

A Coronavirus Communications Guide

A crisis is any event that requires a response or threatens the integrity, reputation or survival of an individual or organization. It challenges the public's perception and confidence in the organization. The actual, perceived or potential damage to the organization is measurable and the organization cannot resolve it internally.

It is rare that a crisis impacts every sector of the economy, but the COVID-19 pandemic is of such magnitude that every private, public, and nonprofit organization is being forced to take measures to serve the public, protect their employees, and survive financially.

Foraker recommends that all organizations take this opportunity to review their crisis communications plans, and supplement them with the following recommendations specific to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We believe it is more important than ever to maintain transparent communications internally and externally. The public is experiencing a lack of control over their lives, and loss of control can lead to panic. Working together, Alaska's nonprofit community can help to calm public fears by providing consistent, calming, and factual communications. Below are our recommendations for steps you can take today.

1. Centralize Communications

Your organization must speak with one voice. Communication between executive leadership and your board is essential. Typically, any external communication comes from the executive director and not the board.

The basics:

1. Establish a Coronavirus Crisis Team.
2. Meet regularly to monitor the situation closely as it continues to evolve.
3. Determine the main source of information about the crisis (CDC, World Health Organization, Municipality, State of Alaska).
4. Provide regular updates to key constituencies.
5. Be as transparent as possible. Explain what you know, what you don't know, and your sources of information.
6. Be succinct. Long turgid messages written by health professionals or lawyers will not be read or easily understood.

2. Communicate Internally with Clarity and Detail

Employees are your most important constituency and function as ambassadors to the community. If they aren't informed and don't understand what is going on, communications outside of the

organization will be more difficult. The organization needs to demystify the situation for staff, put everyone's mind at ease, and provide hope for the future.

To communicate with employees, organizations should:

1. Post information regularly in a highly visible location. This can be a physical location or virtual — email, the company intranet, or a Slack or Facebook channel.
2. Describe how decisions were made about issues such as travel, working from home, etc.
3. Communicate no less than every other day.
4. Try to provide timely information rather than waiting until you know all of answers.
5. Words matter. Use the term coronavirus or COVID-19 when describing the virus and avoid terms implying that a country or a group is responsible.
6. Consider using the term “physical distancing” instead of “social distancing,” since it more accurately reflects the desired behavior.

Internal communications should include *but not be limited to*:

1. Your concern and commitments.
2. Updated policies and procedures, with an emphasis on operational continuity. This puts staff at ease and demonstrates strong management.
3. Client or public communiques regarding continuity, public policy, [protective measures](#), and the solutions you are implementing. This should include how to properly disinfect hard surfaces (computers and technology, office furniture, desktops, etc.) that can transmit the virus.
4. Frequent updates from credible sources.

3. Communicate Regularly with Clients, Stakeholders, and Members

Clients, stakeholders and members require a different approach than employees.

1. Focus on what is important to the stakeholders. Describe what you are doing to meet primary needs, such as food, shelter, health care, services and financial support etc.
2. Provide relief when and where possible. If your services are impacted by public health closures, determine how you can provide services within the new guidelines. How much can you provide on-line? Are there fees that you can waive?
3. Focus on empathy.
4. Be transparent in communicating near-term challenges.
5. Use the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce your organization's mission.
6. Communicate what you are doing about the problem.
7. Be honest about what you don't know.
8. Push out communications and announcements on all your channels.

4. Create a Crisis Communication Scenario for Coronavirus

Though it is impossible to predict precisely how your organization will be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recommended that you prepare a course of action for some of the most common scenarios. This should be in addition to your existing crisis communication plan and include scenarios such as:

1. What will happen when a confirmed case is established in your organization.
 - Protocols, so all staff are *immediately* reminded about the organization's policies and procedures and given next steps.
2. What measures you will implement logistically and operationally.
 - Where staff may be working from and during what time frame, logistics around departmental and organization-wide communications and "meetings," reporting, client relations, technology support, and other considerations.
 - Developing social posts, communiques, and email copy/templates —*in advance*. These can be updated as circumstances unfold.
 - What disinfecting procedures should be implemented.
3. How your facility may be compromised and what steps you're taking to address this.
4. Steps to take and communiqués that outline what happens if your chief executive or other C-level executives are infected.
5. What to do if your facility or staff are blamed for infecting others.

