

# Communicating During the Pandemic

## FOUR QUESTIONS YOUR BUSINESS SHOULD CONSIDER TODAY

**H**ow do you craft a communication strategy when you can't predict what will happen?

Being prepared for the unknown always is the ultimate crisis communication objective but never has the challenge loomed larger than in the complex and dynamic world of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, more than ever, the answer to that question is not, "Since we don't know, we can't plan." It's, "We don't know, so we must plan."

Fingers on my keyboard in early May, I hesitate to predict what the coronavirus landscape will look like when *Grain Journal* readers pick up this issue in mid-June. What I do know is that thoughtful organizations should consider how the coming months may unfold, how they will respond, and what form their communication should take.

Since COVID-19 began to roll over the United States with intensity in March, its impact and subsequent communication challenges have varied

by business sector and region. As an essential industry, agriculture has continued the work of keeping people fed.

But even within this sector, there's been no one-size-fits-all solution. Major COVID-19 hot spots emerged for meat processors and resulted in serious illness, death, and supply disruptions, all major communication challenges. Some ag businesses, like local

elevators, may not have been affected directly but have had to inform employees and customers as to how they adapted operations to keep people safe.

It's no exaggeration to say I've handled hundreds of crises in my career—from elevator and refinery fires and explosions, to anhydrous incidents that prompted evacuations, to product recalls, natural disasters, and a variety of serious business issues that led to protracted legal action. While each were challenges in their own right, the majority had clear outcomes, an established response game plan, and a reasonable sense of duration, even if there were unexpected twists and turns along the way.

Not so much with COVID-19. Even as epidemiologists share projections, and as elected officials issue and then ease restrictions, it's hard to predict accurately what lies ahead or how long the world may grapple with coronavirus fallout. Many experts believe a second wave could hit this fall, just in time for harvest in many parts of North America.

While I've handled hundreds of crises in my career, I've also written 10 times that in full-blown and miniature response plans, standby statements, and key messages. Each time a colleague or client called with, "I'm sorry to bother you, but we could have a problem," I was happy to oblige. Time invested in plans that are never used is far better than

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being caught unprepared and suffering the consequences.

### Questions to Ask Yourself

With that principle in mind, ask yourself these questions, and lay the foundation now for what could be ahead:

#### 1. What have we already experienced or observed? What would we do differently?

Over the past few months, you may have been significantly affected by COVID-19 with ill employees, orders to close, or the need to curtail operations. How did you communicate with your employees, customers, and others? Were your messages clear? Did you instill confidence in your employees that their health and well-being were your priority? Did your customers support operational changes and feel confident that you could meet their needs? What would you have done differently? What issues arose for which you were unprepared? If you've been closed, how will you reopen and ensure that employees and customers feel comfortable to move forward?

Or, due to geography or other factors, you largely have been unaffected so far. Maybe your response has been limited to encouraging handwashing or requiring facemasks. Even so, you've likely observed events in similar businesses in other regions and wondered how you would have handled them.

Either way, now is the time to refresh or create a crisis response and communication strategy to carry you through a potential next phase of the pandemic.

#### 2. Have we laid our crisis communication foundation?

As you create a formal strategy, or get an expert to assist you, make sure you:

### Communication Best Practices

- Be timely.
- Communicate regularly.
- Remember what matters to your audience.
- Demonstrate that you have a plan.
- Deliver communication from known and trusted sources.
- Be as transparent as possible.
- Rely on existing communication tools when possible.
- Match communication tools to the audience.
- Keep messages consistent to all audiences.
- Stay connected with local officials, first responders, and law enforcement.

- Enlist a group of your leaders to brainstorm likely scenarios and game plans. This should include possibilities like COVID-19 outbreaks involving employees, supply chain breakdowns, and economic challenges. Craft policies and other responses for each. You might not anticipate everything, but you'll establish a foundation from which to move ahead. This also is the time to formalize your information flow between leaders and key teams like human resources and health and safety to ensure that everyone is informed and contributes to decision-making.

- Create and communicate critical policies like sick time, cleaning and sanitizing of facilities and equipment, and remote work. If remote work is recommended, plan now to ensure those employees will have appropriate

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equipment and internet access. Lack of broadband in rural America has hampered rural workers and students as they attempt to operate from home.

