



## COVID-19 Communications Response Plan Template Updated 3.26.20

*\*Following is a template to follow to develop a response plan for internal and external communications. These should be customized for each organization based on its constituents, business model and geographic locations.*

### **FIRST AND FOREMOST: Values, Culture & Tone**

- Values: What are your organizational values? Your crisis plan should reflect these and this is one of the most important times to demonstrate how these inform your actions. Values mean nothing if you only stick to them when times are good. They inform everything from when to close your offices, to which expenses get cut first in wake of a recession.
- Culture: Your culture should inform *how* you live by your values. Maintaining this in a virtual economy will require adjustments, and if these decisions are made by considering your culture, you can't go wrong. This applies to how you communicate (are you a text or video culture, and if you're a text culture, should you move to video so people can see your face more and feel more reassured?). Do your people need virtual spaces to have fun or are they hunkered down needing seriousness to weather this storm?
- Tone: Be human, and communicate more than you think you will need to. When your teams, customers and partners are all virtual, this is more important than ever. Authentic communication delivered in a calm tone can help any audience pull together and weather difficult times. Be open, honest, calm, and accessible.

**STEP 1: Identify your issues response team.** This is the group of people who will make decisions. It should include your CEO, office-level management, HR, PR lead and legal lead.

- Centralize your response. Make it clear who handles what internally and communicate that to your employees. Why you need a centralized strategy:
  - You are required to protect employee confidentiality, which means you need to control the message
  - You will need to decide and act quickly, given the hourly shifts and the changing status of COVID-19 geographically
    - Your success will be contingent on having a cohesive set of decision-making criteria that are deployed across all offices
  - You will need to be communicating potentially negative news, while also showing how your business will continue and reassuring employees, customers and partners



- The media is looking for information and it is better for you to provide that than for it to be leaked
- Legislation is changing quickly
- Create a log of their contact information: Home, work, cell, work and personal email addresses
- Determine a time when this group will come together each day to review decisions that must be made and schedule a recurring meeting (which can be canceled if no decisions must be made on a particular day).
- Who is your primary spokesperson (internally and externally)? Who is the backup?

**STEP 2: Set up monitoring.** What resources does the issues response team need to review to make their decisions? And who is responsible for bringing forth new information to this group. Identify that person and establish a cadence for receiving updates.

At a minimum, we recommend monitoring the following resources:

- National & International Data
  - [CDC Toolkit](#)
  - [John's Hopkins tracker of global cases](#)
  - [WHO](#)
  - SBA disaster relief offerings
- Local Data
  - State and City Departments of Health for each of your offices
  - City newspapers for each office
  - Local attorneys general who are posting resources for employees and employers

**STEP 3: Create COVID-19 procedures.** Establish criteria to ease decision-making.

These procedures should answer the following questions:

- How will you determine when an office will close and re-open? City-level states of emergency, outbreaks in towns that house your offices, employee anxiety? Here is an example of a tiered [model from the CEO of DoctorsonDemand](#).
  - Will you follow state-by-state guidelines, federal or both?
  - Are there cases when you will do something different than what the state or federal government is recommending?
- How will you alter your sick day policies?
  - Beware of new regulations surrounding sick days: [The Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Employer Paid Leave Requirements](#) regarding sick time and paid leave.
    - What are your policies regarding how employees should notify you that they are sick, think they are sick, or have been exposed? Consider



streamlining this to a single group or person in HR to 1. Protect employee confidentiality and 2. Enable quick action to protect your workforce.

- In offices that are still open, will employees who travel to countries, states, and cities with outbreaks be asked to self-quarantine for 14 days prior to returning from the office?

