

# Coronavirus (COVID-19)

## A Business Leader's Guide to Effective Crisis Communications



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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Companies and brands in Colorado and across North America face unprecedented leadership and communications challenges due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic and resulting economic and financial market disruptions.

Uncertain times elevate the importance of clear, credible communication from business leaders. The organizations most likely to survive and emerge with reputations intact will be those that:

- Communicate proactively at every stage of the crisis while constantly looking ahead
- Balance reassurance and realism
- Anticipate stakeholder concerns and address them clearly and forthrightly
- Put calm, authentic leaders forward
- Rely on company and brand values to shape the message and response

### CONSIDERATIONS

At Linhart PR, we've been working with companies to address COVID-19 since the scale of the public health emergency became clear. We've supported clients in fast casual restaurants, manufacturing, professional services, oil and gas, investor-owned utilities, agricultural commodities and for-profit education, among others. Across this diverse client mix, we've seen these common threads:

- The shock of a sudden blow to individual and organizational health and confidence
- Fear of the unknown, from health risks to business impacts to concerns about the economy
- The need to react in real time as conditions change by the hour
- Unprecedented government action in determining how products or services can be delivered
- The need to balance competing priorities and stakeholder interests

# Eight COVID-19 Communications Best Practices

## 1. HAVE A PLAN

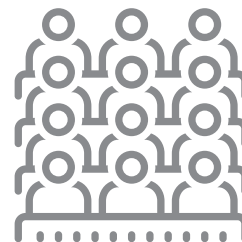


Start by developing a plan that explains clearly what your communications are intended to accomplish, who you need to communicate with, what you need to tell them and why, and how you will communicate as circumstances change. Don't start activating without planning first, even if plans are developed on the fly. Plans can be updated as the situation evolves, but it's better to start with a roadmap.

## 2. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCES

As part of the plan, identify the audiences you need to reach and build a matrix to help understand information needs and concerns for each. Your matrix also can help you identify communications channels for reaching each segment. Audiences may include customers, employees, investors, supply chain partners, host communities, regulators and legislators, among others.

Strategies for reaching audiences in normal times may need to be adjusted. For example, newsrooms are distracted and many editors and reporters are working from home. Seeking earned media coverage for your COVID-19 messaging may not be your best bet, so determine how you can communicate using paid advertising, social media or your website.



## 3. GET YOUR MESSAGES DOWN

Start with a comprehensive set of key messages addressing specifics of the situation for your company, and actions you are taking in response; update these regularly for as long as the crisis persists. Be as clear and candid about what you don't know as about what you do know.

"Your reputation will be enhanced in the long term if you think creatively about what you can do to help in the short term."

Paul Raab

#### 4. TAKE A TEAM APPROACH

In a crisis, you need to have the right people on the bus. For our clients, the crisis response team typically is cross-functional and includes not only business leaders and communicators, but also HR, legal, operations, marketing, government relations, supply chain and finance professionals. Decide how the team will work together, how often it will meet, how team members will communicate in real time and how critical decisions will be made.

As you stand up your response team, assess the support you'll need. If the public health emergency and resulting economic damage will last longer than you think, can you handle it in-house? If not, what outside resources and expertise may you need?



#### 5. OFFER PRACTICAL SUPPORT FOR AFFECTED STAKEHOLDERS

Crises present companies with opportunities to demonstrate genuine concern for stakeholder well-being. Your reputation will be enhanced in the long term if you think creatively about what you can do to help in the short term— particularly for employees, customers and the communities where you operate. Steps taken by our clients include increasing sick leave for hourly employees; supplying food for children who normally eat one or two meals a day at school; supporting daycare for working parents; and extending payment terms for customers who may have trouble paying their bills.

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#### 6. HELP NOW, TAKE CREDIT LATER

Prioritize doing the right thing over getting credit. It's OK to communicate to stakeholders what you're doing to offer support, but companies that pepper the market with too many press releases will undermine the reputational capital they're trying to build. Consumers and communities will remember the companies that stepped up to help. There will be plenty of time to remind them when the crisis has passed.

## 7. LET YOUR VALUES BE YOUR GUIDE

Companies inevitably will encounter competing interests while managing COVID-19 and its business impact, and should rely on core values to make and explain decisions.

For example, some companies are experiencing a surge in demand driven by COVID-19. These companies must strike a balance between the value of employee safety and health, and the value of meeting customer commitments. The solution is to communicate openly with employees about these values and the need for balance – delivering for customers and communities while keeping employees healthy and safe by detailing stringent measures to prevent the spread of disease in the workplace.

## 8. TRUST IS THE GOAL

With so many unknowns and pressure to make smart decisions quickly, the leadership and communications challenges can seem overwhelming.

Our advice to clients is to keep trust as your North Star. Trust is the essential business currency and ultimate asset, hard to earn and easy to lose, especially in times of crisis. When faced with a difficult decision, ask yourself: what action or choice will do the most to help me and my company retain stakeholder trust so that we emerge stronger on the other side?

## LOOKING AHEAD

Challenges facing business leaders and communicators in the weeks ahead may include:

- Significant changes in how you provide your product or service
- Reductions in your workforce or other cost structure adjustments
- Changes in your supply chain
- Updates to your earnings guidance

In addition to these challenges, companies also should think ahead to what happens when restrictions are lifted and economic activity begins to resume. Businesses will need to explain the permanent changes in business practices they'll make to keep returning customers and employees healthy and safe, so that everyone feels confident when some degree of normalcy returns.

### Resources

Public Relations Society of America: Some resources are for members only, others are available to the public.  
Harvard Business Review: Lead Your Business Through the Coronavirus Crisis, and other articles  
McKinsey & Co., Coronavirus: Leading Through the Crisis

### For More Information

Contact: Paul Raab, Managing Partner, Linhart PR  
[praab@linhartpr.com](mailto:praab@linhartpr.com) | 303-951-2551 | [www.linhartpr.com](http://www.linhartpr.com)



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