposed by the governments of affected countries.
At that, Europeans have one non-obvious, but significant advantage: this is their well-developed and agile industry. The fight against coronavirus is a collective effort, so the capabilities and sense of social responsibility of those companies that are able to quickly respond to a critical situation become an indispensable resource in this war.

European companies are adapting their tools free of charge and mobilizing their employees to provide critical equipment to health systems. The first to join this fight were those, whose products are similar to those which are needed now. So, the Italian Calzedonia Group, owns Calzedonia, Intimissimi, Tezenis and Falconeri brands, stepped into the fight against the pandemic, demonstrating a swift and pragmatic approach. Since March 23, part of the production and business resources of the company have been repurposed to produce medical masks and surgical gowns - in fact, the same textile products, only of a different nature. The company´s President Sandro Veronesi noted (3) that these actions are absolutely important, because it is necessary to sensitively respond to the needs of employees and customers in the current emergency. At first, the company sewed 10 thousand masks per day, and then began to increase the daily output. The company´s home ground, Italy, is in dire need of medical protective wear (4), so these extra products are surely coming in handy.

The ability to move on and keep the economy afloat is another way of joining the fight for health and safety. Many factories and stores are shutting down, which deals a huge blow to the welfare of countries and citizens. At the same time, some companies keep going on: "A balance must be found between the need to stop this epidemic and the needs of the business"¦ We have decided to continue with the activities that guarantee the protection measures indicated by the government"?, said Sandro Veronesi (5) commenting on Calzedonia´s activity.
Such ongoing activities play a significant role in the fight against coronavirus and its consequences. EU monetary authorities are now trying to navigate through the chaos, and there is no doubt that suspended or even closed productions don´t make life of economists easier. In turn, those who keep working lend a helping hand to the government budget. They aid partner companies in maintaining activities and preserve direct and indirect jobs thanks to their advantage of short decision paths with rapid implementation.

For instance, French Tereos, one of the world leaders in the production of sugars, alcohols and starch derivatives, is fully mobilized and continues to operate. Getting ready to offer new products for new needs, Tereos repurposed a part of its production in less than 48 hours. Exploiting the capacities and flexibility of its industrial tool, plants and logistic system, the company started production (6) of hydroalcoholic solutions and gels in the amount of several thousand liters per day in five of its European plants to offer the products to local healthcare facilities free of charge. The company continues to acquire the necessary materials (excluding alcohol), as well as

collaborate with farmers and other industrialists, thereby supporting economic activity. What is also important, Tereos goes on with producing vital goods, including ingredients for foods, medicines, pharmaceutical applications. All this is of great importance in terms of providing the European market with essential consumer goods.

In turn, governments also admit they can´t do without the assistance of businesses. In the case of Tereos, it is about saving the currently endangered agriculture sector: “Farmers, forest owners and their cooperatives are facing an increasingly difficult situation and dramatic consequences in the most affected rural areas of the EU,“ reads a recent report (7) from farmers´ association COPA-COGECA. Tereos is a group with solid ties to the communities where its facilities are deployed and where farmers grow the raw material for the whole group, and, obviously, the company can´t fail them in their need. The coronavirus-linked challenge triggered a more motivated commitment from the whole company to support the health community, and authorities were glad to welcome it: “We are receiving support from the public authorities, which facilitates the process: customs, prefectural services, regions, ministries, health authorities, and we also see a strong and positive external response from press and social networks“, says a representative of Tereos.

Other countries follow along and also seek assistance from their business communities: specifically, the UK turned to more than 60 manufacturers (8) for help in the production of ventilators to solve the products shortage. Many companies responded to the call, and among them was Dyson, a British tech company. Together with The Technology Partnership, it developed CoVent, a new ventilator: “A ventilator supports a patient who is no longer able to maintain their own airways, but sadly there is currently a significant shortage, both in the UK and other countries around the world,“ said James Dyson (9), the company's founder. Negotiations on R&D cooperation usually take months and years. However, both companies agreed literally within several days, demonstrating their capability of adapting to circumstances.

CoVent ventilators are supervised products, and so Dyson and TTP will cooperate with the UK government to approve the device design and manufacturing process. The government order will be executed on the open-source basis (10), which is actually an unprecedented case: usually companies are not so eager to share their developments just as freely.
In general, the help from business is now very opportune as whole countries have to deal urgently with a serious situation and unprecedented needs. It´s not easy for businessmen either. In addition to the global economic downturn, companies committed to help their countries are facing new production and operational challenges arising from the repurposing of production. However, we also see unrivalled perseverance, hard work and growing awareness of corporate social responsibility; the features that become a considerable asset in the fight against the coronavirus.

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