

Adjusting To The New Reality: How To Communicate With Your Customers

May 22, 2020

in [CWA Blog](#)



This post is Part I in a series on communicating with customers about the new realities of running a gym in the age of coronavirus.

As the coronavirus outbreak took hold over the last few months, gym owners everywhere have been bombarded with big questions—from navigating payroll assistance and small business loans to keeping customers safe, it's been a big challenge for our community. Now, as restrictions in North America start to loosen, gym owners are faced with another question: How do we communicate with our members about reopening?

It's an important question. Crisis communication expert [Adele Cehrs](#) points out that we're in the midst of a textbook business crisis: "A crisis is any moment where your business needs to clarify a misperception," she explains. In this case, that could be "I'm worried the gym won't be clean enough to keep me safe," or it could be "I'm a member, so I can do whatever I want." In crisis communication, Cehrs explains, you walk back on those misperceptions. Here's how to get started.

Communicate Early and Often

According to Cehrs, the amount of communication you'll need in order to reassure members that it's safe to return is directly related to how frequently and effectively you've communicated over the last few months—if you've been posting regularly to your channels and reaching out to members, you're in good shape. Keep your audience in the loop with an email blast or social post as you move towards reopening, whether you're doing it in phases or are holding off altogether for a few weeks. Reaching out to members proactively has the added benefit of

reminding your customers that they're part of your community and are among the first to know about important decisions.

Set Clear Expectations

As with managing employees and interpersonal relationships, setting clear boundaries and expectations is one of the surest ways to avoid conflict. According to Ted Waldron, an associate professor of management at Texas Tech University's Rawls College of Business, "keeping patrons well informed of occupancy restrictions, advance registration requirements, facility use agreements, [and] protective measures/behavioral guidelines," along with remedial actions (for example, one opportunity to comply with facility rules before being asked to leave), "would go a long way in stopping any conflicts before they start."

Reassure Members—and Communicate Your Value

Getting members back to your gym requires trust, says Cehrs. "I have to trust that you can clean this gym better than you ever have before," she says. "It's a level of respect that needs to be elevated and communicated." Her colleague, former FBI special agent and hostage negotiator [Chip Massey](#), agrees. "Gyms will have to reacquire their customers," he explains, pointing out that folks have been making do with their at-home setups for the last few months. In order to get them back in the door, you'll need to communicate your gym's value better than ever, whether that's your cutting-edge routesetting, access to top-notch training classes, or warm community. This is a great time to step up your efforts to learn individual members' names and preferences, Massey adds.

Be as Transparent as Possible

Right now, it's ok to tell your customers you don't know the answer. Still, Cehrs strongly recommends having a "holding statement" about your reopening status. This can simply be a range of dates between which you anticipate opening. "That statement has to be genuine, authentic, and feel transparent," Cehrs says, adding that it's crucial that gym owners don't make promises they can't keep. It's tempting to be vague or avoid communicating, she says, but that's a mistake—it provides your members with no reassurance at all. Instead, keep it simple and direct: "We anticipate being able to open between X and Y. Lots of factors might affect the exact date we can open, but we'll keep you updated as we know more!"

Show Customers Where You're Coming From

This is closely related to transparency. Humanizing your business—an important step in the HEART framework, which Waldron and his co-author Jim Wetherbe [outline in the Harvard](#)

[Business Review](#)—reminds your members that you, like they, are doing the best you can under difficult, unprecedented circumstances. “If people feel like they’re being bullied,” explains Wetherbe, the Richard Schulze Distinguished Professor at Texas Tech’s Rawls College of Business, it’s harder to get buy-in. Instead, he suggests rephrasing statements as questions: “If you’re not wearing a mask, how is that fair to our other members?” Waldron adds it’s important to consider your body language here—more on that in Part II.

Anticipate Questions—and Come Prepared With Answers

Your members will likely have questions about everything from physical distancing to whether masks are really “required” to how long until you plan to be back to business as usual. It might help to come up with good answers to some of these common questions and share them among your staff. One question you’re almost guaranteed to get is about cleanliness, so a rundown of everything you’re doing to keep the facility clean, from the parking lot to the bathrooms to the equipment and flooring, is key. “You’ll have to hit on that hard, and do it right away,” says Cehrs, “[Members] are really trusting you, so they need you to reassure them that this is a place they can feel safe.”

Even if you’re doing everything right, it’s possible that conflicts with customers will still arise. We’ll cover that in [Part II](#) next week.



About Emma Walker

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