



Crisis Communication 101:

COVID-19 Edition

The world is not the one we knew a couple of months ago. Everything's changed. So, you can't just market the way you've always done or send business communications like nothing's going on. Your communications must adapt as rapidly as the world around you.

This e-book will help you do that. During this crisis, and hopefully in whatever business crisis you may face in the future.



What's in This E-Book

To help you address the situation right now and be more prepared in the future, we've split this e-book into two parts:

Part 1

How to Adapt Your Communications and Marketing During COVID-19

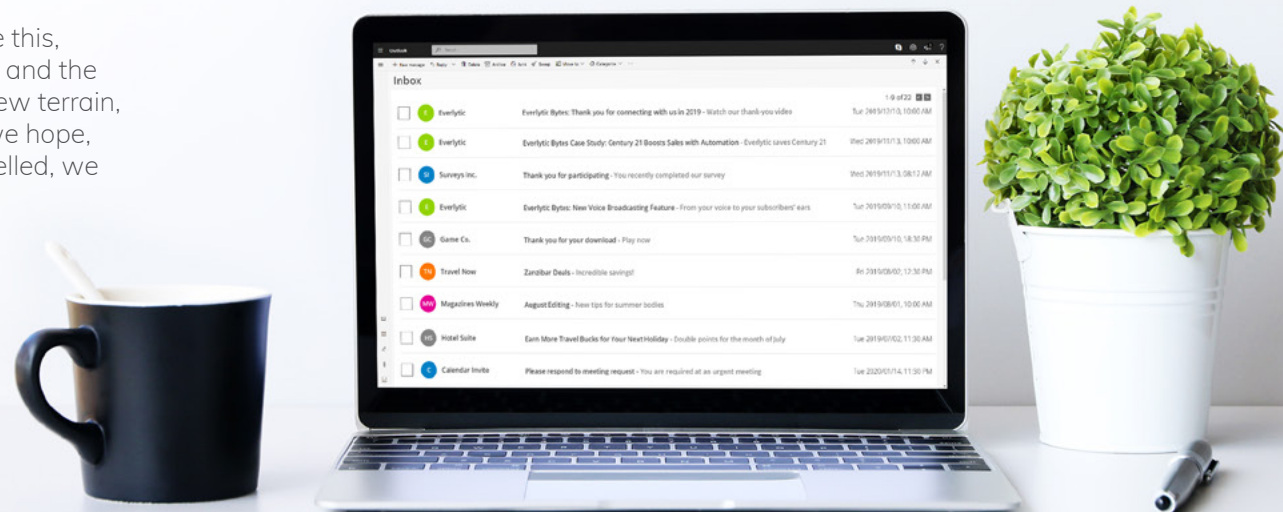
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The world has been taken over by COVID-19 and in a global crisis like this, we've all had to adjust – the way we live, the way we parent our kids, and the way we do business. If your business is scrambling to navigate this new terrain, like passing pilgrims on the same arduous path, we salute you. And we hope, with a few shared tips about the parts of the road we've already travelled, we can all help each other get to our destinations safely.

Part 2

How to Compile a Crisis Communication Framework for Future Crises

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Part 1

How to Adapt Your Communications and Marketing During COVID-19

There's a lot of good advice out there on this topic. Here's some of our favourites.



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Focus on Employees First

Lockdown, illness, social distancing, and the schools closing has put immense pressure on employees and their families. [CMS Wire](#) recommends lightening this load by ensuring that your team is informed and onboard with the company strategy. This is summed up nicely in their one sentence: Your team is your business family, take care of them first.

Their tips for doing this include:

1 Communicating often and clearly:

In times of chaos, it's critical to keep your employees informed of the facts to ease their minds and to avoid rumours spreading.

2 Being honest and transparent:

If you don't know, say so. If you do know, be transparent. The more open and clear you can be about what's going on, the more secure your staff will feel.

3 Taking care of your employees:

Uncertain and unexpected times like these require you to offer extra support to your employees. Do everything you can to help them manage their load – under these circumstances, your compassion will reap a deeper sense of loyalty.



Part 1

How to Adapt Your Communications
and Marketing During COVID-19

Communicate with Customers

Once you've got communication with your employees covered, CMS Wire says the next audience to address is your clients. And the same rules apply; communicate as often as necessary, be transparent, and do what you can to help.

If something's come up in your business that affects your clients, let them know how you're addressing it, include achievable milestones to do it, and communicate your progress along the way. Like the support you offer your employees, navigating this process clearly and openly with customers can also improve loyalty to your brand.

