



How to Communicate During a Crisis: Best Practices, Guidelines and Looking Ahead

Overview

As we are in the midst of dealing with a crisis that none of us have seen before, we wanted to share some best practices and guidelines as we continue to navigate through the current situation and look ahead to a tourism and economic rebound.

As you plan your communication and outreach, be sure that roles and responsibilities within your business are clearly outlined. Items to consider include identifying your spokesperson, creating clear talking points so that your team is communicating the same messages (this applies to frontline staff, folks answering the phone, etc.) and identifying who your necessary partners are to keep in the loop or to add to your communication outreach. As always, be sure that internal and external messaging has approval before being shared.

Best Practices & Guidelines

In the midst of a crisis, one of the most important things you can do is communicate. In most cases, there are a few audiences who will be wanting to hear from you, including your staff and consumers/patrons. Determine the channels through which you will share communications and messages, whether via email, social media, slack or newsletters. In addition, keep in mind that you may want to keep local and industry media posted on new developments and breaking news. After you determine your channels of communication, consider how often you need to communicate and send updates: daily, weekly, monthly, etc. Things to clearly communicate: affected hours, business changes (have you had to change to a new business model – takeout instead of dine in, etc.), impact to services you are providing, keeping staff apprised of actions being taken, etc. Also, be sure you're staying in touch with your team and staff. When travel comes back, and it will, you'll need them back on board with you and likely quickly. Keep them posted with updates and prepare them to hit the ground running.

Industry communication messages to keep in mind:

-If you are a retailer, let people know how the crisis is affecting your business operations, how they can support (leave a review, buy a gift certificate, packages, curbside delivery, etc.) and share regular updates with your key target audiences.

-If you are a restaurant, let people know of the specific guidelines that are in place that are impacting your business. Be ready to pivot and share the good news and/or new offerings, like feeding first responders, offering to-go meals or delivery and more. Be prepared to share information clearly about the steps you are taking to ensure that food preparation is following all the guidelines.

-If you are an activity provider, think about short-term and long-term planning for how the crisis is affecting you, your ability to bring in staff and your ability to hosts guests for the experience and how you will communicate all of those to the various audiences (staff: where they come in from; group size: is it being altered).

As it Relates to Travel

In a crisis, there is typically going to be a dip in travel, whether from wildfires, smoke, a pandemic, federal government shutdown or something else. With a crisis that has a far-reaching impact, like COVID-19, you have to gauge the climate you are operating in, including visitors' willingness to travel, as well as what markets travel will be coming from. Early research is showing that in the short-term—which is the next 6 to 9 months, most travelers will be staying close to home and opting for either in-state travel or destinations within their drive market that are more rural and offer more space.

As it Relates to Messaging

Current messaging

It is vitally important that your messaging and communication is appropriate for the current climate and what consumers and your target market are looking for and in need of. Many consumers are turning to social media as a major source of information, education and more.

Right now, your messaging should not have a strong call-to-action and no hard selling. Instead, focus on messaging that is helpful, share pertinent information and good news and focus on bringing engaging content and joy to the social media feed.

Consider your audience and what they want to see and what content will inspire them. Be sure to utilize the tools available to you to communicate and share the latest news. Ideas: Facebook live, a Q+A on FB or Instagram, partner with other businesses on a giveaway, take customers behind the scene, bring experiences to them (cocktail class, teach them how to make your best-selling dish, show them how to do hotel bed corners), do a style session for clothing, free shipping or run promotional discounts, etc. If you are doing something good, share how you and your team are giving back.

Looking ahead

For the next phase of communication, start thinking about your messaging moving forward, including when you will start advertising again, what deals or packages will be offered and what channels will be utilized to reach target audiences, etc. You also want to be sure that as you look ahead to welcoming incoming visitors that your messaging

and methods of communication are in place and up to date. And remember, most of your incoming traffic will be coming from close by, possibly in Wyoming or within your drive market. Now it the time to re-examine your strategy, messaging, tactics and more.

Planning for next steps

As you look ahead to the future of welcoming travelers back to Casper, there are several elements to keep in mind, from cleaning procedures to marketing channels.

-If you operate under a corporate flag, your corporate offices may have already issued directives on cleaning, sanitizing, new procedures, etc. Put yourself in the mindset of the guests and think about what they'll be wondering: are you washing /sanitizing all bedding (comforter, pillows, etc.) after each guest? How many hands are handling food or touching public surfaces? Are all surfaces disinfected after a room cleaning? How often are public surfaces being disinfected? How is the food being prepared?

-Be prepared to clearly and proactively communicate specific answers and actions to your customers. Keep in mind that many guests may feel a bit anxious when it comes time to travel again and safety will be top of mind, whether it is at a lodging property, event or restaurant.

-Review social messaging and platforms. While social has always been an integral part of marketing, moving forward it will be more important than ever and will play a vital role in influencing traveler decisions. A few things to keep in mind: pay close attention to the photos you're sharing (in the short-term, people may not respond well to marketing photos with large crowds) and remember that even while stay at home recommendations will be lifted, social distancing and keeping away from crowds will still be on the mind of travelers.

-Meet travelers where they are and consider ways to provide the type of experience they are looking for: affordability, wide-open spaces, long weekend road trips, small groups and safe and clean offerings.

-Review your website and touchpoints. Take time now to do a deep dive into your website, the copy and the photos to be sure that messaging is on target. Review and update your listings on VisitCasper.com, the chamber website, TravelWyoming.com, as well as your bios on social media channels, google, TripAdvisor and more.

-Start mid-term and long-term planning now. When travel returns, which it will, competition will be fierce and crowded. Start working with partners, businesses and industry advocates—like Visit Casper and others—to make sure that everyone is sharing same messaging and working together to bring visitors to Casper.