

HR Insights

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Managing Your Post-coronavirus Reputation

There's no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has been disrupting businesses, both small and large, across the globe. Businesses have had to drastically adjust their operations.

Once the threat of the coronavirus declines, your business may be ready to open up and return to normal operations. Whether your business had to close its doors or you had to set up your employees to work remotely, it's important to recognize the global pandemic and continue protecting your company's reputation.

Why Is Your Reputation Important?

Many companies focus on handling reputation threats that have already happened. That is not reputation management. That is crisis management, a reactive approach to limit the damage that's already been done. It's important to focus on a proactive approach to mitigate reputational risks before they become a problem.

Simply put, your brand reputation is how the general public—including customers and employees—sees you, thinks of you and talks about you. It's word of mouth.

How your business has previously responded to the coronavirus and how you move forward can play a big role in public perception and employee recruitment. As much as a good reputation is vital in driving business, it can also reinforce employees' commitment to the company. That commitment leads to confidence and trust in the company. Employees are the face of the company, and engaged employees can be your best promoters.

How Can Your Reputation Be Affected?

There's no denying that this global pandemic is changing how people think, behave and consume information. Since we live in a digital age, customers and prospective employees have many channels available to them as they search for and discover information about companies. A good reputation means that a business is more credible than their competitors. Reputation is all about public perception—even if it's not factual.

There's a need to be proactive, as reputational risk often strikes without warning. Here are some common online channels to monitor:

- Business review websites
- Social media
- News releases and articles
- Blog posts
- Forums
- Competitor websites

People will talk about your company regardless of whether you have an online presence. But, if you're not online or monitoring channels, there's no way for you to discover what's being said, and you may risk even bigger reputation problems.



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Best Practices

As everyone is coming out of lockdown and business slowly returns to normal, consider the following best practices to keep staff motivated and your reputation unharmed:

- **Put your employees first**—First and foremost, keep in mind the health, safety and well-being of employees when making business decisions. The coronavirus pandemic has led to a collective loss of normalcy. Returning to work may be part of the normal that people are longing for, so continue supporting them and checking in to see how things are going. As you protect your company brand from COVID-19 implications, current employees can be the main drivers of your reputation.
- **Follow government advice**—If your team has been working remotely due to shelter-at-home orders, the first topic your company needs to address is when to reopen the office. Employers should be looking to their local health departments and government for guidance on when to return to the office.
- **Prioritize safety**—Along with ethical reasons, employers have a duty under the Occupational Safety and Health Act to make sure they provide a safe workplace. Considerations include testing, social distancing, personal protective equipment, sick leave policies and business travel guidelines.
- **Keep communication open and honest**—Internal communications can help keep employees calm and reduce stress levels. Everyone's been dealing with much uncertainty. There's a need to communicate with employees openly, honestly and frequently. The same goes for external audiences like customers and partners. Go with what's authentic for your company, whether that's regular updates, or tips and tricks to stay safe. This is a good time to reinforce transparency. Keep communication accurate by leaning on credible sources.
- **Ask for feedback and answer questions**—People may be scared and have a lot of questions. Create an open channel or a way for stakeholders to submit questions. Answer them as soon as you can, and provide the responses to everyone. If one person asked it, there are probably more who are

wondering the same thing. An open line of communication is key to establishing trust.

- **Reach out to industry partners**—Chances are your industry partners are in similar situations. Share information and work together with your industry regulators and influencers to move forward. Consider partnerships that could help your customers or employees.
- **Be a thought leader**—While reputation may be defined by what others say about you, it is also defined by what a brand says. If it's appropriate and authentic for your company, identify a business leader who can publicly address impacts of COVID-19 on your industry or customers.
- **Give back**—On a similar note, give back to your community if you're able to. A little bit of kindness can go a long way during these times.

Be Prepared

As everyone moves into life on the other side of the coronavirus pandemic, it's important for companies to come out of it with their positive reputation intact and be known for being caring. Businesses seen responding positively to the COVID-19 pandemic are more likely to survive and thrive.

If an issue or crisis does arise, the quicker you respond to and fix any problems within your control, the better off you'll be. For more information on managing your reputation after the coronavirus pandemic, contact Wallace Welch & Willingham today.