

Reopening and Readjusting: Communicating COVID-19 Policies to All Stakeholders

Article By:

Brett F. Clements

Michael P. Wissa

Jeffrey Skinner

In our [last post](#), we discussed policy changes and new procedures that companies should consider as they reopen amid the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly given the increase in cases in many parts of the country. But companies cannot change policies in a vacuum: they must clearly and effectively communicate these changes to employees, customers, and the public. Clear, written policies will be ineffective if they are not communicated effectively.

Written Communications at Physical Locations As we have seen in recent weeks, retailers in particular are being confronted with customers refusing to follow new policies and challenging employees or other customers about the restrictions. Businesses may not be able to completely avoid challenging visitors, but they can work to alleviate these problems through their communication strategies. Here are a few recommendations for how businesses can communicate effectively to their target audiences.

- **Create positive, written communications to convey the company's efforts.** Businesses should communicate with employees and customers regarding new policies. In addition to describing new policies clearly, use positive messaging about building community and protecting people who spend time at their physical locations. Social buy-in will increase the likelihood that everyone will follow new policies.
- **Provide clear signage.** Develop effective signage at physical locations to convey new policies, like mask and social distancing requirements. Signs should be direct, uncluttered, and relatively simple (*g.*, "Maintain Social Distance" or "Mask Required"). The more information on a sign, the less likely people will pay attention to it.
- **Use physical markings to encourage social distancing.** If social distancing will be required at customer-facing locations, provide clear markings on the floor or other physical objects to inform customers. Confusing markers will only frustrate customers. Once your business reopens, assess how well the markers are working. Adjust the markers to account for unforeseen reactions by customers.
- **Consider "traffic" patterns.** Businesses with aisles of products or hallways may want to

consider single direction traffic patterns. If this is feasible, provide clear signage indicating the traffic patterns.

- **Remind customers and employees to follow hygiene recommendations.** Businesses should consider adding signage in restrooms and by kitchen sinks to remind employees and customers to wash their hands, avoid touching their faces, and use hand sanitizer or masks.

Employee Communication with Customers

- **Educate employees.** Prepare written policies to inform on-site employees of any changes in policy or procedures that they will need to communicate to customers or visitors. Make the policies clear. Require that employees review the policies and sign a statement confirming that they have read and understand them. Provide opportunities for employees to ask questions so that they understand the policies and can communicate them effectively.
- **Prepare employees for problematic customers.** For employees who provide a significant amount of customer-facing service, provide training in how to address customers who question or refuse to follow new policies (e., wearing masks or social distancing). While some negative interactions with customers may be unavoidable, employees who are already equipped with positive-focused talking points or ways of addressing problematic customers can help to avoid negative events.
- **Train customer service representatives who offer information by telephone.** If the business has a customer service phone line or call center, provide operators with thorough, written information about the company's policies for reopening. These types of communications can provide the business with opportunities to inform customers about the steps the company is taking to protect them. On the other end of the spectrum, customer service representatives who are ill-informed or ill-equipped to answer customer questions can inadvertently harm the brand.

Marketing Communications with the Public

- **Consider (carefully) telling the public about additional safety measures.** A company may wish to communicate the efforts it has undertaken to keep people safe in physical locations as it attempts to bring people back. If a company decides to do this, it should make sure that the marketing language is accurate. In the best case scenario, marketing claims about cleaning or other measures taken on-site should be vetted by an attorney. And as always, companies should be sure to vet any statements made to ensure they are accurate to comply with securities laws.
- **Prepare for media inquiries in advance.** As marketing professionals know, media outlets may run stories without giving a company much time or advance notice to comment or prepare a statement. Not all contingencies can be anticipated, but more likely scenarios, like a COVID-19 diagnosis of an employee or customer, should be discussed. Abiding by all applicable privacy laws, a company should be ready to issue a brief, clear statement that explains what happened, what the business is doing to address the event, and what steps the company has taken to keep other employees and customers safe. Due to the potential legal ramifications or reputational damage, a business should seek counsel from an attorney before issuing a public statement.

As the pandemic has continued, and as local orders and regulations have changed almost day-to-day, many of us have likely visited a business where the policies were unclear. We encourage you to develop a clear communication program for your company to ensure higher rates of compliance. Even if your business has reopened partially or fully without a thorough communication plan, it is not

too late to develop one now.

Next week, in the final post of this three-part series on Reopening and Readjusting, we will discuss how businesses can prepare for a potential infection at the company or a broader resurgence of cases.

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