Communicating with the Market

If your business is in the public eye by nature, or if the crisis has made it this way, you'll need to communicate with the broader market too. For this, you'll need a crisis communication framework. We cover this in Part 2.

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Keep Communicating

During the COVID-19 lockdown and the uncertainty of the global pandemic, many businesses are cutting costs as a survival strategy. And one of the first places they cut is marketing and communication. But we've got a different take on it: now's the best time to keep communicating.

Why?

Because the world as we know it has changed drastically in a very short time. People want to preserve the parts of their lives that are important to them and your business may play a role in that. So, if you haven't already communicated your COVID-19 approach to your clients and other stakeholders, and you still can, you should – soon.

As overwhelming and destructive as this crisis is, it won't last forever. And when the dust settles, it will have made a difference to your clients and employees that you kept engaging with them. This kind of brand loyalty can help your business get back up and running faster when all this is over.

Additionally, our email stats show that email opens are **26.95% higher during lockdown compared to the 2019 Black Friday** month of November. So, people are reading.

Part 1

How to Adapt Your Communications and Marketing During COVID-19

How to Communicate During COVID-19



1. Focus on Low-Cost Channels

Budgets are tight. If you can't get through the pandemic at normal speed on your company reserves, focus on the more affordable channels, like email, SMS, and social media. According to **Forbes**, you can also get more from your social initiatives by asking your employees to authentically share your company content.



2. Address Services Clients Need

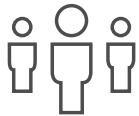
The **Journal Blog** recommends focussing on the services that your clients rely on you for – the ones they really need during this time – rather than creating new ones. Google, for example, has rolled out free Hangouts, Audible is giving away free audiobooks, and many organisations are offering discounts and payment plans on key services.



3. Stay Ready to Adapt

Every day, there's a new development in this pandemic. Planning too far ahead just isn't feasible. Keep your sights on the short-term and be ready to change your strategy as your environment and social circumstances change. In our Marketing department, for example, we're taking it month by month, focusing more on brand awareness and supporting clients' needs, and less on converting leads.

How to Communicate During COVID-19 (cont.)



4. Stay Authentic

Don't say and do things just because everyone else is doing it. This is a chance to show who you are as a business. **Gee Ranasinha on Business2Community** says that, while a health crisis isn't a time to be opportunistic, it's still a chance to be strategic. Take time to think about this in relation to your audience's needs, so your approach benefits everyone.



5. Personalise Everything

There are millions of people sitting on the couch, ready and able to read your messaging. Capture their attention by speaking to them as directly and personally as you can. On email, you can use personalisation tags and dynamic content tools for this. On social media, target specific audiences with information that adds value to them.



6. Share Helpful Content

People's buying patterns are inconsistent right now, and with the lockdown, many stores are closed. So, focus on maintaining and growing brand awareness with content that helps people. After all, that's what most audiences need – a helping hand, not a sales pitch.

Read the case study on how **Flight Centre** used dynamic content to **boost website traffic** from email by **388.72%**.

[Read Now](#)

Use content to draw people to your brand with tips from our **Guide to Inbound Marketing**.

[Read Now](#)

This is also a great time to go the extra mile. Depending on your business, you can do this by checking in with clients to make sure they're okay and offering support where possible. After all, we're all in this together.

How to Communicate During COVID-19 (cont.)



7. Create Tactful Messaging

A great tip from **Google** is to be conscious of your messaging and imagery. Now isn't the time to be funny or insensitive to people's pain by sending messages about touching, being out and about, or behaving like nothing's changed. Make sure your messaging is considerate, helpful, honest, and kind.

Leverage your **content marketing mission statement** during this time to make sure your messaging is aligned to the heart of your brand.

[Read More](#)

8. Adapt Your SEO Keywords

According to **Media Update**, another good strategy during COVID-19 is to adapt your SEO keywords to ones that your target audience will likely be searching at this time. This can also include creating more content about the pandemic, the lockdown, and how you can support the people you'd like to attract to your business while we're in the thick of it – always reference **SA's Corona Virus Resource Portal** or the **WHO** to ensure your information is accurate.

Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures. And a global pandemic like COVID-19 is pretty extraordinary. So, if you're making changes in your business to lessen the long-term impact, we understand. But be careful not to overcompensate by making it harder for you to pick back up when this is all over.



9. Review Your Business Strategy

What will the 'new normal' look like once this pandemic has passed? Will your business still be relevant in the way it was a few months ago? Take this time to review the parts of your business that have been affected already and consider readjusting your strategy so it aligns better with your clients' current and potential future needs.

