



Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Strategic communications considerations

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) global health crisis gripping the world is having devastating impacts on lives, economies, our everyday way of life and those businesses and companies we rely on each day.

At Bastion Reputation Management our trademark is that we help our clients be their best on their best day and the best they can be on their worst day.

While the circumstances we each face are unique, we all want to do the right thing by the people who matter most to us. Making and communicating the difficult decisions needed to manage the effects of the virus in a timely manner is crucial to looking after your people, ensuring business continuity and maintaining the trust and confidence of key stakeholders.

The following overview summarises some of these challenges and provides some considerations to manage these in the best way possible.

Two core principles of all COVID-19 communications plans

While communicating in a timely and effective way is critical and communicating poorly may actually be dangerous, doing either in isolation is potentially highly damaging to people, your organisation, your clients and your reputation. We strongly advise that the following two principles underpin any communications planning.

- 1. Base all communication on the advice of government health experts:** don't be tempted to go it alone and where you need to make decisions that go beyond government advice, ensure this is based on careful consideration of and aligned with that advice and importantly, not a reaction to panic, speculation or hyperbole
- 2. Your communications and operational plans must align:** business continuity planning can often be mistaken for an staff email and FAQs. Proper operational planning should come first, which should then be communicated ensuring those people who matter feel reassured and informed. A holding position and advice that further information will come can help to minimise anxiety while you work through complex decisions.

Four pillars to effective COVID-19 communications

It is important to create a single and credible source of truth for the people who matter most to you to engender trust, confidence and reassurance at all levels of the organisation. The following four pillars are designed to help structure your communications plans.

1. **IMPACT: How the situation is impacting your organisation**

Communicate often

During a crisis, how you communicate with your staff and customers is key to show care, provide reassurance, and to demonstrate leadership. You should communicate regularly and reinforce that their health and safety is your main priority and make sure updates or changes are shared as they occur. It is important to also clearly outline guidelines, policies and plans are available to support them and protect the business.

Acknowledge people's concerns and the uncertainty

There are still many unknowns about the virus and a lot of what is happening is unprecedented. Acknowledge that it is normal and very human to feel concerned and anxious. Let people know you're being guided by government and health advice to get the right processes and practices in place.

Be honest, transparent and clear

While your terms and conditions may not require refunds, reimbursements or other forms of financial support, consideration should be given to what your stakeholders and the wider community will deem to be fair. For example, you may respond differently to cancellations due to government-imposed restrictions and closures than you would cancellations that are a customer's personal choice.



2. PREPAREDNESS: How your organisation is planning ahead

Have clear plans and policies

Many businesses are looking at how they can manage and support employees who are affected by the Coronavirus or need to quarantine. It is important to share with your staff clear guidelines, when they should stay home or get tested, what leave they should take if they need to quarantine or get sick, and how they can work remotely if needed.

Let your customers and clients know what you're doing

How you manage your operations or business at this time can directly affect your customers. Let them know what you're doing to make your business a safe environment to visit and what controls and measures you have in place to protect their interests.

Cancelling activities/events or closing venues

This situation is moving rapidly. If you need to cancel events for health and safety reasons, where possible make the call early and be definitive. It is important to provide clarity and certainty sooner rather than later so people can change their plans and logistics. This also shows respect for your partners, operational support, suppliers and third parties who may suffer financially or reputationally as a result of the cancellation.

3. CONTRIBUTION: How your organisation is supporting others

While we are all focused on the potential impacts to our organisations and those who matter in the immediate and long-term, there are also many ways in which our organisations are also contributing to global efforts through their work, products and expertise. From workers and volunteers, to researchers and experts, it's important that communications point to these contributions to demonstrate care, empathy and your support for the community.

4. CITIZENSHIP: How your organisation is demonstrating leadership

The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis'. One brush stroke stands for danger and being aware of it, and the other for opportunity and how this should also be recognised.

As organisations we have a responsibility and an opportunity to be leaders when the wider community may be concerned, anxious and panicked. As we have witnessed, this behaviour can lead to aggression, xenophobia and poor judgment. As organisations we can influence this by understanding our role as global citizens and ensuring that our communications and business decisions always align to the same core set of values that drive our businesses daily.

Bastion Reputation Management is one of Australia's leading strategic communications and issues management consultancies and has the specialist expertise required to help your organisation plan, prepare and respond to this emerging crisis.

If you would like to have an informal conversation about how we can support you in this difficult time, please contact Bastion RM CEO, Clare Gleghorn on +61 407 400 695, or Bastion RM's Head of Risk, Issues and Crisis, Anna Gillett on +61 419 160 377. Alternatively you can email enquiries@bastionrm.com.au