

An Agent of Change

An Interview with Richard Edelman, President and Chief Executive Officer, Edelman

EDITORS' NOTE Richard Edelman is the CEO of Edelman, a global communications firm. The firm was named to Advertising Age's 2019 A-List and was honored as "PR Agency of the Decade" by both Advertising Age and The Holmes Report. Edelman has extensive experience in marketing and reputation management, having led assignments with major corporations, NGOs and family businesses in over 25 industries around the world. He has counseled countries in every region of the world on economic development programs. As the creator of the annual Edelman Trust Barometer in 2000, he has become one of the foremost authorities on trust in business, government, media and NGOs. In 2020, Edelman was inducted into the American Advertising Federation's Advertising Hall of Fame. In 2019, he was named the PR Agency Professional of the Past 20 Years by PRWeek and was inducted into the publication's Hall of Fame; in 2014, he was inducted into the Arthur W. Page Society's Hall of Fame. Edelman is regarded as an industry thought leader and has posted weekly to his blog since 2004. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Ad Council, the Atlantic Council, the Children's Aid Society, the Gettysburg Foundation, the 9/11 Museum and the National Committee on US China Relations. He is a member of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, World Economic



Richard Edelman

Forum and PR Seminar. Edelman earned his MBA from Harvard Business School in 1978 and a BA from Harvard College in 1976.

COMPANY BRIEF Edelman (edelman.com) is a global communications firm that partners with businesses and organizations to evolve, promote and protect their brands and reputations. Its 6,000 people in more than 60 offices deliver communications strategies that give its clients the confidence to lead and act with certainty, earning the trust of their stakeholders.

Its honors include the Cannes Lions Grand Prix for PR; Advertising Age's 2019 A-List; the Holmes Report's 2018 Global Digital Agency of the Year; and, five times, Glassdoor's Best Places to Work. Since its founding in 1952, Edelman has remained an independent, family-run business. Edelman owns specialty companies Edelman Intelligence (research) and United Entertainment Group (entertainment, sports, lifestyle).

The world is fighting a public health crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers and all other

essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?

We have to recognize that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on people of color who represent a significant portion of the essential and front line workers in this country, and we should make every effort to improve healthcare in their communities. The most important and profound thing we can do is to provide them with better healthcare and easier access to it.

Edelman is a purpose-driven firm with a long history of supporting its employees, clients and communities. How has Edelman adapted its business and the way it works during this unprecedented time in order to continue to effectively support its employees, clients and communities?

Between March and September, we conducted several Edelman Trust Barometer special reports that looked at the role consumers expected brands and corporations to play in helping them deal with COVID-19. The studies revealed huge expectations of business as "my employer" was found to be the most trusted source of information on the virus.

We also did a number of studies examining how U.S. consumers want brands to address systemic racism. The results were clear – respondents want brands to step up and play a central role in addressing systemic racism or they will exercise brand democracy with their

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wallets. Edelman has made a commitment to fight injustice and institutional racism and act as an agent of change. We have a task force that is involved in over 300 engagements with clients. We are advising clients to not just change how they communicate, but to change what they do.

Edelman was built with an entrepreneurial spirit and an ability to be nimble and adapt. How is the firm addressing its business during this time in order to succeed in this challenging environment?

For one of our largest clients we launched two major campaigns during quarantine that went from idea to on air in 10 days. We also built a content factory to provide rapid response production.

How has Edelman’s team changed the way they work in order to be effective with the changes that have been necessary for all businesses to make and how proud are you to see the resilience of your team?

We have changed the way we work by learning to be more creative through Microsoft Teams and understanding the necessity of regularly connecting with our colleagues. We have put even more of a focus on employee engagement and our people.

There is a great deal of discussion about businesses reopening in a “new normal.” What is your outlook for what this new normal may look like and how is Edelman preparing for the next stage in this crisis?

In September, we launched a Trust Barometer special report on Workplace Trust and the Coronavirus that revealed only half of the respondents feel their office spaces are safe and less than one-third are likely to enter a corporate office this fall. Most respondents feel their company has or will have a safe workplace when opened, but nearly half of the respondents want reduced occupancy in the workplace and all employees checked for fever before entering.

Edelman is headquartered in New York City which has been heavily impacted by the pandemic. What are the keys to New York City’s reopening and recovery?

The key is taking the appropriate steps to effectively reopen a service economy. That could include things like health and temperature checks for restaurants and theaters. New York is very reliant on tourism so the safety of employees and customers must be paramount.

Edelman is committed to building a diverse and inclusive workforce. Will you discuss these efforts and how critical is it for the firm to have diverse perspectives and experiences at the table when making business decisions?

Our staff and leadership teams must be more reflective of the communities in which we are located and serve. We are accelerating our work to reach and surpass our goal of 30

percent race/ethnicity workforce representation in the U.S. (currently at 26 percent), while continuing our efforts to maintain 50/50 gender diversity at senior ranks. We are refocusing our efforts to recruit more diverse senior hires and we have diversified our Board, Executive and Operating Committees.

In addition to these internal commitments, we have committed to combatting systemic racism and its impact. As part of that commitment, we have selected pro bono partnerships with three NGOs focused on racial equality and inclusion for the Black community: the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ); CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion; and the Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation.

This is also a big workstream for us. In August, we worked with Good Humor and the artist RZA on the collaboration of a new ice cream truck jingle to replace the more commonly-used song that actually has racist roots.

During this difficult and uncertain time, what are you telling your people and what would you say to young people across the country who are deeply concerned and uncertain about the future?

You must absolutely exercise your right to vote and become more involved in your communities through volunteering. I still volunteer throughout the year with Project H.O.O.D. in Chicago.

Get involved in your community, do not just be a spectator. ●

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