Many experts recommend adjusting the style of your communications during this time, while others suggest you go on as usual. While we don't recommend keeping everything running as is (a mistake US air carrier, **Spirit Airlines** made), we do take a feather from those supporters' caps to not over-compensate or take advantage. Stay balanced, so your communications are authentic, relevant, and measured.

Part 2

How to Compile a Crisis Communication Framework for Future Crises

Like any traumatic event, a business crisis can often leave the people managing it feeling overwhelmed and panicked, unable to make effective decisions quickly or know what to do next. It can also result in multiple different people managing the process in different ways, sending conflicting messages into the market.

To ensure your business can respond quickly, tactfully, and effectively in a crisis, get agreement on the communication process **before** the crisis occurs. This way, everyone already knows what their role is and what the strategy is, resulting in a much smoother, cohesive message to all stakeholders.

Pre-Crisis Preparation

The first steps to prepping a crisis communication framework involve identifying what those crises may be, who will be on the crisis management team, prepping those people for their roles, prepping your systems, and planning what you're going to say to which stakeholders.

Based on advice by **Bernstein Crisis Management**, these are the **top 10 steps of crisis communications**.

Step 1 Gather Your Team

Start by bringing a small group of executives together for your crisis communications team. This should include:

- Your company CEO or MD
- Your PR or communications executive (or your outsourced agency / consultant)
- Your legal counsel
- The heads of your major divisions
- Any critical subject-matter experts

Tip: The court of law should not be the only concern in your communications. Experienced crisis communications experts know that a brand can be destroyed in the public eye long before court proceedings are finalised. Ensure that your legal counsel supports finding tactful ways to stay responsive and forthcoming with the public to protect your company's public reputation too.



Pre-Crisis Preparation (cont.)

Step 2 Anticipate & Plan for Crises

Once you've identified your Crisis Communication Team, bring everyone together to define what a crisis is for your business and brainstorm the kinds of crises it's most likely to experience. Then see what documents and other support tools you have on hand already. This has at least two immediate benefits:

- You may find that some crises can be avoided just by making a few adjustments to your operations.
- You can start thinking about best-case scenarios, worst-case scenarios, and potential responses.

Step 3 Identify & Train Spokespeople

Only authorised team members should be permitted to speak for the company. These members should be pre-screened and trained to communicate publicly under strenuous and potentially hostile circumstances.

You can also train people to be spokespeople for certain degrees of crises or for certain departments or subjects. This lessens the load on any one spokesperson and ensures that a reputable person is available to address the situation no matter what arises.

Beyond this, **Cristina Roman**, a content marketer and social media strategist, says you may want to compile a Q&A document for other representatives, like call centre agents and social media managers to use.

Pre-Crisis Preparation (cont.)

Step 4 Set Up Notification Systems

You can't wait until a crisis to figure out how you're going to communicate with your audience – you need to set up a system and a contact list long before that. The best channels for crisis communications include:



Social Media

This is a strong way to communicate with your followers urgently. **Cristina Roman** recommends creating profiles on the channels you don't normally share on too, so you can respond to crises on whatever channel they erupt on.



Voice Broadcasting

This enables you to send a pre-recorded or text-to-speech audio message to your contacts as a voice call. It's one of the most effective channels for urgent messages as it calls everyone on your list within minutes and you can track who didn't answer, so you can contact them a different way if needed.



Email

Email isn't the fastest channel when sending urgent communications, but it's a credible channel that can carry much more information. This makes it a good support for the other channels listed here.



SMS

Most SMS popups are read within minutes and it doesn't require mobile data to receive – this is highly effective, particularly in South Africa.



Push Notifications

These allow you to send messages instantly to anyone who's signed up for push notifications on your website or mobile app.

For speed and consistency, look for a system that allows you to communicate via all these channels and automate communications. You can even set messages up ahead of time, so when / if the time comes, you can tweak them with the specifics of the situation and send.

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Pre-Crisis Preparation (cont.)

Step 5 Set up Monitoring Systems

It's always good to know what's being said about you in the media, so you can adapt your communications and steer the conversation. But, in a crisis, it's critical. Good social listening tools for doing this include:

- Google Alerts
- Hootsuite
- Talkwater
- BrandsEye
- Meltwater
- Radian6

Ensure that a communications professional is monitoring this constantly, so you can respond urgently to public opinion if needed.

Step 6 Know Your Stakeholders

To make sure all your stakeholders have the correct information ASAP, know who your stakeholders are and what they need to know. Top stakeholders usually include:

- Employees
- Clients
- Suppliers
- Partners
- Investors

These people all function as PR representatives for your business in their own personal networks, whether you like it or not – make sure you communicate quickly and clearly so the message they're communicating is as close to yours as possible.

