What Corporate America Can Do to Protect Itself From Conspiracy Theories

By Matthew Ferraro
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(AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

The coronavirus pandemic has spawned highly contagious, unsubstantiated conspiracy theories that have led to world harm. One of the most widely disseminated claims is that 5G cell towers are responsible for the virus' spread is a prevalent idea around the world. The United Kingdom has seen over 60 attacks on cell towers and 80 cases harassment against telecom maintenance workers. There have been at least two dozen arson attacks on cell site across continental Europe. Telecom companies in New Zealand recently warned of the possible interruption in emergency cell service if the dozens of strikes on cell towers there continue. And the U.S. Department of Homela Security advised the U.S. telecommunications industry that the dangers of coronavirus conspiracists "inciting atta against communications infrastructure…will probably increase as the disease continues to spread."

Similarly, according to a Yahoo News/YouGov poll, *half* of Americans for whom Fox News is their primary televisic news source believe that Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates is plotting to use a mass COVID-19 vaccination campaig a ruse to implant people with microchips. It's not just Fox News watchers: Twenty-eight percent of all U.S. adults believe that conspiracy theory, regardless of where they get their news. Only 40% of all U.S. adults say that alleg is false; 32% are unsure. This discredited falsehood could imperil widescale adoption of a coronavirus vaccine wl one is brought to market.

Seemingly every day, the news carries more evidence of the power of what *The Atlantic* has called "the rise of mainstream conspiracism" -- paranoid fictions untethered to empirical reality commanding broad adherents acros globe and moving from the fringes to the center of social discourse. For example, in the last few weeks, conspira have circulated claims that the furniture maker Wayfair is involved in human trafficking because of the coincidenta overlap of the names of some of its pieces and of missing children.

Conspiratorial thinking is like water -- it seeps into perceptions about everything. It warps views on matters as far as telecommunications infrastructure and pharmaceuticals. It is a lesson businesses of all stripes would do well t

learn: In our interconnected era, where social trust in all institutions is at low ebb. Businesses can become collate damage to conspiracy theories. Off-the-wall, yet widely shared claims can harm corporate brands, the perception products, and even hard assets.

What can the private sector do?

First, conspiracy theories and disinformation are a business risk like any other, and smart companies need to pre for them accordingly. Game out vulnerabilities. Develop possible responses, build a crisis team, and assign responsibilities to different officials.

Second, research shows that proactive messaging can establish sturdy defenses to bogus claims. For example, recent peer-reviewed paper by Professors Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Dolores Albarracín in the *HKS Misinform Review* about COVID-19 disinformation observed that a very high percentage (87%) of the public believed that handwashing and social distancing inhibit the spread of the coronavirus. Jamieson and Albarracín argue the pub accepted this truth because the public had already absorbed messages about the efficacy of handwashing and s distancing in preventing the spread of the seasonal flu. By contrast, more than 1 in 5 people surveyed believed th Vitamin C was a remedy for the coronavirus in part because of longstanding misperceptions that Vitamin C cures common cold, they wrote.

These findings suggest that, in the business context, a company should take steps to establish its brands and its messages in the public's mind early on, before misinformation starts spreading. If a company creates durable pub perceptions about its business, it will be less likely to lose the information war to tendentious tweets.

Third, understand that not all claptrap needs to be corrected. Debunking disinformation that has not spread very 1 can have the ironic effect of furthering the lie's reach. Jamieson and Albarracín's research suggests that a compa can wait until disinformation reaches at least 10% of the population before correcting it. Businesses can hire companies that specialize in tracking the spread of untruths online to help them understand when that threshold i crossed.

Finally, when a conspiracy theory becomes sufficiently prevalent, businesses should respond with speech of their and enlist trusted third parties to validate and amplify fact-checks. A victimized business can also work with socia media companies to remove posts if they violate the platforms' terms of service, particularly if the disinformation misappropriates a business' intellectual property -- like a copyrighted image or a trademarked brand name. Such companies will want to discuss with counsel whether to involve regulators and what legal options they have again propagators of the disinformation.

None of these steps is an outright cure to virulent conspiracism, but they can help lessen disinformation's impact businesses' bottom lines and build a society more resistant to charismatic deceits.

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