



World Customs Organization

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COVID-19 Crisis WCO Guidance on how to communicate during a crisis

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) was officially granted pandemic status, which means, following the World Health Organization (WHO) definition, a “worldwide spread of a new disease.”

In this fast-moving and uncertain situation, while we cannot control what is happening, we can still control the way we communicate both internally and externally. By following some general steps, we can ensure that those in charge of communicating messages internally, to stakeholders and externally to the public rely on accurate information, understand the objectives of the messages being sent, have enough empathy to create trust, and are equipped to effectively plan and communicate to targeted audiences during this time of heightened public concern.

The WCO understands that dealing with a pandemic such as COVID-19 is uncharted territory for Customs administrations, particularly given the current global circumstances; in this context, it would like to share the following approach to assist Members to react to a crisis situation by defining an efficient communication strategy.

Step 1: Create a dedicated task force

The task force should be composed of a cohort of workers whose task will be to keep up with the latest updates, relay information and plan for future actions. The decentralized team should allocate specific planning and decision-making tasks to its members. It should be small (less than 10 people), and include members of the leadership team, someone from corporate communications, a HR representative, and relevant experts/leaders in key Customs topics. The following elements could be considered by the task force:

- Meet online (phone, webinar, etc.) regularly to monitor the situation and how it evolves
- Prepare/refresh/review the administration’s Business Continuity Plan (BCP) and communicate across all platforms
- Be the main source of information about the crisis for the administration
- Provide regular updates on key decisions/actions
- Create a contact list for emergency response, and communicate it to employees
- Be honest, transparent and consistent in formulating messages (provide the source of information and explain the real situation)
- Prioritize issues of greatest urgency
- Be succinct and communicate in simple languages

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- Map messages to targeted audiences (segment audiences and adapt the tone of the message)
- Listen, track and measure audience responses

Step 2: Establish the facts

While our first reaction during a panic situation is to respond to our stakeholders, it is vital to first understand the facts of the situation and then communicate responsibly to different audiences. Customs administrations cannot be seen as gullible or reactionary by building their communication on speculation or unverified claims. Poor communication can cause confusion, and breed fear and misinformation, which will exacerbate crises.

Conversely, strong data from reliable sources, and proper referencing to those sources, reinforces confidence in the veracity of the information being communicated. The general advice is to verify information from a minimum of three (3) sources.

Step 3: Develop crisis communication scenarios for COVID-19

To handle a global crisis situation, it is important to implement a Communication Plan that includes preparing pre-approved messages for specific situations that may arise. The elements in the two examples below could be considered when preparing such scenarios:

- **Scenario 1: An employee is confirmed as having COVID-19**
 - Apply a protocol for procedures, policies and measures
 - Inform all staff about the current situation and the next steps
 - Reassure staff, and provide logistics information
 - Prepare social media posts, communiqués, and email copies/templates in advance
 - Take precautionary measures (disinfection procedures, hygiene, etc.)
 - Assess how far your facilities may be compromised and devise steps to address this. Communicate the steps
 - Prepare communiqués in the event that the Director General/Director of Customs or other high-level executives become infected.
- **Scenario 2: A stakeholder with COVID-19 is found on Customs premises**
 - Apply a protocol for procedures, isolation policies and measures
 - Show empathy, and do not blame the stakeholder for not following precautionary measures
 - Inform all stakeholders/staff, and prepare a media statement detailing the procedures followed
 - Reassure stakeholders and provide support to the infected stakeholder

- Prepare a communiqué in advance that can be shared quickly
- Assess how far your facilities may be compromised and devise steps to address this. Communicate the steps to stakeholders.

Step 4: Select the appropriate communication tools/channels

There are myriad communication tools on the market that may be used, depending on the type of audience and the messages. During a crisis, administrations have to consider a mix of traditional and new tools to communicate effectively. The following tools may be considered:

- Website – create a dedicated webpage for Coronavirus updates
- Social media – set up a team to prepare/plan the publication of posts on a regular basis and to monitor responses
- Dedicated hotline – stakeholders will appreciate having a hotline for queries about the impact of the COVID-19 on Customs operations
- Informal communication – establish channels for quick/non-confidential communication with groups of employees
- Webinars - use of webinars to communicate with staff/stakeholders
- Regular podcasts – post podcasts on the website / internal communication channel
- Regular communiqués – send regular communiqués via radio /television channels as most people are connected to one or the other during confinement
- SMS notifications – send short messages for urgent information to targeted audiences
- Online meeting/conferencing tools – consider these tools to ensure business continuity.