Pre-Crisis Preparation (cont.)

Step 7 Create Your Holding Statements

Your company's response to a crisis depends largely on the specifics of the crisis itself, so not all messages can be prepped ahead of time. But it's good to have one (or more) first-contact response prepared for a range of scenarios that you can send out immediately. This will let your stakeholders know that you're working on the solution and buy you time to compile the rest of your strategy.

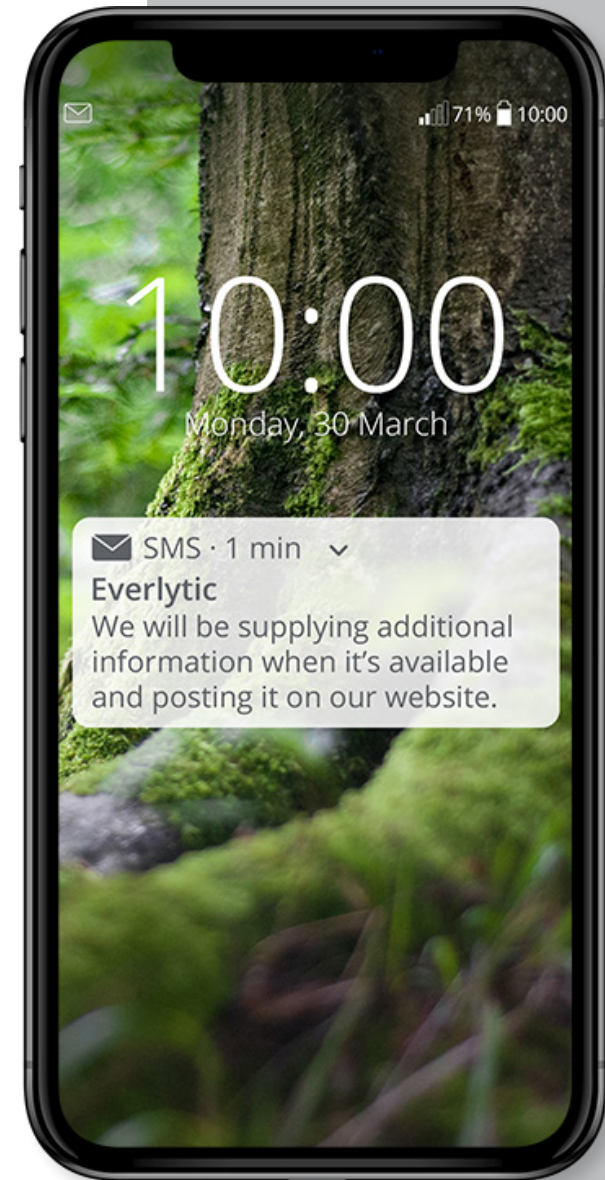
Examples of a message like this could be:

"We've implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of our clients and staff."

"Our thoughts are with those who were in harm's way, and we hope that they are well."

"We will be supplying additional information when it's available and posting it on our website."

According to **Cristina Roman**, it also helps to tailor responses to the degree of the crisis, the exposure to the public, and the potential impact to your brand reputation.



Post-Crisis Preparation

Everything from here is what you'll need to address once the crisis has landed. Go through this list with your Crisis Communication Team and make sure it's documented in an intuitive location that everyone can access.

Step 8 Assess the Situation

Beyond everything you'll have prepared and rehearsed ahead of time, don't make any decisions or statements before you have all the information. This is why steps 1 to 7 are so valuable; they allow you to assess the situation, so you can make better decisions from here.

Step 9 Finalise & Adapt Key Messages

Now, it's time to flesh out the rest of your communication plan, including social posts, press releases, emails, and any other channels you've planned to use. Get to the point by addressing what your stakeholders want to know, keeping the messaging simple.

You can do this by sticking to a maximum of three main messages to avoid losing your audience's interest or overwhelming them. If you need to, send messages to specific audiences that may need additional information.



Post-Crisis Preparation (cont.)

Step 10 Looking Back

Once the dust has settled, look back at how you handled the situation and take any lessons you can to adapt your pre-crisis plan. Ideally, this will make crisis communication less of a crisis – one crisis at a time.

Conclusion:

Preparation is Key

You never know what's coming – keeping your head in the sand about the infinite possibilities and their potential impact on your business will only cost you time, money, sleep, unnecessary stress, and brand reputation in the end.

A well-structured crisis communication framework, as needless as it may seem in normal times, will help your team and your business act swiftly and effectively if the time comes. And for that, you may end up being infinitely grateful.

Best of luck!



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