

COMMUNICATIONS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

MARCH 2020

A handbook to compassionately and confidently
navigate your organisation's communications
through the Novel Coronavirus crisis



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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing global health emergency is posing unprecedented challenges for many businesses. As a leading communications agency in the region with over 40 years of experience working closely with the Government and private sectors, we are committed to sharing our expertise to help organisations navigate these challenges through effective internal and external communications.

We want to help you develop a clear and consistent approach by empowering your people and partners, and by being transparent in engagements with clients and stakeholders.

No organisation is immune to the ongoing crisis, and without established internal and external communications in place:

- **Employees will feel confused and insecure**
- **Operational response will be hampered**
- **Stakeholders will be left in the dark and could become reactive**
- **Your organisation will be perceived as incompetent or slow to act**

HOW TO PLUG GAPS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Communication is key to how your business deals with the ongoing crisis, whether or not you are currently impacted. Therefore, as an organisation, ask yourself the following:

Are you communicating with your people and stakeholders?
Are you proactive rather than reactive?
Is your crisis communication timely?

Minimise disruption with these simple steps:

- 1)** Be honest, transparent, accountable and consistent in your communication.
- 2)** Talk to your people – even if it means discussing the risks and challenges facing the company – and encourage two-way dialogue. Reassure people with real solutions you may be implementing to address current challenges.
- 3)** Be sympathetic – you work with people, not machines.
- 4)** Demonstrate purpose – show you are committed to making this better for everyone.
- 5)** Develop holding statements and have them updated regularly as the situation develops.
- 6)** Do not hesitate to share facts in real time rather than waiting for others in the industry to do so.
- 7)** Do not be seen as opportunistic or trying to drive sales during this period.

- Remember that, in times of crisis, people look for sound and authoritative leadership. Your employees are counting on you to tell them what has happened, what is being done to address the issue, how long the situation will go on for and steps to reduce any direct impact.
- Your clients will also turn to you for support. Be honest and transparent through social media channels like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, your company's website, CRM, chats or email.
- Do not offer any medical advice. Instead, direct your audience to useful sites and organisations, such as the UAE Ministry of Health or WHO on topics outside your area of expertise.
- If your employees have any fears, set up sessions with medical experts, who can offer consultation and tips on how to combat the virus.

DEVELOPING CONTINGENCY PLANS

1) Set up a crisis response team

Mobilise a cross-functional team of people from within your organisation. Every member of the team - from executive leadership down - should know who is doing what. Train the people involved in executing the plan to be sure they're ready at a moment's notice.

2) Your people are your strength

An organisation is only as strong as its people. Review all travel policies and consider allowing employees to work remotely, reinforcing IT infrastructure to support these arrangements. Limit face-to-face meetings and show that you are doing everything in your power to put the wellbeing of your staff first.

3) Develop a stakeholder communications strategy

A company's messaging during a crisis should address all the organisation's stakeholders. Create a complete database of internal and external stakeholders and make sure that they get the exact messages you want them to hear and potentially repeat to other individuals or media outlets.

4) Use reliable data to distinguish facts

Reliable data is essential in crisis planning and response. Strong data ensures that an organisation can confidently explore different scenarios and how they could affect the business in the short, medium and long term.

5) Develop key messaging in consultation with your communications teams

Your communications team or PR agency should operate as your extended arm. It is essential to work closely with them so that you are aligned with developing and delivering your messaging internally and externally.

6) Monitor communications updates from public health organisations

A trusted source of information is data from approved health authorities. Develop a system for monitoring daily, hourly and emergency information.

Remember that in this day and age of social media, misinformation travels faster than accurate information. Steer clear of any unverifiable news about COVID-19, and instead seek advice from scientific and medical officials or refer to the latest advisory issued by the WHO, UAE Ministry of Health or similar national government health organisations. WHO publishes daily bulletins on the status of the virus, along with helpful guides on how to deal with the virus.

7) **Establish visitor protocols**

This is a simple precautionary measure to ensure safety at the workplace, for example develop an email to send out to visitors ahead of meetings:

As a precaution during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we are asking all guests to our offices to confirm they have not travelled to any location that was classified as high risk in the last 14 days. Please let us know if you or a member of your household have travelled to or through any affected locations, have exhibited any symptoms of illness or have been in close contact with someone exhibiting any symptoms. These precautionary measures have been established because of concern for the health and safety of staff and fellow visitors. Thank you and appreciate your support.

