

COVID-19 The New Normal: Communication is Vital for Business Survival

Whether we like it or not, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world to a different time – a time like we have never imagined before. With social distancing being the new normal, a handshake is not encouraged, but a simple smile and verbal greeting will suffice; video conferences replaced boardroom meetings; information is disseminated digitally; companies are compelled to digitise their operations to safeguard the continuity of their businesses.

Generally, people are resistant to change as change gives rise to uncertainties. More so if these changes are brought upon overnight with little time for a well thought out strategy to be put in place. To address these uncertainties and provide assurance to your stakeholders, a structured communication platform is thus vital for the survival of your business in a crisis.

The survival of your business depends on the speed and clarity of information that is delivered in this fluid situation. The announcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) that took effect on 18 March 2020, left supply chains abruptly disrupted, which resulted in a panic amongst business owners and customers alike. Many businesses were brought to a realisation that their business operations are not nimble enough to continue outside of the office due to the lack of a Business Continuity Plan (“BCP”).

Once your BCP ([click here to read about Business Continuity Plan: Be Prepared for Disruptions](#)) is activated, the next step is to assure your stakeholders that it is business as usual, and to manage their expectations in terms of timelines in delivering and meeting their needs. Precise and prompt communication to your stakeholders will minimise monetary loss that may incur when change takes place in these unprecedented times.

Baker Tilly International has released a Crisis Communication Protocol for member firms in which you will find key processes and structures outlined in this article to help your business to communicate with your stakeholders effectively during and after the MCO period until such time when the economy rebounds.

Setup a Pandemic Communication Team (PCT)

Overview

- **Objective:** focus on all communication efforts that are related to providing assurance to the uncertainties and implications resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic
- **Members:** senior management, heads of departments, and the marketing and communications department
- **Functions:** coordinate and disseminate critical information for the stakeholders such as clients, business associates, suppliers, media, and the broader community; ensure the right messages are able to be delivered in a timely way, and are accurate, informative, useful to key stakeholders and consistent with those of other key stakeholders
- **Communication channels:** Website, social media platforms, email, and other digital/online channels

Roles & Responsibilities

- Development and implementation of the communication strategy
- Delegating and determining role description of team members
- Identifying Spokesperson(s) as the face of your brand / business
- Briefing Spokesperson(s) on the communication process
- Preparing and disseminating external communication material
- Preparing and disseminating materials direct to stakeholders
- Coordinating any media if required and briefing/coaching the Spokesperson(s)
- Monitoring media coverage, including social media chatter, and amending communications strategy and responses as and when required

General Communication Principles in Times of Crisis

Consistent tone used in messages: Trust and credibility can greatly influence your ability to persuade affected persons to follow public health authorities' recommendations during an outbreak or public health response. In a pandemic, where medical authorities are facing public fear and concern, it is vital that all parties are able to have confidence that those 'in charge' have a coordinated and appropriate plan that is being communicated effectively.

The four factors that determine whether an audience, including journalists, perceive a messenger as trusted and credible, include:

- Empathy and care;
- Honesty and openness;
- Dedication and commitment; and
- Competence and expertise.

Orchestrate messages to express the correct tone

- **Empathy and care**

Expressions of empathy can be difficult to incorporate in communications, particularly when a more clinical approach to facts is traditional. When communicating with stressed or anxious stakeholders, the absence of demonstrated empathy can undermine the trust and confidence in the spokesperson.

It is important that empathy is incorporated in any direct communication to stakeholders as early as possible. Over the duration of this crisis you should increase engagement with your stakeholders to remind them of your presence.

For indirect communication, empathetic statements can be more general acknowledgements of the scale of what is being asked of the audience.

- **Honesty and openness**

Honesty and openness are key virtues to establish a foundation of trust with your stakeholders. Great relationships are built on trust, be it personal or in business. However, honesty is not just about telling the truth, but it is about telling the full story truthfully. Half or partial truths are a form of manipulation to blindside and manoeuvre the emotions of the audience towards the desired direction that may achieve a positive outcome for you, yet it is misleading regardless. Honesty can be as simple as pointing out facts and sharing your observations objectively.