- Identify your primary audiences and understand their greatest concerns. First should be your employees who need to know how you will protect their health on the job (think about tools like work-from-home policies, social distancing, and protective equipment). They also will be concerned about possible job loss.

Second are your customers, whether they are farmers dumping loads at elevators, grain purchasers awaiting shipments at mills or export terminals, or others in your supply chain. Their top concerns likely are health, safety, and supply security—how will you continue to meet their needs, particularly if your facility has a serious outbreak?

In addition to these two audiences, list others with whom you may need to communicate, like local communities and government officials.

- Craft your key messages. While final details will be determined by circumstance, you can draft standby messages that meld your values with audience concerns and action. Most of all, you must demonstrate empathy and action. One example might be: "As it always is at this challenging time, the health of our employees and customers is our priority. That's why we will limit access to our offices, conduct all business with social distancing, and ask employees to stay home if they don't feel well."

You'll use these key messages as the foundation for talking points for leaders who work with employees and customers. Combined with situation specifics, these will help you develop other means of communication, including fact sheets, frequently asked questions, employee and customer emails, media statements, and more.

- Round up additional resources. In the heat of a crisis, you may need outside support and guidance from experts, such as health and safety consultants, human resource specialists, employment law authorities, or crisis communications professionals who can provide additional insights and bench strength. Determine who those people are now. You may never need them, but you'll want to know they're there.

- Stay attuned to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, and adjust your policies accordingly. And if an employee has a confirmed case of COVID-19, and you must communicate health information, be sure you understand notification requirements and privacy issues related to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Currently, a confirmed diagnosis requires informing contacts (including co-workers, customers, and others) of possible exposure and your action steps, along with a 14-day self-quarantine for the employee, who cannot be named. Helpful information on HIPAA and COVID-19 is available at [HHH.gov](http://HHH.gov).

### **3. Do we have the right communication tools and timing?**

You know who you need to reach.

## **Four Questions to Ask Yourself**

1. What have we already experienced or observed? What would we do differently?
2. Have we laid our crisis communication foundation?
3. Do we have the right communication tools and timing?
4. How will we manage media inquiries?

You know what you want to say. How are you going to get the information out?

Now is the time to assess your communication tools and determine which you'll use to reach each audience. If you discover gaps, fill them now. While it's possible to launch a new communication tool during a crisis, it's not easy. Your resources already will be stretched, and you'll have the dual challenges of learning on the fly and trying to drive audiences to an unfamiliar tool. Consider how many of us fumbled as schools, churches, and workplaces migrated to Zoom and similar video platforms (don't forget to take your microphone off mute!).

Think also about timing. While you'll announce time-sensitive developments right away, your employees and customers will gain confidence if you communicate regularly. Here are tools, some you may have and others you may want to implement now, that could help:

- Email news updates (individual and group).
- Text updates (individual and group).
- Small group, socially distanced personal contact.
- A public website.
- An employee intranet.
- Virtual meetings (by conference call or video service).
- Newsletters (print or electronic).
- Statement stuffers (for updates, but not urgent information).
- Social media posts.
- News media (for public announcements).
- Video messages from leadership (most suitable for larger organizations).

#### 4. How will we manage media inquiries?

As I write, there's little else in the news but COVID-19 and related economic developments. Within agriculture, the spotlight has been on the meatpacking and other labor-intensive industries and the food supply chain. Even if you aren't at the epicenter of breaking news, you could be asked to comment on how your operation is affected, your own response, or how you're addressing a confirmed employee case. Include media response planning in your brainstorming. Identify your spokespersons and prepare them. Decide whether you'll do socially distanced in-person, video conference or phone interviews. or if you'll respond to inquiries via email.

Rely on your key messages and other reference materials to ensure a consistent response. Get communication support if you need it. Remember,

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failure to participate in a news story may allow others the opportunity to fill the void – and you might not like the outcome.

This is a lot of prep work, but it's critical, and there's a bonus. Once you've scoped out these essential elements for

COVID-19 response, you'll have the basics for creating a template crisis communication plan you can adapt to a broad range of future incidents and issues.

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