YOUR EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Businesses of all sizes have been drastically affected by the coronavirus outbreak. As things have unfolded over the last few months, it is an interesting time to be in marketing and communications.
One thing that is abundantly clear is that many businesses have experienced a situation unlike any before. The pandemic is a perfect example of a case for a communications plan.

Having an emergency communication plan is essential for your business. You need to know what to say and when to say it. When you are faced with a crisis, you don't want to be in a state of confusion scrambling around for the right things to say, regardless if it is an outbreak like coronavirus, a social issue, or an emergency within your staff or family.   Your messages should be kept simple and updated regularly.

Determine the People Involved in the Communications Team
It doesn't matter the size of your company or whether you have a marketing team - you need to know who is responsible for communications.

Ideally, this would include the CEO/owner, leadership team and a communications person. It is important to have all these members on the same page, but you'll need only one person to craft the message and one person to proof and approve the message. This will help to ensure that one person is saying what they want to say and not representing the whole company. You may think a small business with one owner only requires that one person to be the point, however if the emergency is impacting the owner, someone needs to communicate that.

Also, allocate a responsible person to maintain phone numbers and emails for staff that is regularly updated. If your plan needs to be activated, you must be able to reach your employees in the easiest way possible. You will also need a media plan if the need arises to contact the press.

Determine the Issues of Response
It is important to know what issues will need a reaction from you, and whether these situations need responses internally, with customers, with the public, or all. Truthfully, there are small and large crises all the time, and you can't realistically respond to every single one. Do you respond to national situations or a local tragedy? Do you respond to political situations? Something to think about is how responding (or not responding) to a situation aligns with your core values and how it looks socially. It's also important to consider your customers and their concerns about the situation. Does the situation impact your customers' ability to do business with you? Does responding to the situation reassure your customers or only cause them more worry?

Determine the Messages and the Delivery Processes

Regardless if it is just the owner or a team, it is good to always have an extra set of eyes on the message. So, if you are the business owner, you might be the one to draft your company memo but have your office administrator proof the message. If you are a marketing manager, you might write the message and have the business owner approve it. Some details to think about:

How many variations of the message do you need? This could include one official message to the staff, one to customers via email/call, and one to publish on the company's website and social media.

Who is responsible for crafting each message? Who is responsible for approving the message? Who should email messages or make phone calls?

Determine What to Include in the Message

When writing a message to staff, it is important to be positive in stressful times. Everyone reacts differently to situations. In the situation of coronavirus, some people may just want to keep working while others may be experiencing great anxiety. It is important leaders remain calm and be encouraging.

For addressing staff in any situation, some things to highlight are:

- The company's private and public stance
- What the company is doing about the situation
- Updates to policies and procedures
- How the situation affects their daily job
- What accommodations the company is making for staff
- When and how staff should respond to customer questions about the situation
- Whom employees should speak with for their own personal concerns

For customers and the public, keep in mind:

- What public persona you want them to understand and the company's stance on the situation
- Any changes to business operations, hours, or company contacts
- Changes to customer projects, processing orders, and timelines
- Continued updates as time goes on

Determine What Your Staff Needs to Know

Whether or not you've chosen to address a public situation, you will likely get questions and concerns from your staff about what and how they should respond if asked questions from customers. Even if you choose not to make a public statement, you need to educate your staff on their response.

As a business owner, you could be thinking about the health impact of the coronavirus or maybe you are more concerned about the hit your business may be taking. You may not want to respond publicly. Whatever choice is yours to make. Meanwhile, your staff may be bombarded with questions from customers. It is important they know how to respond. Even if that means having them say "it's business as usual!"

By not coaching your staff, you could create confusion, misrepresentation and inaccurate information for your customers.

Determine When and How Often Updates Need to be Made
Depending on the type of situation, you may or may not need to provide updates. With the example of the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been a series of government updates and restrictions that developed. If your business was affected by the continuous updates from the government, then it might warrant an updated message to your staff and customers.

We can't predict all the possible situations that can arise, but we can be relatively prepared for how we respond to them.

Whether big crises like coronavirus or smaller situations like power outages, your company should know how to respond. If you need help developing your communications plan, do not hesitate to email us at Maria@Maria-L-Novak.com