

COVID-19 Communications

Challenges and Practice Points for Organizations and Executives

Public health crises present distinct challenges for the organizations and executives affected by or tasked with confronting them. Organizations need to balance the public's appetite for information with its tendency to panic, and balance public and employee safety with maintaining business operations and remaining solvent.

These essential dynamics are all at play for leaders confronting the coronavirus pandemic as it unfolds globally and in their communities. Never in living memory, though, have *so many* organizations confronted the same crisis at once, each fighting to hear and be heard in a fast-moving media and communications environment demanding content but dominated by static.

Goldberg Segalla's **Coronavirus Task Force** has helped numerous clients with the critical legal and business decisions that have arisen from this crisis. Many of those decisions have involved complex challenges related to internal and external communications. We prepared this desk-reference with key considerations and practice points to assist clients as they continue to navigate issues related to workplace illness, staff reductions, abrupt changes in business operations, social media and digital media, and general reputation management in this unprecedented environment.

General Considerations: Communicating in the Time of Coronavirus

Some considerations apply to any organization or executive operating in the coronavirus environment, regardless of industry, location, or the particular challenge at hand. For the duration of this pandemic, keep the following axioms in mind:

1. Identify a crisis-response team (ideally before the crisis).

This team *must* include a senior communicator, who should at least be present for all high-level decision-making.

2. Fact-checking is time well-spent.

As public trust in government and media recede, research has shown private companies are increasingly standing in as sources of reliable information. Understand that, for the duration of the crisis, your organization will be an information broker.

3. Identify senior representatives to speak for the organization, both internally and externally.

Your internal PR team and outside consultants can help, but they shouldn't be out front. The appearance of their intervention will immediately damage credibility.

4. Avoid self-congratulatory messages.

If you want to tout what your organization is doing to help, frame it in a way that invites your audience to participate.

5. Be useful.

You know what your own inbox looks like. Organizations are rushing to convey coronavirus-related messages to virtually every email address they can find on file. Know your audience, know what they need, and give it to them.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS IN CRISIS MODE

Effective internal communications will be critical for maintaining safety and productivity. Poor internal communications could spell disaster, as negative stories leak from the inside out. Internal communications should be top-of-mind for all organizations.

1. Communicate early to the entire organization. Set a tone, relay the most critical information, and signal that high-level representatives are available to field questions and concerns.
 2. Adequately prepare front-line managers and senior office administrators to field questions and relay key messages. Rely on them to disseminate (and repeat) information.
 3. Make sure employees know where to get the latest information (for example, daily emails or the intranet) and be consistent in delivering it.
 4. Empathize. Employees' unique needs may not be immediately apparent. Decision-makers and communicators must strive to hear out the questions and concerns of all employees without judgment or hasty conclusions, and to respond with intelligent empathy. Vagueness, evasion, and rote responses will do irreparable damage.
- ▶ Click here to access our Law360 article, "[Preparing Policies, Internal Comms for Public Health Crises.](#)"

COMMUNICATING ILLNESS AND ACTIVE PUBLIC RISKS

Health care facilities, long-term care facilities, and food service enterprises are particularly susceptible, but any organization could identify a case of employee, resident, or occupant illness and need to communicate this to the public. Keep the following in mind:

1. Be transparent and straightforward about what you know and what you don't know. Don't dissemble or delay; lead with the most important information, even if it's uncomfortable.
 2. Communicate how your organization is addressing or plans to address this situation and ensure the safety of all stakeholders.
 3. Anticipate and prepare answers for questions that reporters will be likely to ask. These could include questions about safety measures as well as workplace policies or even health care benefits. You don't have to answer everything, but you should know *how* you would answer everything if you were forced to do so.
 4. Follow the latest federal guidance (e.g., relating to HIPAA) regarding the release of personal/private information.
 5. Use the opportunity to communicate your organization's overall COVID-19 response measures.
- ▶ Click here to access our guide: [COVID-19 and Workplace Illness: Responding to Media Inquiries.](#)

COMMUNICATING ONGOING OR ALTERED BUSINESS OPERATIONS

Organizations will have to adapt quickly to remain solvent while ensuring employee and stakeholder safety. Restaurants and retail shops are suddenly becoming take-out and delivery businesses, distilleries are switching from spirits to sanitizer, and manufacturers are suddenly re-tooling to produce ventilators and PPE. It is crucial to communicate these changes clearly both internally and externally.

1. Lead with the "what." In communications about critical business changes, the essential details—hours of operation, lines of communication, etc.—should come before generalities.
2. ...but don't forget the "why." In an environment marked by an increased sensitivity to safety and labor issues, explain exactly why it is crucial to your employees, local community, and other stakeholders to remain in business.
3. Explain the safety measures you are taking. Whether it's the use of PPE, social distancing on a production line, office closures, nightly sanitization, or some combination, explain this in detail—internally as well as externally.

COMMUNICATING LAYOFFS AND COST-CUTTING MEASURES

COVID-19 and measures taken to stop its spread have created economic conditions that have killed businesses and forced others to find ways to cut costs—including reducing staff to a degree and at a speed never before seen in U.S. history. When communicating layoffs and cost-cutting measures, keep the following in mind:

1. Communicate internally first. Your employees should not learn about layoffs from the news, social media, or each other.
2. Communicate from the top. Your HR team can carry messages about workplace policies and your IT department can communicate about remote-work concerns, but your organization’s CEO, managing partner, director, or chair should initially communicate and answer all questions related to layoffs.
3. Understand and leverage the media’s and public’s unusual degree of sympathy. Never before have audiences responded with such understanding to news of mass layoffs. Because of the scope and speed of COVID-19, there’s a sense that “we’re all in the same boat,” and audiences will be less critical of organizational decisions to lay off staff than at other times. Because of this, you elect not to share exact numbers or other details about layoffs that could damage your reputation with vendors or other partners.
4. ...but make yourself accessible. Reporters will appreciate your senior leadership responding in detail to inquiries and engaging in a dialogue. Respond to every inquiry, even if you share the same message each time.
5. Craft your message with your recovery in mind. Frame (and explain) your decision as a difficult but ultimately smart management move that will protect the greatest number of employees now, grant swift access to expanded unemployment benefits for those let go, and lay the groundwork for your return to full-strength (and, hopefully, rehiring).

SOCIAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Social and digital media will provide fast and effective channels for relaying key messages. These channels also present considerable risks, though.

1. Relay appropriate restrictions and guidelines to the social media team—this is not “business as usual.”
2. Assign an experienced team member to monitor social media and respond to all interactions according to internally agreed-upon guidelines. Avoid appearing unresponsive, but be careful to stay on-message.
3. Consider identifying (and sticking with) a public “face” of your organization’s response, especially on social and digital media or broadcast appearances. Consider having a CEO communicate internally via video shared by email to all employees. Put a representative on local TV, and share the clip to your social channels. As Dr. Antony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases has demonstrated, the human touch is invaluable in a crisis. Messages that come from a person—even “DIY”-style cell phone videos—will go further on social media, and these individuals can lend an organization significant credibility in a time of crisis.

The categories above identify just a few of the communications challenges that have arisen because of COVID-19.

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