



3 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN AFTER COVID-19

BY TERRENCE J. TRACY

Risk professionals across many industries have been forced to rapidly evaluate the short- and long-term effects of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. There has been tremendous pressure to respond quickly while planning for potential future risks and challenges. This demand for rapid response along with the need for forecasting future risk and building a plan for resuming normal operations is enough to strain even the most robust risk management preparations.

The sheer scope of disruption caused by the coronavirus is placing new emphasis on the all-encompassing nature of these kinds of events. Organizations are quickly realizing that robust risk management planning and crisis protocols are essential. What's more, they are recognizing the importance of planning around communications strategies. Communication with employees, partners, customers and others is critical to ensuring that all stakeholders understand the situation and support your risk mitigation efforts.

As organizations have ramped up their communications strategies around the coronavirus, there are opportunities to build on best practices and incorporate key tactics into future risk management planning and crisis response efforts.

THE RISK OF SAYING NOTHING

"Transparency is job one in a crisis," writes Harvard professor and management and leadership expert Amy Edmonson. By now, virtually all companies have shared some kind of statement or update on the coronavirus, from the world's largest corporations to the smallest family-run businesses. Customers and stakeholders expect an update from your organization on how the coronavirus has impacted your business and what steps you are taking to address it.

Organizations that offer no response or a lackluster update in the face of this crisis risk a few negative outcomes. Customers and clients may assume you are not taking the necessary response steps specific to your business. Worse, they may assume that you have something to hide.



At this point in the evolving crisis, a response strategy is an essential component of any overarching risk management plan.

Here are a few key tactics to improve your risk management response and communications amid the current crisis that can be utilized in future risk management plans and crisis scenarios.

1 MAKE YOUR TASK FORCE PERMANENT

Most organizations have assigned an internal team to monitor and manage COVID-19 developments and determine the necessary responses and actions. Risk managers undoubtedly play a critical role on many of these teams. Formalizing this task force and sharing key details with customers and the public demonstrates your commitment to staying ahead of the crisis and actively navigating solutions and next steps.

For members of this task force, the coronavirus pandemic has likely been a crash course in effective communications. Do not let that hard-earned experience go to waste.

Rather than dismantling the task force when things begin to return to normal, re-establish it as an ongoing crisis response team. Use the team's expertise to improve your response to the next crisis. Consider media training and other communications coaching for key members of the task force. Remember, this task force must be more than a communications tactic. The team you put in place to manage this crisis must have the necessary time and resources to drive the organizational response to COVID-19—and what comes next.

2 REFINE YOUR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In addition to regular updates from a dedicated team, most organizations have collected all COVID-19-related information in a centralized repository. Any and all updates, policies and resources should be easy to find and access at this hub. In most cases, it can live on the company website, and all communication via email, social and other channels should reference and link to it.

As stakeholders utilize this hub and other communications, keep a close eye on metrics. Track which updates were the most viewed, when they were accessed. Take the time to read and respond to comments and customer sentiment. All of these analytics offer useful insights on what customers, employees and others prioritize in times of crisis.

Knowing how and where they look for updates from your organization can increase the effectiveness of all of your crisis communications.

3 ADAPT YOUR RESPONSE PLAN

Taken as a whole, the coronavirus was almost impossible to anticipate and effectively plan for. But it was possible to foresee individual risks and business impacts. Some organizations have created protocols for a remote workforce, for example, or increased public health protocols in employee or customer interactions.

With the coronavirus, we expect shifts in the industry or regulatory landscape daily.

But this is not the only crisis that requires flexibility and adaptability in a risk management plan—frequent changes and updates are to be expected.

Those organizations that are addressing the situation with their stakeholders and in their own business continuity plans will be best prepared for any future crises.

Ultimately, the ongoing coronavirus outbreak offers a powerful case study for every organization to reflect on its risk management preparation and emergency response procedures. Using this pandemic to better prepare for future risk events of all kinds is essential.

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TERRENCE J. TRACY, CPA

Executive Vice President, Managing Director, Commercial Lines
267 702 1458
ttracy@connerstrong.com

CONNER
STRONG &
BUCKELEW

