



16 April 2020

Strengthening the social license to operate of ports during COVID19: mixed blessings ahead?

First of all I would like to wish all of you a pleasant Easter period, with first some quality time spent within the household, and maybe some time for broader reflection amidst the COVID19 turmoil. Just like port activities, universities are considered (at least in Belgium) as essential services, which has not seen us sidelined at all, on the contrary!

Just like any organization, port managing bodies need to rethink both their strategic actions, as well as their communication strategies within the current crisis. For a lot of traditional companies, this implies revising the ways of positioning themselves towards their wider stakeholder communities. Two weeks ago, I came across a rather lighthearted post on LinkedIn which explains the dilemma and sometimes, as put by the author, the “soul searching” going on within organizations on how to communicate during this crisis. While many corporate strategists are entering uncharted waters, this is also valid for other organizations. Take the climate change activist groups which actively ‘use’ the COVID19 crisis to support their claims against untamed economic growth, linking COVID19 death rates to air pollution, etc. Whether all this is a legitimate strategy in the long run, remains open for debate. Two elements stand out here for companies, and by extension port managing bodies: the risks of developing rather shallow and meaningless “we are here for you” messages, as well as the rather interesting consideration of deliberately not launching COVID specific communication at all (see <https://marketoonist.com/2020/03/communicate.html>).

For port managing bodies, their branding or marketing strategy is multifaceted. In general, a lot evolves around B2B marketing to shipping lines, shippers, investors, hinterland, etc. Furthermore, in absence of a direct ‘consumer’, an increasing amount of efforts revolves around the generation of broad societal support for port activities, in particular from local communities. This in light of the overall contested nature of port activities, given the negative externalities these generate (emissions, noise, congestion, visual intrusion, etc.), and the resulting widely documented difficulties of obtaining approval and permits for both their going concern activities and port expansion projects.

In order to have a feeling on how port managing bodies approach the current crisis from this perspective, I spent some time during Easter weekend doing a ‘short-cut’ examination of the Facebook communication streams of 6 larger European ports, from 6 different countries, neatly divided between the Med Range

and the Hamburg-Le Havre range. All ports, as they are located close to cities, are characterized by high amounts of stakeholder pressure. I choose Facebook as being the main communication channel for outreach to wider stakeholder communities, given the rather specific audiences of LinkedIn and Twitter. The number of Facebook followers ranged from between 100 and 1000 (one port), between 1000 and 5000 (two ports) and more than 10.000 (three ports). With March 10th as the turning point, I analyzed the month before and the month after (for the one Italian port, we took February 10th as the turning point). This led to 97 posts pre-COVID, and 164 posts during the COVID-era being analyzed. A strong increase (more than 50%) is thus noticed as opposed to the “Business-As-Usual” case.

Around 60% of the COVID-era posts have an explicit link to the crisis. About half of these posts show the “we are here for you” trait. However, large differences were observed between ports. Some ports kept their usual rhythm of communication, while others tripled or even quadrupled the number of posts. One port even remained ‘silent’ during the first 3 weeks of the crisis. The amount of COVID related posts ranged between 1 out of 3 posts, to almost exclusive COVID-related communication. One port even highlighted its role played in ... toilet paper logistics!

Highlighting the important role of the port during the crisis also varied a lot: from no posts at all to almost 9 out of 10 at the individual port level. We also coded the posts into 5 larger content categories: (1) posts related to CSR activities of the port managing body, (2) operations, (3) performance, (4) port people/labour market and (5) more general community outreach. Here, the samples showed a relative stability across the different generic themes, with operations-related posts gaining share from general outreach and CSR activities. Also in this case, large differences between ports were observed, with some ports overhauling their communication mix, e.g. reducing people-related posts (mainly port worker oriented style) towards more general outreach posts, with some moving towards strongly port people oriented content (style ‘port heroes’ in analogy to the healthcare sector).

Whether these are deliberate or emergent strategies, is rather unclear, and we surely acknowledge that a Facebook channel might also serve other audiences than local communities (e.g.: keeping port workers motivated). However, it seems appropriate that a reflection takes place both (1) in terms of the general ‘business as usual’ communication towards the wider stakeholder communities in terms of content, as well as (2) whether intensive “we are here for you” or “port heroes” communication streams in the context of COVID19 will ultimately lead to a strengthening of the social license to operate in the longer term. From a personal perspective, I consider the Facebook response of the port of Los Angeles quite impressive. It is based on aligned communication with the city government (see e.g. <https://youtu.be/LAxNhxoSpiU> - via Facebook, April 8th), setting up a joint platform “Logistics Victory LA” (<https://lovla.org>), with the port CEO now formally acting as the “City Chief Logistics Officer” literally at the service of the mayor, the city, the people, in a quite factual and no-nonsense “we are just doing our jobs” philosophy, and most of all transcending the mere port atmosphere (and avoiding the “we are here for you” and “port heroes” slogans).

ESPO keeps going – week 4

Contribution by : Prof. dr. Michaël Dooms, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

So, what are your opinions on the best practices? How should ports communicate to the wider stakeholder community during this crisis ? Should the crisis be ‘exploited’ to gain more societal support, or not? I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts!

Port	Pre 10/03	Post 10/03	% COVID	Role of the port
A	21	34	44%	33%
B	21	23	78%	33%
C	12	36	53%	32%
D	11	3	100%	67%
E	9	39	90%	89%
F	23	29	34%	0%
Total	97	164	61%	30%

	CSR	Operations	Performance	People	Gen. Outreach	
Pre	7%	7%	14%	20%	52%	n = 97
Post	2%	19%	12%	23%	44%*	n = 164
* of which 17% general outreach related to COVID						

Source: M. Dooms (2020)

Keep well, keep safe!