



WE ARE
BACK!

A Communication Primer for Re-Opening and Ensuring Trust

As states and provinces roll out their respective phases of (COVID) reopening, it is imperative that we, as venue operators, comprehend our new ways of conducting business and become proactive and effective in communicating them. We want to ensure that our outreach instills a sense of mutual understanding and trust, so that our clients return, and business slowly but surely resumes.



As recently as June 12, 2020, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its Guidelines for Events and Social Gatherings for events and venues within the United States: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/considerations-for-events-gatherings.html>. In review, these guidelines are intended to supplement the respective State Guidelines and thus it is critical for all venue operators and sales executives to carefully read and understand the suggested measures. The CDC Guidelines here include signage and other communications, in addition to the operational recommendations.

There are similar guidelines for Canadian venues. Canada is far ahead of the United States in flattening the curve and getting life back to normal. Here is a link for information regarding Canadian guidelines: <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/coronavirus-in-canada-reopening-plans-province-by-province/>

No matter your country of operation, we should take a step back and look holistically at our communications. There is, in fact, an easy formula for good communications that already exists in the academic sphere: **The Four C's of Marketing Communications**, including **C**larity, **C**redibility, **C**onsistency, and **C**ompetitiveness.

Since circumstances have dealt 2020 a gut-wrenching blow, let's consider an important revised set of **The Four C's of Marketing Communications in a COVID and post-COVID world**. Consider instead **C**ompassion, **C**omfort, **C**larity, and **C**redibility.

This new set of C's encourages venue executives and sales, marketing and public relations professionals to ensure that messaging shares:



- **COMPASSION** or care for our associates, our guests, and our stakeholders. We truly care about one's situation.
- **COMFORT** refers to sharing information about safety, security, sanitation – the practices a guest would want to understand before attending their first meeting, conference or social event.
- **CLARITY** means it's very important, as it always has been, to be specific and transparent, avoiding ambiguity in the messaging and communication.
- **CREDIBILITY** means that the venue is actually delivering the marketing promise and executes the safety, security and sanitation operational steps, AND that the venue is communicating and not "selling" or coming across as insensitive or inappropriate during a delicate and uncertain time in our history. Credibility, in this case, includes both.

With this in mind, what steps should you take to bring these Four C's to life through intentional messaging? Here are suggested steps to consider, which include operations and training, on-site signage, Sales Manager talking points, your venue's website and social media platforms.



1. Operations and Training: Safety precautions and venue updates must be communicated clearly to employees before externally marketing. Whether it's through the HR department or the Executive Office, the operational changes and staff training are critical. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) can include and, of course, are not limited to wearing gloves and masks; repeated cleaning of public spaces, guestrooms and more; installation of plexi barriers, hand sanitizing stations, and processes and tools for checking body temperatures. Departmental discussions with staff are necessary in all areas: housekeeping, front office, sales and marketing, technical support, catering and more. We must inform employees and internal stakeholders first.

Ownership/management should also refer to the appropriate state or provincial guidelines and coordinate for implementation. What's key to point out here is that the operation implements modifications for COVID-19 first of course, and training must be in place before any marketing to external audiences.

Food For Thought: *Will buffets no longer be the norm? Will we find breakfast consists of individually wrapped items such as sandwiches, muffins, and granola bars? Will hand sanitizing stations be placed in high-contact public areas such as the lobby or meeting rooms? What needs to be done to protect your frontline, high traffic employees?*



2. On-Site Signage / Sales Professional Talking Points: On-site information such as signage and posters are essential for communicating the new safety policies to guests. Signage should be located at the main entrance, and high contact public areas that outline the venue's social distancing and mask policy. Frankly, all associates should be trained to speak to the specifics of the cleanliness and sanitation measures. Consider policy enforcement guidelines so that anyone not adhering to the venue guidelines will be provided the option to adhere to the guidelines or leave.

Food For Thought: *Will your restrooms also have signage to encourage 20-second hand washing? Will all guest contact positions be prepared to respond to guest inquiries – consistently, compassionately, clearly and credibly?*



3. The Sales Department: The sales department may need to keep the lines of communication open for relationship repair. In other cases, the sales department was likely reaching out to clients since the beginning of the "shelter-in-place" orders – to connect, check in, work towards revenue and business generation, and simply ask about clients' well-being. Or, sales managers may have been furloughed or laid off, so there may not have been any client communications at all. Now it is time for those same sales managers to convey the extra precautionary measures to ensure your venue is as safe as possible for guests to help restore trust and confidence. Since many sales managers may have not been working, now is the ideal period for renewed contact.

