

How to create a communications plan for reopening after lockdown

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A necessary discussion right now is your organisation's readiness to reopen post-Covid-19 restrictions in South Africa. With some provinces hit harder than others, and economic impact taking a toll, some people are desperate for a return to normal, while others believe in the need to wait a bit longer.



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Apart from the actual process of reopening, resuming operations involves several stakeholders along your value chain. The latter includes public health, transportation, childcare, to mention a few external stakeholders. Internal departments include human resources, C-suite, operations and, of course, PR and communications.

It is fundamental to have a communications plan in place.

The first step for any reopening plan is to consult government guidelines. As a responsible business, it is best to conduct your research into government regulations and not rely on hearsay or what media reports.

Remember, there is no one-size-fits-all communications strategy. And at the end of the day, the buck stops with communicators as they are responsible for consistent communication of policies and practices to internal and external stakeholders.

Begin with a return to basics

Yes, communicating in times of Covid-19 has its nuances; however, the rules of communications that have always applied, still apply.

- Be honest and direct
- Safety and care for your team comes first
- Communicate clearly and often
- Do not be afraid of saying you do not know at this moment. But always return/follow up with a response.

Start with internal

Your immediate and most valued audience is your employees. By now, most companies have a system in place to communicate with remote workers. Set a time when to start talking about reopening. A phased-out approach to your messaging is recommended so as not to overwhelm or confuse employees. Lead with trust and open communication lines for further questions and to provide clarity.

Tip: Create an internal messaging document or FAQs for your task team and C-suite to ensure you are all singing from the same hymn sheet.

Readiness equals safety first

Your employees need to know/trust their place of work is safe. Whether it is the head office, factory, or school/classrooms, each location must conduct its safety check and have a detailed safety plan in place. Again, an FAQ addressing the concerns of all your employees is advisable. Listening to "water cooler" conversations and having a go-to platform in resolving issues is recommended. This is not the time to ignore gossip and rumours. Several employees are feeling insecure and unsure about a few things. Be proactive in addressing concerns about the new normal. Start by listening and give employees a voice that helps them feel included in the process. How you treat your employees goes a long way in company reputation.

Get public buy-in with trust

According to a survey conducted by Brandwatch, South Africans miss the most gym, sports, and dining out. Regardless of this, a return to old ways is off the cards. Adapt a communications strategy with messaging around new modes of your operation to increase the comfort levels of your customers when restrictions lifted. Acknowledge the transition from lifting restrictions to people's comfort levels by communicating each phase accordingly. We are aware people will not instantly trust so help them get there by setting the right expectations and highlight your concern for public health.

Monitor and update – rinse and repeat!

As with any communications plan, ongoing monitoring and regular updates are vital.

Be on the lookout for reinfection figures, new safety requirements and any future health policies in play. Regular, clear, and factual updates on cleaning, safety and disinfecting procedures will be part of our new normal. People want to know what and when you are cleaning, what you are using and how often. Employees included!

Training of employees

Your customers want to know that you have trained your employees on how to interact with them. Are you providing masks? How are you rolling out social distancing? What is your new return/exchange policy?

It seems a lot, and it is. But it is necessary if we are to overcome. With a collaborative spirit and consistent communication, this new normal will be normal sooner than we think.

In conclusion

To avoid feeling overwhelmed as communicators, make sure to create an information distribution plan.

- Sounds cliché but true – distribute internally first before going external.
- Have programmed reminders of where you are in your reopening plan
- Rotate your communications, so not everything comes from comms. For example, weave in a report from heads of departments or employee messages of support.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandisiwe Gugushe is passionate about creating PR campaigns that help organisations navigate and achieve their business goals. A generalist and curiosity allow me to predict likely outcomes and the skill set to design think pragmatic strategies that yield success for my clients. My approach is a great communications programme is about getting the right message to the right person at the right time. LinkedIn [<https://www.linkedin.com/in/sandisiwe-gugushe/>] Twitter?: [[@sandisiwe](https://twitter.com/sandisiwe)]

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