5. Be Proactive with Communities

What happens within organizations around the coronavirus affects everyone in the communities around them. At the very least, organizations should do their best to make sure their actions do not negatively affect members of the community, but you can also think about a crisis as a time to enhance relationships with the local communities in which you operate by:

1. Providing resources such as cleaning supplies or food for those in quarantine.
2. Providing information to the local media to help to calm communities while also enhancing your organization's credibility.
3. Providing transparency about what is happening within the organization rather than going radio silent.

6. Be Prepared for Media Inquiries

It is imperative to be prepared for media inquiries, which requires a number of critical steps, which include:

1. Anticipating difficult questions.
2. Developing factual messaging that conveys empathy, transparency, and concern.
3. Establishing and media training a company spokesperson.
4. Monitoring social media and other media commentary.

7. **Remain Calm and Stay Current with the Facts**

It is imperative to stick with the facts. According to the WHO, COVID-19 mortality rates are a fraction of SARS and EBOLA. According to experts, as testing becomes more widely available in the U.S., we should see mortality rates drop precipitously. The CDC provides regular updates on its website, www.cdc.gov, as does the WHO at www.who.int.

These eight helpful points were adapted from *Communicating through the Coronavirus Crisis*, by Paul Argenti in Harvard Business Review, March 13, 2020 and from *Best Practices for Coronavirus Communications and Preparedness*, by Chris Rosica in O'Dwyers Marketing Communications, March 16, 2020.

8. **Develop Messages for Various Occasions**

Points to remember about effective messages:

- Be aware of the needs of your audience
- Keep your messages brief, clear, and factual – update regularly
- Project empathy and a calm attitude

Event planning and fund development – CDC guidelines discourage gatherings of ten or more people. Many organizations have been forced to close their doors or cancel fundraising events, and it is unknown when those guidelines will be lifted. This is an appropriate time to shift your messaging from being transactional, as in purchasing a ticket or receiving a refund, to a message that is more transformational and mission oriented. It is OK to ask supporters to turn their refunds into investments. Speak with donors and potential sponsors candidly about the importance of investing in your mission instead of an event.

Here is a good example of that type of messaging from the *Musical Instrument Museum* in Scottsdale, AZ which announced its closure on March 18.

*Be assured that it is with the health and safety of our guests, team members, and artists in mind that we made this difficult decision. But also know that public institutions and organizations that exist to provide transformational experiences for all will be seriously impacted into the future. We are feeling the effects already. **For the past 10 years, we have been on a mission to connect the world through music so that we can better understand and learn from each other. That work is needed more than ever. Some of you have been asking how you can help.***

Follow Us!

I encourage you to stay engaged with MIM on social media for uplifting performances, behind-the-scenes looks at the collection, and much more. You can also keep an eye out for our newsletters that include stories of hope and music to lift spirits. We really are all in this together!

Contribute to Our Mission!

Make a gift to sustain us through this difficult time. You've invested in us and we want to be here for you in the years to come. Consider converting any previously purchased tickets into a membership rather than asking for a refund. We will honor and extend your membership so that you won't miss out on the value of your meaningful commitment. Email guestservice@MIM.org for assistance.

Heather Harris, Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Alaska, sent out an update that serves as a very good example of how to reinforce the mission, update supporters, and thank them for their continued support. Here is an excerpt:

As a nonprofit, whose core mission is to defend potential through one-to-one interactions, this crisis is pushing us to make difficult decisions. But we will get through this.