*A sample of guidance from InkHouse to our managers (when our offices were open):*

- *Employees should stay home if they are sick (or only a little sick) [[link to sick policy](#)]*
- *If people feel sick, they should not come to work. Even if they are well enough to work, they should feel free to work from home.*
- *If an employee comes to work sick, they should be sent home; they cannot return until they have been cleared by a doctor.*
- *Managers are the front lines on this, so they should be empowered to send people home. [COVID-19 symptoms](#).*
- *If an employee has traveled to a country, state, or city with an outbreak, they should remain at home for 14 days.*
- *If an employee has been in contact with a person who has or may have the coronavirus, they should work from home for 14 days.*

- When offices are still open, or when they reopen, how will you adjust your travel policies? Which regions are employees allowed to travel to? Can they stay overnight? If they travel for personal reasons, will you require them to be self-quarantined upon return?
- What events are upcoming that may need to be taken virtual or rescheduled? Who is in charge of these and do you need a separate conversation about these? What tools do you have that would enable them to be done virtually? (Here is our [blog post with tips for taking events virtual](#).)
- Where can employees find information about your COVID-19 procedures? We recommend creating one place where everything is housed, and making it clear to everyone who they should go to with questions around benefits and sick leave. This should include reminders to employees about respiratory hygiene (wash hands, covering coughs and sneezes) and social distancing (staying home when they are sick, alternatives to handshakes).
- What are your worst-case scenarios? (see Appendix for sample holding statements)
  - An outbreak among your employees
  - An employee death
  - Lay-offs



**STEP 4: Create a communications process.** Determine who will communicate COVID-19 updates, when and how (through which communications channels). Above all, being human makes all the difference. A dose of clarity, patience and kindness goes a long way.

- What is your policy regarding employees speaking to the press? We recommend making it clear that only the approved spokespeople are allowed to take media calls. *Establish a single person who should manage media inquiries. InkHouse is happy to be this contact.* Provide staff with this response in the event they are contacted directly:

“I will be glad to take your contact information and nature of your call and get it to the right people.”

In response to any questions: “I’m sorry but I’m not authorized to address your questions. Please allow me to get this to the people who are.”

**No one should go off the record with reporters.**

**STEP 5: Create business continuity plan.** How will business continue considering your new procedures? Consider the following for *internal* communications:

- What tools will you use to host internal and external meetings? Which video conferencing solutions do you have, and do you need to purchase one?
- Which collaboration tools will you rely upon?
- How will people communicate when they are available and unavailable while working from home?
- Will you ask them to maintain normal business hours?
- How will you handle employees whose children’s daycares and schools are closed?
- How will you keep spirits up and positive as much as possible?
- How will you personalize your response? Should your CEO do video updates to the teams? Community matters in difficult times.

InkHouse’s blog post on [How to Work From Home is here](#) with some suggestions.

Consider the following for *external* communications:

- Which customers, clients and partners will be impacted by your updated procedures?
- How will you mitigate these or reassure them?
- Who should that communication come from and in which format? Are there any personal phone calls that need to be made?



- Do you need to make a public statement on your website? (This will be more likely for B2C companies)
- If you have to do headcount reductions, how will you reassure your customers and partners? How will you reassure existing employees? The levers that you pull in advance of making these decisions should reflect your values and that should be communicated to all. (See Appendix for sample holding statements.)

**STEP 6: Create your media statement(s).** You should be ready to answer the following media questions:

- Which offices are working from home?
- Which events have you canceled or taken virtual?
- Do you have any employees who've been infected?
- Do you have employees on quarantine? (Reminder that employee health information is protected under HIPPA and cannot be disclosed.)
- How many employees are sick?
- How has your business been affected?
- Do you foresee layoffs in the future?
- Are you able to continue with business as usual?
- How are your employees coping with this?

*The PR team should draft holding statements for these questions with you.*

**STEP 7: Prepare for the worst.** Consider the worst-case scenarios from STEP 3 and create contingency plans and media statements for them *now*. When the time comes, clear thinking will not come as easily as it does right now.

