

Predict. Prepare. Protect.

Managing through a crisis: Communications tips for businesses

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This is not Crisis 101. We are in an unprecedented time of global uncertainty. COVID-19 and resulting restrictions, closures and cancellations are spreading at incredible speed. The virus is taking lives, and efforts to halt the spread are crippling businesses. Communications might seem like a low priority as business leaders navigate pressing concerns related to COVID-19 such as significant business loss, managing a newly-remote workforce or even having to reduce a workforce.

As with any crisis, how businesses engage their employees, customers and key stakeholders will play a significant role in their ability to persevere. The crisis communications checklist below was designed as a helpful guide to protect your brand's reputation during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

COVID-19 Crisis Communications Checklist



Make your crisis communications team official

It is likely that your management is in constant contact about COVID-19 challenges. However, it is still important to establish a core crisis team that is responsible for managing communications. The team should include the following members and communications roles:

- **CEO/Owner** – Representing the company as its leader, the face and voice of communications. During this time of social isolation, it is more important than ever for leaders to be visible.
- **Marketing/Communications** – It's essential to have one point person coordinating what, where and how often the company communicates. While the entire crisis communications team should have input on these decisions, it is the Marketing/Communications representative's role to facilitate the process.
- **Human Resources** – Employee well-being should be first and foremost and Human Resources should have input as you build a communications plan.
- **Legal Counsel** – Ensuring that communications meet legal and compliance requirements.
- **CFO/Financial Director** – Informing the team of financial updates that should be reflected in communications.
- In addition to those key roles, the company should consider if outside consultants or experts are necessary.



Strategize

Now that you have your team, it's critical to ask the tough questions, which will enable you to develop a plan to react to the situation as it unfolds. Think through the risks and prioritize the most likely ones, but prepare answers and response strategies for all. Some tough questions to ask right now are:

- Are your employees safe or in need of assistance? What tools can you give them?
- Will you need to shift strategy? Eliminate certain products or services? Close sites/stores/facilities/factories?
- Are there risks associated with a newly remote workforce? Service disruption?
- Will you need to furlough or lay off employees?
- Have any of your employees reported virus exposure or diagnosis?
- Are you in compliance with government directives and regulatory requirements?
- What are the safety or exposure concerns for your employees, customers and communities?
- What processes and procedures are in place to minimize these risks?



Make a plan

Once you have those answers, develop a communications strategy that fosters transparent and honest communications starting with your employees and fanning out to other constituents. The plan should include the following:

- **Standing meetings** - It is important to develop a standing meeting to stay in contact, share information and plan.
- **Information sharing** - Leverage existing technology or additional apps/tools to create a system that works for your team such as Slack, Microsoft Teams or Google Hangouts to keep your team connected and communicating in real time. This should be a hub of information and monitoring activity, and you'll want a way to disseminate this information quickly and talk amongst yourselves about your corporate response.
- **Communications principals** - What you'll communicate, when and to whom.
- **Messaging platform** - Identifying your key messages by audience to ensure consistency across the organization. In all cases, demonstrating true compassion is key to engagement.
- **Tactics** - Identify the best ways to disseminate information by audience.
- **Lists** - Ensure you have up-to-date information on all stakeholders to ensure they receive timely messages.
- **Protocols for monitoring** - It's important to get a "pulse check" on what is working and what is not. Poll employees monitor social media and report back to the team to best pivot messages where needed.



Help those in need

Consider how you can positively make an impact. Goodwill helps your employees stay engaged throughout the crisis and demonstrates your fortitude to customers. How can you use your resources to help people within the bounds of social distancing requirements? If you have a Corporate Social Responsibility function at your company, they should coordinate with communications to get the message out about their initiatives.



Maintain sensitivity: check all "business as usual" communications

The daily objective is an ambitious one: to keep business moving, people employed, customers served and all parties protected from exposure. However, "business as usual" communications must sometimes take a pause. Marketing and communications leaders should check pre-planned advertising, social media posts and news releases to consider if they are still appropriate in this environment. For example, pushing a new product or service might be considered "tone deaf" and inconsiderate of those suffering. Perhaps pre-planned messages should be swapped for more appropriate and timely messages. This judgement call should be made on all internal and external communications.

This is a crisis like no other. We are all facing personal and professional concerns at this time. No crisis communications plan is perfect, but with these steps, you can work toward an authentic and empathetic response.



Key Message Considerations

You'll want to develop messages with these three key considerations in mind:

- **Overriding theme** - Your philosophy, mission, mantra - what you hope customers, employees and communities will think, feel and remember about your business. This theme will remain your consistent voice in all communications.
- **By audience** - Remember that each audience is coming from a different place and will have different expectations, needs and perceptions. Prepare to address each of their concerns in your communications.
- **By scenario** - This is a fast-moving crisis. Once you've anticipated further risk scenarios, consider how you will communicate about each issue to the public. As appropriate, press statements and talking points will be based on these messages.

Communications Tools to Consider in a Crisis

There are a number of ways to reach key audiences in a crisis. Social media is the most effective tool to reach your audiences quickly, but being creative and expanding your toolbox during a crisis can ensure your messages are heard. Consider the following:



Messaging Tools

- **CEO/Business Owner message/letter** – Send a message to key audiences, beginning with employees, offering transparency into the situation. This does not have to be complex, but a simple communication that conveys your key messages.
- **News release** – Develop news releases/media statements and talking points for key issues or important updates. Whether these are disseminated immediately or held in check until the need arises, you'll want these materials written, approved and ready to go.
- **FAQ** – Frequently Asked Questions are a very helpful way to give your audiences quick access to important information. With news evolving rapidly, these must be updated frequently, so make sure someone is specifically tasked with regular review and updates.



Primary Communications Tools

- **Social media** – People are turning to social media channels as primary information sources, so it's important that your key messages are posted on all of your corporate social media accounts. Remember that social media is a two-way communications tool – be prepared to respond to consumer questions and even messages of support in a timely manner!
- **News releases and traditional media relations** – Reporters continue to need information, story ideas, subject matter experts and other sources of information. As always, pause to consider the newsworthiness of your press release or story idea before you press send!
- **Email/eblasts** – Look to third-party vendors to manage your contact lists and facilitate your email distributions.

- **Video conferencing** – Consider connecting with smaller groups (board, advisors, suppliers, etc.) through video conference tools. These can be used as one-way or two-way communications channels, depending on the number of participants and the topics to be addressed.

- **Advertising** – Consider traditional advertising channels to get the message out that you are open for business or available to help, but be cautious about tone. You don't want to be perceived as taking advantage of the crisis to advance your own company's position or public perception.



Value-Add Tools

- **Video** – People want to see and hear from leaders directly, which makes video a particularly effective tool for disseminating key messages. Upload videos online and then embed them on your website and post links from your social media accounts.
- **Webinars** – The same tools you use for video conferencing can be used to host webinars for a broader audience. These can be recorded and then posted to your website/linked from your social media accounts.
- **Podcast** – If you're already proficient with audio recording and hosting, a podcast can be a great way to communicate key messages. You can also reach out to established podcasters in your industry and offer up your corporate spokesperson as a guest on their shows.