As we continue to navigate these unique times, I want to reassure you that Big Brothers Big Sisters of Alaska is guided by a purpose and a plan:

- *If you're a donor, know that your funds will be used responsibly as we continue to serve hundreds of youth and their families during this time of need.*
- *If you're an event registrant, we'll prioritize your safety, and we will keep you up to speed on the latest developments on Bowl for Kids' Sake and other events as plans are developed.*

Click here for complete message: <http://www.bbbsak.org/2020/03/19/message-from-ceo-heather-harris/>

If, however, you have an event planned weeks or months out in the hopes that the CDC restrictions are lifted, Kivi Leroux Miller, founder and CEO of the *Nonprofit Marketing Guide* has the following suggestions.

- Be clear that you are paying attention to official recommendations and acknowledge that your plans are subject to change based on those recommendations.
- Explain how you will communicate any updates to attendees.
- Explain what you will do to make the event as safe as possible, should it go on as planned.

Messaging for a cancelled event

*Event Cancelled:
Dorsey Spring Social*

Due to the rapidly evolving situation regarding COVID-19 (Coronavirus), we have cancelled our upcoming Spring Social, previously scheduled for Wednesday, April 1.

Dorsey's first priority will always be the health and safety of our clients, friends, colleagues, and the community-at-large. Thank you for your understanding as we navigate this challenging time.

We wish you and your families good health and look forward to seeing you at a future event.

Messaging for closing operations

REI

To our Co-op Community:

As the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak continues to spread through the communities where we all live and work, we have consistently looked for ways to help protect the health and safety of our employees and customers. Since our founding, REI has been about doing the right thing for our community.

After a great deal of careful consideration, we are temporarily closing our 162 retail stores nationwide starting tomorrow, March 16, until March 27. I believe that is the right thing for our community. In fact, I believe it is our duty – to do all we can to help keep one another safe in this unprecedented moment.

9. Additional Considerations

Technology – Establish email and social media policies surrounding this or any other pandemic (update your social media policy and, if you don't have one, create one that includes language on epidemics and pandemics). Remind team members that they should take precautions and avoid at all costs clicking on links in emails. Right now, there is a flood of phishing scams, many of which use coronavirus scare tactics. Should they need information regarding the pandemic beyond what you will be providing, they should seek guidance *only* from the CDC, WHO, and local health department websites. *They should avoid seeking advice given on social media channels altogether.*

Your website – Consider providing a repository of the latest COVID 19 information, including local, state, and national bulletins. Keep this section updated daily so that your stakeholders know they can turn to you for accurate information.

Fund development considerations – Avoid using the pandemic as a tool for fundraising unless the funds raised are going to specific pandemic-related relief. That is not to say you should eliminate the channels for continued donor support, nor does it mean that you should not communicate how the pandemic is affecting your clients, staff, and mission. But be cautious about using language that creates an impression that you are using the pandemic as an “opportunity” to fundraise.

Tracking COVID-19 – One member of the crisis team should be responsible for monitoring the CDC and WHO throughout the day for any new alerts, updates, or guidelines. This information will be disseminated to staff and internal stakeholders and, in some instances, shared with external stakeholders.

10. Articles and Resources

10 Ways Inclusive Leaders Can Mitigate Bias When Communicating About Coronavirus

<https://medium.com/@brevityandwit/10-ways-inclusive-leaders-can-mitigate-bias-when-communicating-about-coronavirus-f644f6ec5310>

CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Manual

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/manual/>

Communications During a Coronavirus Pandemic

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nonprofit-communications-during-coronavirus-pandemic-lori-a-woehrle/>

Covid 19 – How to Manage Your Communications – Examples and Tips

https://thedeberrygroup.com/coronavirus-covid-19-how-to-manage-your-communications-examples-and-tips/?utm_source

Viruses Don't Discriminate and Neither Should We – From the King County, WA Public Health Department

[https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/communicable-diseases/disease-control/novel-coronavirus/~media/depts/health/communicable-diseases/documents/coronavirus-and-stigma.ashx](https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/communicable-diseases/disease-control/novel-coronavirus/~/media/depts/health/communicable-diseases/documents/coronavirus-and-stigma.ashx)

Navigating External Communications During this Time of Crisis – a webinar

<https://bigduck.com/insights/navigating-external-communications-video/#post-gated-content>