



To Reopen Your Church the Right Way, You Need an Effective Communications Strategy

By David W. Fouse

After months of separation, church communities are finally coming together again. But reopening our churches will be no easy task.

As we prepare to share space and break bread together, we all need to consider how to do so in a safe and wise manner. Yet safety isn't the only thing we need to consider. An effective communications strategy will be important for a smooth reopening for local churches.

Information is a vital resource in restarting our church communities. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted business-as-usual and generated a lot of uncertainty. People are hungry for information and see the world from very diverse perspectives. Communicating effectively with your church community is more than just a courtesy; it's an essential part of kickstarting your ministries with attention and care. And it can also go a long way towards protecting your church from bad press, misperceptions, and unfriendly public scrutiny.

Effective communications will mean crafting an informed holistic strategy and message that engages the right people. With that in mind, here are four basic communications principles for navigating the new COVID-19 world.

Be Informed and Stay Informed

Your first goal is to be informed. The COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving public health challenge. To step up to this challenge and to avoid preventable mistakes, you have to stay up to date on the latest guidelines, regulations, and announcements from public health authorities. For sports ministry leaders in particular, that means staying abreast of CDC as well as possible state and local government guidelines for how to safely engage in sports.

The COVID-19 pandemic affects every community differently. To speak into your unique situation, you have to get informed about the state of affairs in your local area.

The very first thing you will be judged on by your congregations and by outside media is how well-informed the decisions you're making are. So, make sure all church leaders are knowledgeable.

Be Prepared

Being informed won't be enough if you do nothing with it. The key to any successful communications strategy is a developed plan for handling questions and inquiries from a variety of possible stakeholders. In the case of COVID-19, you need to be prepared to answer typical questions as well as questions that may be unique to your church body or community. Possible scenarios to think through might include a local outbreak, a sick churchgoer, or outside scrutiny of your decision to reopen and more.

Before you announce and initiate your reopening, make sure you have identified a spokesperson, prepared a holding statement in case there are questions, drafted talking points, and gotten your church's leadership team on board with how to handle inquiries. Inquiries may come from community members, parishioners, the media, and more.

Don't Worry About Overcommunication

The word "overcommunication" carries negative connotations, and a lot of people are afraid of communicating too much. And for sure, you can send too many emails and overwhelm people with content. But COVID-19 has changed things a bit. Now, with so much happening and people looking for guidance and information, overcommunication should not be your first concern.

To that end, a crucial element of your communications strategy needs to be identifying key stakeholders – the parents, congregants, coaches, and leaders in your church community – and keeping them appropriately engaged and informed regarding key decisions, safety protocols, and more. Maintaining channels of communication with these stakeholders will help increase your chances for a smooth transition out of lockdown.

Be Aware And Alert

Finally, your communications strategy is only as effective as it is relevant. That means staying on top of what's happening not just in your church but also in your community and more broadly in the world. You should monitor developing COVID-19 news and reporting in your area. Additionally, you should monitor how the news or other local influencers talk about your church's reopening or reengagement in in-person ministry. You want to keep tuned in to the media atmosphere so that you are prepared to quickly react and speak skillfully if needed.

All in all, effective communication is a service opportunity. With the right principles in place, your communication strategy can be an integral part of rebuilding a flourishing church community.

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