Pairing honesty with openness can be challenging because feedback can be hard to receive, but honesty is always the best policy. Honest intentions in speech and action never fail to gain the attention and respect of your audience.

- **Dedication and commitment**

Let stakeholders know that your business has implemented remote-working protocols to allow continuity of your products and services, ensure the impact of this disruption is minimised, and that you are proactive to adapt to new developments of COVID-19 as and when they arise. If you have invested in technology and capacity development within your organisation, be sure to inform the stakeholders about your newly adopted capabilities and how these initiatives can provide certainty and security to help your business in managing and overcoming this crisis. Ultimately, you want your stakeholders to know that, be it working in the office or working from home, the working location will not affect the quality of your products and services.

- **Competence and expertise**

It has become a universal truth that most businesses are in the Red Ocean. With the COVID-19 pandemic in the background, every brand out there is screaming at the top of their lungs on all available digital advertising and promotional platforms. To keep your business afloat and stand above the noise, the digital integration of your business operations is inevitable, and it has to be made known to the public that you stay competent in delivering your products and services. Be generous to share your expertise that is relevant in helping the pandemic-affected public to get through these dire times. For example, it can be a professional article to help businesses who find themselves in financial difficulties due to the pandemic's impact on the market ([click here to read about Corporate Rescue Mechanisms in Times of Crisis](#)), or it can be a thought leadership article that business owners may find useful in managing their employees who are working from home ([click here to read about Leading People Remotely](#)). Here are more examples from other brands that are sharing their expertise, as it also serves as a symbolic representation of the brand's resilience in the face of a crisis and a reminder of the brand's unwavering presence amidst the pandemic tidal wave:

- **DoubleTree**, an American hotel chain owned by Hilton, is famous for their chocolate chip cookies. They shared a video of their recipe, which garnered nearly 250,000 views at the time of writing, for homebound cookie lovers to replicate.
- **Nike**, a global shoes and athletic apparel powerhouse, offers free subscriptions for the Nike Training Club app which you can stream workouts, training programmes and read on expert tips. To create awareness for their free offer, they developed a marketing campaign – Play for the World – to showcase how athletic influencers maintain their fitness routine indoors.
- **IKEA**, the Swedish home furnishings retailer, shows a different side of its strength. Instead of assembling your own IKEA furniture, you can now put together IKEA's signature meatball in your kitchen. IKEA has also kept their online store open just in case you need a saucepan or a pot for your meatball-making journey.

A Guide to Respond to Positive or Possible COVID-19 Case Within Your Organisation

Mollify the public by structuring effective messages: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States of America recommends outbreak-related messages be delivered in the following order:

1. An expression of empathy.
2. What is known and a call for action, including Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
3. What is known and what is not known, and how answers will be obtained for what is not yet known.
4. Explanations of what public health actions are being taken and why.
5. A statement of commitment.
6. When additional information will be provided.
7. Where to find more information in the meantime.

Conclusion

To become the leading brand in the market, you need to play a critical part in ensuring that your stakeholders stay calm, focused, and engaged. Especially in a time of an unparalleled crisis, communication is more important now than ever before, it is a trick of the trade for businesses to stay connected with the audience. Always aim to be the clear voice that guide your stakeholders to find hope in the chaos and realise calmness in the storm.

Author Background



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Rhoda heads the Corporate Communications department of Baker Tilly Malaysia. As an advocate of the Firm, her role includes using strategic and innovative communications to deliver brand excellence for the Firm. She works closely with the management team to shape the Firm's image and values; and ensures that appropriate methods are employed to communicate them to the public. Her responsibilities include identifying press opportunities and developing content to be disseminated via social media, websites, newsletters, press releases and any other distribution channels. She ensures all messaging aligns with the Firm's key business strategies. Rhoda also serves as the Firm's media liaison and formal spokesperson, conducting briefings and press conferences.

Besides communications, Rhoda oversees the Firm's branding and marketing strategies, i.e. develop, implement and execute strategic marketing plans, coordinate and produce materials representing the Firm's businesses, to create an overarching image that represents the Firm in a positive light.

Rhoda has more than 8 years of experience in marketing and communications and has been invited for speaking engagements on relevant topics at conferences.

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