

Communication is going to be crucial in these challenging and unusual times.

Businesses can't afford to get it wrong when they are already facing their toughest test yet.

Doing some thinking and planning now could make all the difference.

#coronavirus #crisiscomms

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Key points

Be accurate

Things are moving fast, so make sure the information you're communicating is the right information. And the best advice currently available. Use official sources such as gov.uk, the NHS and Public Health England. Ensure your workforce knows what their options are regarding working from home, self isolation and how you will manage sick pay. Lack of clarity could result in people arriving on site when they should not.

Be timely

If you've not already communicated about your plans, policies and working arrangements, it's time now. This does not mean you need to rush out information before it has been checked and considered, but neither to delay when it could make a material difference to the decisions people make.

Identify your audiences

Your messaging will be different for each group. Staff need operational details, customers need to know whether you can continue to serve them and what changes may be necessary and supplier communication may be crucial to your supply chain. You will probably have other stakeholders too.

Identify your channels

What's the best way to reach each group? Should customers be getting information in their orders or a briefing from an account manager? Are staff best reached by email, or maybe a WhatsApp group?
What's your tone on social media? Are you communicating business as usual or preparing people to adapt to some necessary changes? Do you need to make a statement on camera and share it as a video?

Choose your triggers

What will be the points at which you have to act? Make any tough choices now about how things will play out if, for example, the schools are closed or transport is restricted. It's crucial to know the trigger points which lead to a certain approach to coronavirus, which then needs to be communicated in a timely way. Certainly, the last thing you want is to find the landscape shifting quickly and you scrabbling to keep up.

Be vigilant for 'fake news'

Watch out for and swiftly counter any misinformation. Social media has changed the landscape for communicating in a crisis and the nature of that change keeps evolving. Now it's not enough to share your factual information, you have to be wary of people spreading rubbish and disinformation as well. Ensure you have access to the main sources of official coronavirus information and share them through your channels so that people know where to turn (see below for sources).

You'll need the answers to these:

What steps are you taking to protect your staff, both from infection and economic loss?

Don't forget that the people you deal with regularly will have relationships with many of your workforce. The answer to this question will say a lot to them about your organisation.

What measures are in place to avoid infection through contact with customers and suppliers?

If you are sending deliveries, are staff in a routine of regular handwashing before handling products or packaging materials? The time the virus can live on different surfaces is still unclear and variable depending upon conditions. Are mobile staff suitably briefed and equipped?

What will be your response in the event of a breakdown in your supply chain/service delivery?

If you can't meet orders or deadlines, be open about that. Give people an idea of when you might be able to. If that's not yet clear, tell them so. They will appreciate your honesty.

How is this likely to play out for your staff?

This is your most important audience right now. Be clear and honest with them. Try to be proactive – a vacuum is dangerous. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so and then try to find out. They may be worried about how they can work if schools are closed, about sick pay if they fall ill and potentially concerned about losing their jobs. Keep the lines of communication open and frequent.

What can you say to the media?

You might not normally be on journalists' radar or you might be a regular contributor, either way they are going to be interested in exploring impacts across multiple sectors. Know what you will do if you get that call, or know who you will pass it on to (PR support, senior exec, etc). We are getting daily enquiries from journalists looking to talk to businesses about their plans and the coronavirus impact.

What are you doing to contribute to the response?

We know many businesses will have their hands full running operations in challenging times, but some of you may have services or products that would be beneficial to a struggling community. If you are in a position to make them available, on whatever basis, that's an easy question to answer. The tough one is when you're not able to give things away or even get them into circulation on a commercial basis.

Again, clarity and honesty are key here. Tell people clearly what the circumstances are, bearing in mind there is an expectation of 'pulling together' at this time. Getting this part wrong can land you in a social media storm very quickly. Most important advice: Don't sell on the back of a crisis.

Keep this guide handy. Our number and email address are below. If you are faced with a comms crisis and don't know how to respond, get in touch. **We will provide a sounding board and give you guidance for free**, whether you are a client or not.

Find the positives

This is a scary time and it's going to feel like all of the news is bad news - and may be for some time to come.

But as well as communicating organisational information, there is much to be gained from identifying and highlighting any successes of continuity or other positive developments.

We are all going to need to hear those stories! We can help you find them. In a time such as this there can be a tendency for altruism to remain hidden. Some organisations can be, to their credit, shy of highlighting their efforts.

Our view is that the community and maybe the wider country or world wants to hear good news and positive stories. That's why regional newspapers are launching campaigns about the UK's neighbourhood response and why #caremongering (the opposite of scaremongering) is now a trending hashtag.

As we tell our clients regularly, the best communications are always, in one way or another, about people. There has not been a more human crisis in our lifetimes, so our advice remains to keep the lines of communication open. Talk to each other - just don't shake hands!

- If you are supporting your community or others in your sector, you must share that.
- If you are innovating out of necessity, that will be a boost to morale for your own people as well as others.
- If you are going above and beyond to keep the metaphorical wheels turning, shout about it.
- If you are turning on the taps of your products or services to those who would otherwise not be able to gain access to you, those audiences need to be reached.

Official sources of information

UK Government - official advice

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

UK Government - advice for employers and businesses

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>

NHS information

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

Public Health England

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>