Food For Thought: *Were some client relationships hurt when they requested monies back for their non-refundable deposits during the early weeks of the pandemic? Were you trying hard to keep these pieces of business on the books for cash flow? What is your plan to continuing the sales process with a limited or new sales team?*



4. Your Website: Once the internal operations training and communications are in place, it will be time to focus on the digital footprint. It is interesting how this pandemic has flipped certain phenomena upside down. For example, in the last decade, the consumer trust of the proprietary website has waned as the reliance on user-generated content and word of mouth was found to be a more objective and credible

resource. Customer reviews are trusted 12 times more than marketing coming directly from an organization ([CrowdRiff.com, 2018](https://www.crowdriff.com)). Now, however, as venues are beginning to reopen in some markets, and more eyes will certainly scrutinize website content for specific COVID best practices, the need for directly compassionate, comforting and clear communications is critical.

Food For Thought: *What do you want your forward-facing message to look like during this time? How will you prepare to announce updates on your venue's website? How can you leverage your client's voice to support your brand?*



Potential Meeting Planner Questions

There are numerous questions that Meeting Professionals and casual event planners are sure to ask, and the better prepared you are, the more likely they are to trust you as an advisor and reliable partner for their future event.

Be sure to share this information in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) landing page or link that can be shared on your website, as well as via an email, or snail-mailed outreach campaign to your prospective clients.

Indoor Spaces:

- What are the state, provincial or local guidelines you are following that planners and attendees should understand?
- What are the specific quarantine guidelines for your state, provincial or local area?
- Are you modifying or handling ventilation issues in certain or all rooms?
- Will guest temperatures be checked upon arrival? If yes, how will this impact arrival time and line management?
- What are your cleaning and sanitation protocols for meeting rooms, restrooms, food and beverage areas, public spaces and more?
- Will hand sanitizing stations be available throughout the venue? Do you have a plan for strategic placement and replenishment during events?
- If your venue is open to the general public during private events, are you prepared to separate your audiences with specific, and possibly differing, guidelines in place for each?
- How will you cook, handle, and serve food?
- May clients contract an outside vendor such as technology company, florist or caterer? If so, do you have strict guidelines in place that must be followed by outside vendors?

- What is your cancellation policy including specific timelines, deadlines, etc.?
- If someone attends without a mask or violates a venue policy, are you prepared to address the issue?
- How will physical distancing guidelines be promoted throughout the venue?
- Specific to Universities and College campuses:
 - > Is there a link on your website to your University's protocols for handling COVID – now in the summer? For the fall?
 - > Are students coming back to campus this fall? How will the University control and monitor student behavior and movement?
 - > Is the meeting space dedicated just for external conferences and events, internal business including student activities, or both?

Outdoor Spaces:

- Will fans be utilized in the outdoor spaces to spread air?
How many fans in what spaces?
- What is the protocol for tent and equipment cleanliness?
- How is social distancing going to be promoted on site, and then enforced?
- Will you still provide valet parking? How will that look for events?
- What is the maximum number of people that can attend at outdoor location?

Additional Questions to Consider for Talking Points and FAQ Sheets:

- Preventative Measures: How is your venue reducing contact between guests and employees or amongst employees?
- Contact information: Be sure to provide an email address to encourage feedback which will help fill any gaps in the communications proactive outreach. The key takeaway here is that however much information can be shared, should be shared.



5. Social media: Along with efficiently using your website, status updates should be shared on social media platforms. Along with COVID-19 information, post pictures and when possible, videos*, to show how precautions are in place to keep guests safe. It is crucial to stay socially connected to guests to help foster digital word of mouth. Food For Thought: Venues using social media should immediately implement a digital customer service strategy. People have questions – lots of questions – and these inquiries will come through Facebook Twitter, Instagram. Questions should be answered in a timely manner to boost trust.

How should social media be utilized?

1. Indicate COVID updates, including opening dates and precautions taken;
2. Interact and engage with followers; answer as many questions as possible;
3. Share virtual tours;
4. Display images of outdoor / seating areas;
5. Post your FAQ sheet with responses to help educate;
6. Post new policies.

**Today, the use of smart phones and tablets enables businesses to create quality videos that can be easily edited. Video messaging that can be linked in an email message or placed on your YouTube channel can also help share and show how the operation is handling COVID19 requirements.*

It is crucial that you are prepared to answer these and other questions as they arise. All venue executives should be prepared to speak and communicate to planners and perfecting your message with your team is also suggested to ensure consistency.

Preparation and proactive communication are key to a successful re-opening of your venue, resulting in strong client relationships and trust. A safe event experience is the responsibility of all parties and requires a true partnership between the planner, venue and attendees.

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