HOW TO GUIDE: CUSTOMER COMMUNICATIONS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

EDELMAN

26 MARCH 2020

HOW TO GUIDE: CUSTOMER COMMUNICATIONS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

As the Covid-19 pandemic evolves, organisations must carefully consider how, when and why they contact customers regarding the virus' short- and long-term impact on operations. Below, we describe the key steps to consistent, clear and effective customer communications. We also outline some best practice examples from four sectors that have been particularly impacted by the coronavirus so far: aviation; food and beverage; retail; and hospitality.

1. **Identify your customer segments.** A vital first step is to identify the different segments of your customer base, then develop bespoke communication plans for each of them. These plans should be based on the way customers interact with you – for example, in-store, online or through a third-party vendor. You must also consider whether certain groups require more regular or detailed communications. These could include high-spending customers or those with specific product needs or buying patterns.

2. **Decide how to contact them.** It's also important to determine the best way to reach customers – bearing in mind this may differ between segments. If your organisation has a loyalty programme or payment/order app, it can be a great way to get information to the user group quickly and accurately. You can also post content on owned platforms, such as your company website and social media channels. And, where mass awareness is required, particularly in response to a specific Covid-19 outbreak, you may consider releasing a statement through the appropriate earned media outlets.

3. **Stay on top of the conversation.** Social media allows your customers to share their thoughts and opinions 24/7, meaning the conversation surrounding your organisation and the Covid-19 pandemic can switch in the blink of an eye. Daily monitoring of key social media platforms and news outlets will help you stay on top of what your customers, industry peers and the general public are saying. When necessary, this knowledge will enable you to join the conversation quickly and effectively.

4. **Be proactive and honest.** Organisations that communicate regularly, openly and proactively with customers during a crisis are more likely to emerge from it with trust and reputation intact. Decide how often you will contact your customers – and stick to it. Getting on the front foot to honestly address their concerns, communicate solutions and update on any actions you are taking is a highly effective way of preserving – even strengthening - vital customer relationships.

Best Practice Customer Communications Examples

Aviation – proactive use of owned channels

In the initial days of the coronavirus crisis, one airline used its corporate blog to regularly communicate how it was addressing customer concerns surrounding airline safety. The posts included a detailed range of videos and photos to demonstrate just how thoroughly its aircraft were being cleaned and made safe for customers.

Food and Beverage – enlisting third party expertise

A major food retailer is working with well-known experts in food safety and sanitisation to serve as external validators, proving how seriously it is taking health and hygiene during the coronavirus crisis. It has also created regular online communications showing customers how it is increasing cleaning regularity through the duration of the pandemic.

Retail – segmenting customers

This retail business experienced major supply chain disruption as a result of the coronavirus, requiring it to make customers aware of the impact on product manufacturing and distribution. It therefore identified VIP members and special-order customers for bespoke communications. It has also developed a holding statement to share with business and industry media, and is providing alternative merchandise options and/or discounts throughout the disruption.

Hospitality – planning to react quickly

This major hospitality provider needed a plan to reach people who may have been present on one of its properties at the same time as someone diagnosed with Covid-19. It therefore established a clear cadence for group communications, collated and segmented its guest and employee database, determined company spokespeople for specific segments of its audience, and partnered with the local department of health to serve as an external validator of its cleaning protocols and procedures.