8) **Prepare for media inquiries**

Ensure that you have ready statements for the press if a situation arises, supported by a robust operational response plan. Media outlets are devoting time and budget to covering those topics, but remember that you do not have to unnecessarily contribute to what may be a sensational story. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- When communicating about COVID-19, prioritise people and safety first. How are you protecting your employees and customers?
- Are there any experts and third parties you are working with, including government agencies?
- What are the next steps? Focus on your operational readiness and response processes.
- How is your organisation ensuring business continuity while prioritising safety?

USING SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTIVELY

- **Stay connected with your customers and employees:**

No matter what goods or services your company provides, ensure that you have reliable communication channels so that customers and employees are getting the support they need.

- **Prepare a customer service plan:** Be prepared to be responsive and transparent with your customers. Consider drafting templated responses for your emails or set up instant-reply messages with information you expect your customers will be looking for. Connect with your customers for free in real time using Instagram Direct Messages, Messenger or set up a WhatsApp Business profile.

- **Create FAQs:** Prepare a list of responses for questions your customers are likely to ask, and provide as much detail and reassurance as possible in your answers.

- **Continue to build your brand:** Create a content calendar to plan out posts for the next few weeks, and organise your messaging and visuals. Make sure that your posts continue to have a consistent look and feel, and highlight what makes your business unique and special.

- **Encourage more customer interaction with stories:** In addition to photo and video posts, you can use stories on Facebook and Instagram to virtually interact with new and existing customers. Share authentic content, make announcements, encourage people to visit your website and show behind-the-scenes moments to continue to engage your community.

BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNING

1) Collaboration

In the face of a disruptive event, companies must ensure their employees can communicate with one another, and with partners and customers. This will ensure that employees spend time doing their jobs, rather than figuring out how to do it.

2) Ensure IT and communication technologies are working flawlessly

In the face of a crisis, plan to have on-demand technologies in place. Make sure that remote working technologies are available to all employees. A well-prepared organisation should make conferencing and collaboration a key part of the business continuity infrastructure, and IT professionals should incorporate collaborative communications technologies into their business continuity plans.

GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES

Apple

Apple announced that it was temporarily closing all retail stores outside of Greater China until March 27. Previously, the retailer told retail workers to refrain from encouraging customers to try on popular tech gadgets like the Apple Watch and Air Pods in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19. In addition, the company is allowing hourly employees, including retail workers, to take unlimited sick leave should they have coronavirus-like symptoms.

AT&T

AT&T announced that it is lifting overage fees and removing internet data caps for home broadband internet users given that employers, schools and institutions are mandating work-from-home policies.

Macy's

Macy's has adopted more enhanced cleaning measures, including hiring more cleaning staff to work during open hours to clean highly trafficked areas and hard surfaces more frequently. The company has also enacted an emergency leave and pay policy, ensuring that employees will receive compensation should they be infected with COVID-19 and required to self-quarantine for two weeks.

Sephora

Sephora is suspending all paid in-store services including makeovers, skin care applications and classes for the time being. The company is also waiving standard shipping fees on all orders through the end of March when you use the code FREESHIP at checkout.

Starbucks

Starbucks has temporarily suspended the use of reusable cups at all locations worldwide. The company says it will still honour the \$0.10 discount for customers who bring in a personal travel mug or tumbler, though they won't be able to use them.

CONCLUSION - MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS IN THE NEW NORMAL

Throughout history, global events have shaped the way we lived and did business; the Roman Empire introduced roads, the World Wars sped up adoption of assembly lines, factory hours and industrialization, and the internet spread information (and disinformation). This is another one of those events.

As we start to adapt to this new way of commerce, engagement and society – either for a prolonged period of time or for a few weeks – communication will be key. There will be new needs that arise, new challenges to overcome and new opportunities for those with the vision to see them.

To win in this new age, businesses and brands will need to be brave and let go of ‘the way we always did it’. It will be uncomfortable at times and there will be risks. But not adapting or preparing for change will be the greatest risk of all.

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