## **THE ESCALATION PLAN: IF YOUR COMPANY HAS AN INFECTED EMPLOYEE (OR MORE).**

**STEP 1: Risk assessment.** Convene a call with the issues response team and determine the following:

- Who and how many have been affected?
- How many others could be affected? Who was with this person(s), where and when?
- Who needs to be notified? The health authorities? The local hospital? People who could also be infected? And what are the legalities regarding how you do these notifications?
- What is the estimated timeline for the situation to resolve?
- Confirm chain of decision-making.
- Set up two to three times per day 15-minute check-ins for the issues response team.



**STEP 2: Materials production and preparation.**

- Create set of questions that will become an FAQ for your key audiences. *InkHouse can help draft this.*
- Internal and external statements. Samples:

Internal: Today we learned one of the employees in our XXX office has tested positive for Covid-19. This employee is at home recovering. As of today, all employees in XXX office will be working remotely OR Since XX date, all employees have been working from home.

We have been in contact with the employee and they have provided us with information about who they have been in contact with and we have begun reaching out to those employees. We have also employed XX strategies (work from home, cleaning, etc.)

We encourage employees to seek medical attention if they are not feeling well (please call your doctor/local emergency room before you visit).

External: We can confirm an employee in our XXX office has tested positive for Covid-19. We are employing a work from home strategy for the rest of our workforce and are following all of the CDC guidelines.

- **Prepare media spokesperson.** Practice run-through with FAQ and statements. Don't leave this one to chance. Have your spokesperson do it out loud with someone else (ideally a PR person) asking the questions.
- **Prepare media statements for what will come next.** What is the next likely thing to happen in this situation and does your FAQ and your media statement(s) address it? If not, now is the time.

**STEP 3: Monitoring.** Establish a social and media listening post to monitor chatter and breaking news that may require statements from the company. This should also include monitoring for inaccuracies.

## **APPENDIX: SAMPLE MEDIA HOLDING STATEMENTS**

**Confirmed COVID-19 case with employee**



- On **XXX**, we were informed that a member of our staff out of our **XX** office has tested positive for COVID-19. We immediately informed our staff - all of whom have been working from home since DATE. We are working closely with the local health officials, following CDC recommendations, and are undergoing an extensive cleaning of this office location that will remain closed for at least 14 days. This individual is recovering at home and is doing well at this time **(or insert other knowledge about the individual)**.

#### **COVID-19 outbreak**

- As of today, **XX** employees have tested positive for COVID-19. We immediately informed our staff - all of whom have been working from home since DATE. We are working closely with the local health officials, following CDC recommendations, and are undergoing an extensive cleaning of all of our office locations that will remain closed for at least 14 days. These individuals are recovering at home and are doing well at this time **(or insert other knowledge about the individual)**. We are ensuring continuity in our day-to-day operations by **XYZ [insert specifics]**.

#### **Layoffs**

- Putting our employees first is our top priority. We had to make some difficult decisions and changes during these unprecedented times in order to weather the uncertainty in the market. These decisions were made after an extensive review of our operations and needs and our focus was on preserving our workforce as much as possible. These difficult decisions were focused on xx positions and were made only after considering and implementing several other cost saving measures. We hope to be able to hire back many of our employees as soon as xx. These decisions are incredibly difficult because they affect people we care about and we will support them with xx.

#### **Employee death**

##### **[If able to confirm name]**

- We are saddened that our employee, **NAME**, has died due to complications from COVID-19. NAME was a valued colleague and friend who **XYZ [INSERT POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF EMPLOYEE]** and will be missed by our entire team. Our thoughts are with **NAME'S** family as they grieve this tremendous loss.

##### **[If unable to confirm name]**

- We are saddened that one of our employees has died due to complications from COVID-19. Under HIPAA confidentiality laws, we are unable to release the employee name. Our thoughts are with our employee's family as they grieve this tremendous loss. We also know many of you are grieving with us and we encourage you all to spend as much time together (virtually) as possible.