Step 5: Communicate with employees

Successful communications start with employees being informed and understanding clearly what the situation is. Customs being on the frontline, it is essential to demystify the situation for employees, eliminate mixed messaging and confusion while providing guidance, and, finally, reduce employee anxiety. Staff will judge the administration by the steps taken to ensure their safety and understand their qualms. The following may be considered while communicating with employees:

- Regular communication on protective measures, including how to disinfect surfaces (office equipment, tools, etc.) and sharing updates from the WHO or other credible sources.
- Supervisors should stay in regular contact with employees who are teleworking
- Employees need to know how decisions are made (explain the rationale behind decisions)
- Communicate information in good time (do not wait until all the answers are known)
- Show empathy and care to employees as they are going through anxiety and stress
- Share the administration's concerns and commitment in an honest and transparent manner.

Step 6: Communicate with stakeholders

Stakeholders require a different approach from employees. They need to know that administrations understand their reality, and, in order to build trust, administrations need to provide a steady flow of information and establish proper channels to communicate regular updates. The following may be considered when communicating with stakeholders:

- A communication from the Director General/Director of Customs describing the procedures, and staffing put in place to ensure that the integrity of the supply chain is not disrupted, in order to reassure the business sector
- Focus on empathy and query stakeholders' safety
- Explain the administration's BCP
- Reassert the administration's core values
- Demonstrate flexibility and support whenever possible
- Issue regular alerts/webcasts, and be transparent
- Listen to stakeholders' concerns, discuss them with an open-mind and include the findings in decision-making.

Step 7: Communicate plans for rescheduling meetings/events and explore tools to organize online meetings/events

With social-distancing measures advised by the WHO, and travel restrictions implemented by countries affected by COVID-19, it is important to draft plans to reschedule or cancel meetings or events and communicate them in a timely manner. Communication channels should be adapted to the type of audience.

As it is difficult to predict how long the current global crisis will last, it is recommended that the use of online meeting/conferencing tools be explored to ensure business continuity, while considering the security aspect of the platform being used and the accessibility of the tool by the different audiences.

Step 8: Prepare for media enquiries

Customs should be prepared for media inquiries and have the responses ready. The following may be considered in preparing for such queries:

- Anticipate difficult questions and prepare honest replies
- Develop factual messaging that conveys empathy, transparency, and concern
- Establish regular contact with the media (short press briefings)
- Monitor commentaries from social and other media to gauge audience feelings
- Provide timely replies to media enquiries
- Inform the media about actions taken, planned actions, and their impact on stakeholders/the public

Step 9: Continuously evaluate the established processes

The whole process of communicating during crises has to be fluid at all times. To drive this agenda proactively, the entire process has to evolve at the same pace as the crisis it has to deal with. Administrations are advised to evaluate audience reactions through surveys, social media reviews, responses to emails, and actual endorsements.

A holistic approach is needed, i.e. an approach in which the task force continuously looks at what has been accomplished, and repeats the approach for other sectors or goes back to improve the strategy to make sure that the right communications have been sent and received, the correct channels have been used to communicate, and the messages have been bound by the core values of the Organization.

Step 10: Prepare to rebuild

While a great deal of effort will have to be put into communicating during the crisis, the same amount of energy will be needed to strategize the post-crisis communication process when the administration starts to rebuild its processes. This crisis, like others the world has seen before, will eventually come to an end. The communication team should start planning this process and preparing the messages that should be sent once the crisis has reached its peak and the number of cases starts decreasing. Administrations will need to plan a smooth transition back to the office, and to rebuild trust with stakeholders.

Conclusion

Effective communication is an essential element of crisis management. Pro-active communication is conducive to behavioural change (the adoption of protective measures), reduces confusion, and fosters a better use of resources. The WCO is committed to supporting Members during this challenging time by providing timely guidelines, resources and communiqués to the Customs family as well as its stakeholders. Members are invited to share their experiences/best practices with regards to the communication strategies they have adopted to better inform audiences during this time of crisis, in order to enhance this document.

For more information about the WCO's communication policy, please write to:
Communication@wcoomd.org.

Further reading

- 1) WCO COVID-19 dedicated webpage:
<http://www.wcoomd.org/en/topics/facilitation/activities-and-programmes/natural-disaster/coronavirus.aspx>
- 2) WHO Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Action Plan Guidance COVID-19 Preparedness and Response:
[https://www.who.int/publications-detail/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-\(rcce\)-action-plan-guidance](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-(rcce)-action-plan-guidance)
- 3) WTO COVID-19 and World Trade:
https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/covid19_e/covid19_e.htm#communications
- 4) European Commission: Coronavirus update:
https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en
- 5) OECD – Tackling Coronavirus (COVID-19):
<http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/>